



He really was a Wizard

Harry 'Buddy' Melges Jr was one of the three Iceboat Kings, along with Peter Harken and Bill Mattison. Only a few American sailors pronounce the name correctly (Mel-GUS), writes Carol Cronin, yet numberless hard and soft-water folk have a favourite Buddy story – a mark of how many lives he touched. Sadly, I didn't write a profile of him before he took off for the great regatta in the sky. I'll try to make up for it by recalling some of the many words he leaves behind, including what must have been one of his last interviews, in 2021, when we reunited him with Andreas Josenhans to discuss their two Star World Championship victories for the book *100 Years of Gold Stars*. And I could write an entire piece just about that conversation alone...

50 SEAHORSE

Childhood

Buddy grew up on a small Wisconsin lake and went on his first sailing adventure at the age of five. In *Sailing Smart*, the 1983 book he wrote with Charles Mason, he said his dad pushed him off after only a few simple instructions. 'I sailed away from the dock in a more or less straight line, turned around and sailed back... I already had plenty of confidence in what I was doing.' (This is exactly how Sir Ben Ainslie got his start in sailing, in Cornwall in southwest England; bow bumper and a firm shove from dad – ed)

He and his friends soon realised that sailing was a great way to get across the lake, and 'certainly a lot more fun than walking'. To raise funds for a sail repair Buddy charged ten cents for sailboat rides. By the end of the summer he'd earned enough to buy a whole new sail.

A few years later he began a lifelong Scow sailing career with bailing and pumping 'like mad, trying to keep the boat up on top of the water rather than at the

bottom of the lake'. Once he got a chance to steer he was hooked. And when the lake froze over iceboating taught him how to react to the wind's shifts and puffs even when they gave no visible warning.

'The best thing my dad ever did for me was to take me along,' Buddy said in a 2015 video produced by the company now called Melges Performance Sailboats. 'He took me duck hunting, he took me sailing, he took me iceboating. He went out of his way to make sure I was exposed to what he loved.'

His father started Melges Boat Works in 1945, and soon Buddy was winning races in the boats his father built. 'When my dad got into the boatbuilding business sailing fast became even more important,' he told a reporter in 2021. Travelling around the country, he marketed the family business by helping his competitors improve and then beating them anyway – a family tradition that continues to this day.

In 1946 his parents moved to Lake Geneva, and he came home to that lake for the rest of his life.

PHIL UHL



Above: 1953 and a 23-year-old Buddy Melges is fresh back from the Korea War with a Bronze Star. Time to get back out on the water. Before leaving for Korea Harry 'Buddy' Melges Jr, Class of 1948, had earned six varsity letters from Lake Geneva High School, three for football and three more for basketball. Over the following 70 years Melges would add 'at least' (not too many people are really sure) 60 national and international titles on hard and soft water and two Olympic medals, one of them gold. And the America's Cup...

Starring Gloria

In 1951 Buddy went to a Star regatta in Chicago. 'I finished dead last, but I met Gloria!' he crowed to a reporter in 2016, adding, 'And I was smart enough to get her phone number before I left.'

Gloria Wenzel grew up racing on Lake Michigan and at the time was crewing for Star Class president Bill Parks; 'We were smitten with each other from the off,' she told that same reporter. When Buddy went off to fight in Korea she took time away from university for the train ride down to Lake Geneva so she could sail with Harry Senior in her boyfriend's absence...

Buddy proposed shortly after he came home from 'meritorious service' that earned him a Bronze Star, and they married in 1954. The couple had three children – and, just like Harry Senior, they exposed all of them to everything they loved. Those kids eventually produced seven grandchildren, and in 2015 Buddy proudly stated that 'they're all involved with boats and sailing or something to do with the sport'.

Today Harry Melges III runs the family

business; and Harry Melges IV is on the sailing team at American Magic.

As the reputation of Melges Boat Works grew Buddy's own impressive results were not always appreciated by sailors proud of their amateur status. In 1957 a competitor filed a protest against Buddy, claiming he'd gained an unfair advantage from his work as a professional boatbuilder and sailmaker. 'The charge hit Melges so forcibly he sold his boats and retired from sailing,' a 1962 *Sports Illustrated* story says, before adding a quote from Buddy: 'I did a lot of duck hunting that year.'

Once the protest was dismissed friends talked him into racing again – just in time to win the 1959 Mallorys, the North American Men's Championship. Buddy called that win 'especially gratifying, because it was the first time I had ever really sailed any sort of keelboat'.

He won the tough championship again in 1960 (E Scows) and 1961 (Dragon), a record that held into the next century. In 1961 he was awarded the very first US Yachtsman of the Year trophy (then

sponsored by Martini & Rossi), the highest symbol of his now national recognition.

Bronze medal in a lightweight centreboarder

But it was another sailor from his own midwest lake who would first fan the Olympic flame. 'Having grown up in a small community in the midwest I had never given much thought to entering the Olympic Games,' Buddy said. But after teaming up with Bill Bentsen and sailing the Flying Dutchman only a few times, a solid result at a regatta in Chicago inspired them to spend the winter of 1962-63 training, on Lake Geneva...

'It was the first time in my memory that the lake hadn't frozen over completely,' Buddy said. In 2015 Buddy added that 'we did our Olympic effort at home, our way, without a lot of instruction. And because of that I think we were more attuned to Mother Nature and what she's all about and how she affects you.'

Bill and Buddy won the 1963 FD North Americans, and at the US Trials 'we did so



Two of the great loves of Buddy Melges's life. Buddy and Gloria Wenzel were married in 1954, three years after meeting at a Star regatta in Chicago where Gloria was crewing for her regular helm, Star Class president Bill Parks. The couple had one daughter, Laura, and two sons, Harry and Hans; you may have heard of Harry and Hans at least, or read about them in *Seahorse*. In turn, you're likely also to have read here about some of their own talented additions to a uniquely fascinating sailing and iceboating dynasty. **Right:** training one of his beloved black Labrador gundogs... Melges is well known for his love of duck hunting but his interests as an outdoorsman ranged much more widely into issues of conservation and the environment. He served in many capacities beyond just sailing and iceboating, being equally at home chairing a local marsh rehabilitation committee or his own Delta Waterfowl Foundation

well we didn't even have to compete in the last race. Our hard work that winter had paid off for us.'

At the 1964 Olympic Regatta Tokyo's gear-busting conditions taught the pair a valuable lesson: 'You must always be able to think positively and clearly when a crisis occurs on the water.' A capsize, a broken rudder and putting the mast through the bottom of the boat added up to a DNF and a long night of boat and spar repair that took them out of gold medal contention – they had to 'settle for the bronze'.

Three years later they used that same lesson to earn a gold medal at the 1967 Pan Am Games; despite breaking a shroud they managed to limp around an extremely windy racecourse under main alone – and were the only boat to finish that race.

At the 1967 FD Worlds in Montreal, though, Buddy was so turned off by the fleet's light-air kinetics that he stopped sailing for two and a half years. 'Even though I did have some very happy moments in the Flying Dutchman,' Buddy wrote in 1983, 'I do have to say that I left that class on a sour note. And even today I feel badly about leaving without having had an opportunity to put something back into the class for all the good times it gave me.'

Priceless pup

One of Buddy's most famous mantras was to 'send the dog home on a good retrieve', which applied equally well to training hunting dogs and coaching human sailors.

According to a 1973 *Sports Illustrated* story Buddy used his extra time after leaving the FD Class to work up a new Lab named Oscar. 'Two years after he started training the puppy,' the story continues, 'Melges was offered \$10,000 for him. At the time the Melges family lived in a house that overlooked Lake Geneva but were trying to ante up enough for a place right on the water. Gloria Melges idly pointed out one day that if they cashed Oscar in for 10-grand their waterfront financing problem would be solved. Melges countered, "Why don't we sell one of our children?"'

Gold medal in a keelboat

It was the much heavier Soling that lured Buddy back to Olympic sailing. He and Bentsen teamed up again to train for the 1972 Games – with another mid-westerner, Bill Allen, as their third.

Buddy bought a hull and designed his own rigging and deck layout; in *Sailing Sense* he explained that 'There is no point in having something on a boat if you

can't adjust it quickly and easily.'

At their first regatta the boat 'created quite a stir... for one thing we had no winches. Instead there were Harken ball-bearing blocks and ratchets that handled all the wire rigging. And the sail-trimming lines were all placed under the decks.

'In all honesty I thought the boat looked like a thoroughbred sitting among a bunch of draft horses.'

They arrived at the 1972 US Soling Trials in San Francisco with 'every aspect of the Trials set and under control'. But in the first race Buddy got tangled up with both the starting pin and the weather mark in the strong current, because he 'forgot everything I had learnt in my pre-race homework'.

In the second race their mast broke. After that they settled down and 'sailed the way we knew we could, and when the Trials were over we had won'. In Kiel they won Olympic gold easily, beating an international field that included Paul Elvström. That accomplishment earned Buddy his second Martini & Rossi Yachtsman of the Year award.

Three world titles in the 5.5 Metre

In the summer of 1973 Buddy won both the Scandinavian Gold Cup and 5.5 Metre





The idea of bringing a now 62-year-old Melges into the 1992 America's Cup programme was a masterstroke. His age and his maturity certainly underpinned the excellent relationship he enjoyed with the official *America's* skipper, paymaster Bill Koch; but that was not as important as his ability to encourage but not patronise, teach but not hector, and reassure without humiliating. Quite an ask for any self-respecting yachtsman, occasionally taking the helm because 'it's your yacht'... but with Buddy Melges keeping score

Worlds with Ernest Fay and Henry Johnson. It was not his first 5.5 victory, or his last; he also won in 1967 (now with Gordon Lindeman and Gordon Bowers) and 1983 (again with Fay and Johnson). He was sailing as the middle-man at all three regattas.

Two Gold Stars in a row

After finishing third at the 1976 US Soling Trials Buddy stepped back into the Star boat – as a crew for Ding Schoonmaker.

'One reason for my sailing in those first Star North Americans, of course, was to have Melges Sails become more involved with the class,' Buddy wrote, in the 1977 regatta report's only direct reference to the loft he had by now started in Zenda.

'I hoped that we might be able to come up with something that would beat some of the well-established sails...

'A few phone calls with Ding and we set the schedule to arrive early in order that I could learn a little about the strings that needed twinging by the crew and to get a reading on some of our gear.' They finished third, but the real prize was teaming up with Canadian crew and fellow Soling campaigner Andreas Josenhans (who was hanging over the side for a guy named Paul Henderson...) to campaign for the next Star Worlds. 'Sailing on the Soling, that was our mission,' Andreas said. 'When we

sailed Star boats, that was like vacation; we really had a lot of fun. We literally laughed our way around the racecourse. And I strongly believe that when a human mind is loose and relaxed, and laughs, it gets a lot more out of itself.'

Laughter must have been quite easy to come by once the class newcomers proved the superior speed of their 'better mousetrap' Star boat and groundbreaking yarn-tempered sails (all finished in Zenda).

After they won the first three races at the windy 1978 Star Worlds in San Francisco, and didn't have to sail the last race, Star sailors around the world quickly lined up to order from both Melges Boat Works and Melges Sails.

Buddy's favourite story from that regatta conveyed the dismay of one 'well-established' sailmaker; Gloria overheard Lowell North grousing about Buddy and Andreas's speed. As Buddy retold it, between guffaws, 'We had a terrific lead and Lowell said, "They told me it was bad, but I didn't know it was this bad!"' That year Buddy was named Yachtsman of the Year for the third time.

And just in case anyone thought that 1978 heavy-air victory was a fluke, Buddy and Andreas successfully defended their title at the much lighter 1979 Worlds in Sweden. 'I think we outsailed them, quite frankly, in Marstrand,' Buddy said. 'Whereas in San

Francisco we just had so much damn speed! We had blinding stupid boat speed.'

Winning one gold star was an accomplishment in itself, but in 100 years there have still only been 12 skippers who've managed to win two in a row.

America's Cup (of course)

In *Sailing Sense* (and many other places) Buddy explained why he preferred to race small boats. 'I have never been very thrilled by being matched up to some rating rule or formula, because in many cases you can be beaten even before you leave the dock.' With one-design racing 'there is never any question that you may have won or lost because of some computer program'.

He had already turned down several offers to steer America's Cup boats when he finally said yes to Bill Bentsen's Heart of America syndicate for the 1987 Cup in Fremantle. Next he talked Andreas Josenhans into joining the team, though as Andreas remembers it Buddy initially overpromised just a wee bit. 'Buddy was calling every day: come down here. So I was saying, "Well, what do you want me to do?" And he's like, "Well, you're going to trim the mainsheet on the 12 Metre."

'OK, that sounds great. Let's go. What he didn't tell me was that for the first six weeks I had to ride in the powerboat and tell them what they were doing wrong. ▷

DANIEL FORSTER



Above: a problem in the rigging of Melges's well-named iceboat 'The Bull', demands and so gets its skipper's immediate attention. *The Bull* first appeared in 1940 and was bought by Melges in 1960 – the year of this photograph. Iceboat legend has it that Melges collected *The Bull* in Detroit then drove it back to southern Wisconsin on the roof of a Chevy Suburban. What is known is that when a new hull was constructed for *The Bull* in 1980 it did travel to the ice on a car roof – little other local traffic went anywhere that day. **Top right:** in 1976 Buddy started Star sailing, crewing for class icon Ding Schoonmaker. In 1978, at his first attempt, he won the Star world title and with it his first, precious Gold Star. In 1979 in Sweden he won the worlds again, now in completely different conditions. **Right:** 1972 with 'my greatest prize of all'... Melges and Bill Bentsen who with Bill Allen had just won the 1972 Olympic gold medal in Kiel in the Soling class. Melges was not unique among the world's greatest sailors in considering one-design racing the one true test

And that was horrible. But it did change the way we sailed the boat; we made a silk purse out of a boat that was a bit of a sow's ear. And we got to think freely and take a boat that had a lot of potential and try to realise something. It just doesn't get much better than that.'

Andreas and Buddy finally won the America's Cup together in 1992 on *America*. 'We always had that solid foundation,' Andreas said. 'Successful experience took us through some of the rougher patches that you inevitably go through in any America's Cup programme.'

'And the reason it was so successful in 1992,' Buddy added, 'is that Andreas was doing nothing but working above and beyond for the team. To get a person who you trust, who paints the picture without you looking all around the racecourse so you can concentrate on boat speed... Andreas was the master at that.'

Statement of quality

Buddy continued working and competing well into the 21st century, eventually chalking up seven Skeeter World Championships on the ice and numerous Scow victories on soft water, as well as an International 50-footer world title.

In fact, we haven't even touched on his hard-water sailing, so I'll sneak in a quote

from Harken's 2009 video *Three Kings of Iceboating*... After Bill Mattison and Peter Harken spoke about their shared love of the sport, Buddy added, 'You dream about these beautiful days of mirror ice, and going six times the speed of the wind – it's exhilarating.' Then he invited the audience up to his home lake to join in the fun, on any day of the week, because 'Every day is Sunday at Lake Geneva when we have ice'.

Buddy was well recognised for both his results and a willingness to share his knowledge. In 1972 US Sailing awarded him their highest honour, the Nathanael G Herreshoff Trophy for Outstanding Contributions to the Sport. Fourteen years later he was the very first recipient of their Sportsmanship award. In 2001 he was inducted into the America's Cup Hall of Fame, followed quickly by the Inland Lake Yachting Association Hall of Fame (2002) and not so quickly by the National Sailing Hall of Fame (2011). In 2015 the Lake Geneva Yacht Club named their newly rebuilt sailing school after its most famous alum. But, perhaps most significantly, Buddy leaves behind two generations of sailors who continue to carry the Melges name and its traditions to regattas around the globe.

Our 2021 interview ended with a memory that didn't quite fit into a book about the Star Worlds – but now makes a

perfect conclusion to this remembrance...

When Andreas first started sailing Solings with two Canadian friends they were overwhelmed by the number of different sail options. 'We had a set of North Sails,' Andreas said, 'but we saw that Buddy was using Melges Sails and going really well.'

So the skipper wrote a letter to Buddy, 'trying to figure out how to trim a sail, how to set it up – just the nuts and bolts of making a boat go fast. And Buddy wrote him back a three, maybe four, page handwritten letter on the sail trim things that we should be considering.'

'He had no idea who we were; it was just a letter that he got in the mail from somebody who apparently sailed against him one time, in eastern Canada. What a statement of quality, and of personality, and of commitment to doing it right! Because if you don't share with your competitors, how are you going to get better?'

'That's really how he thought, right there. So congratulations to Buddy, for what he accomplished and all that he contributed to the sport of sailing.'

Farewell, Wizard of Zenda and King of the Iceboats. Note to self: regattas in heaven on both soft and hard water just got a lot more challenging. And also a lot more fun.

Carol Cronin, Jamestown, RI