

Plodding along dropping white plastic balls

Peter Harken is beyond doubt a marine-industry legend. With brother Olaf and 'third brother' Art Mitchell, he built a series of visions into a world-renowned company. But to hear him tell the tale this all just happened. As if dropping a few white plastic balls of course led to the lowest-friction blocks and cleats sailors had ever seen. Carol Cronin went back to the start

My first email request for an interview prompted what I now realise was a typically humble response: 'Following my mentor Bill M's (Mattison) footsteps is going to be a pretty dull slug in the mud, but I'll do the best I can without direct lying.' He also warned that 'My schedule is a bit crazy right now...'

As everyone who knows the supposedly retired 85-year-old had told me, he proved to be very hard to pin down. Even the *Seahorse* editor added his own tuppence after yet another postponement: 'Peter, pin down? I think not.'

After two months of trying to schedule a face-to-face chat I developed a unique appreciation for his impressive travel appetite. Peter married for the first time at 75, and he and Edit Olasz always seemed to be leaving their home in Wisconsin: to spend time on their powerboat, or drop in at a regatta in Europe – or attend one more Hall of Fame ceremony. 'Another plaque to cover a hole in the wall,' Peter wrote in one of his many itinerary updates.

'I appreciate these awards, but how come they never include *cash*?!' (He's joking of course...)

We finally ended up in the same zip code when Peter decided to drop in on the 100th anniversary Star World Championship. Harken had sponsored the commemorative book *100 Years of Gold Stars*, and I had written it; so we were both able to fit in a relaxed morning chat without worrying about weather briefings or start times.

He and Edit had only flown back from Europe a few days earlier – but somehow he had already fixed a storm-damaged

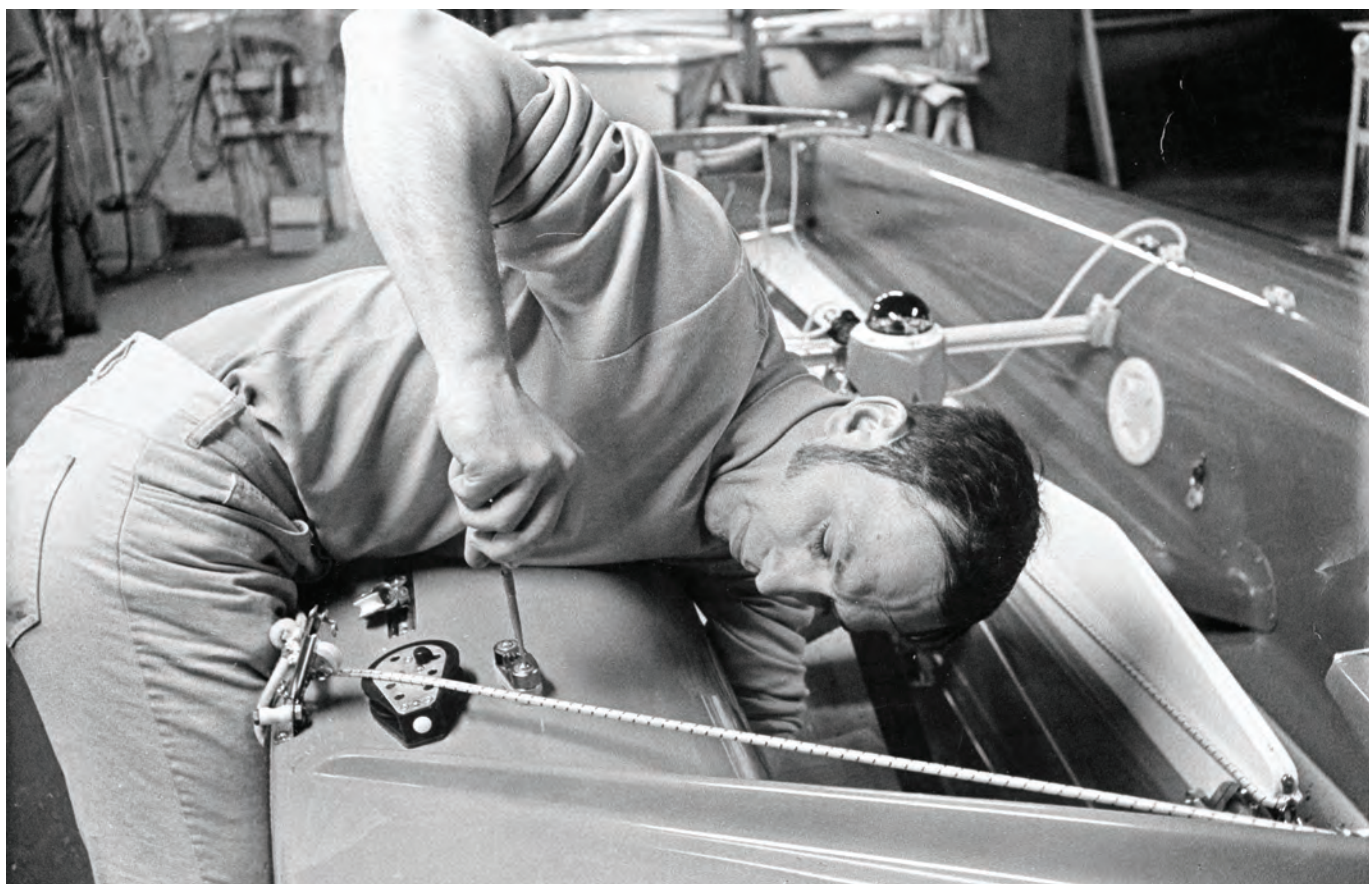
boat cover at home in Wisconsin before flying back east to Marblehead. As we sit down together in Eastern Yacht Club's cosy lounge I swallow any complaints about my own three hours of driving... and ask for the Harken 'origin story'.

Instead, I get something even better: Peter's own life story – though that is so tightly intertwined with the company it's almost impossible to separate the two threads. 'My first love was the business,' he admits, trying to explain why he never put more than 'seven-eighths effort' into sailing – or got married sooner. 'It just was one step at a time. You discover this, put the foot forward; when you discover something else you put the other foot forward. That's the way it is; just keep plodding along.'

Good winters lead to new sports

Peter was born in Indonesia in 1937 and grew up in the Philippines. He went to the University of Wisconsin on a swimming scholarship; 'I didn't get there on brains!' he insists, with the first of many gravelly chuckles. Cold weather was totally new to him, 'and Madison had some pretty good winters when the whole lake freezes over. I started discovering sports like skiing and iceboat sailing.' He claims he spent most of his academic years at either the ski club or the sailing club, rather than studying.

He also adopted his famous dog, Mac, from two girls who couldn't keep a puppy in their dorm; the pair became inseparable. 'He always sat outside my classes,' Peter explains, before adding that his professors sometimes invited the 40lb mutt into the lecture hall. 'I'd point up to the podium



Left: Olaf and Peter Harken with an early version of what soon became the ubiquitous Harken Titanium runner block... which by the mid-1980s was found on every serious racing yacht in the world, before then similarly invading the 12 Metre fleet at Fremantle for the 1987 America's Cup. Olaf would sadly pass away in 2019 at the age of 80 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. First boats then blocks then both (above) as Peter fits out another Vanguard 470 with the latest Harken fittings. Previously, less than four years after their disappointingly slow launch in 1969, Harken ball-bearing blocks would be found on 34 of the boats at the 1972 Olympics in Kiel

and he'd go up there and sit right next to the lecturer. He was an amazing dog; he never had a leash on him.'

Such a carefree college existence – but with one big problem: the swimming coach didn't allow athletes to do any other sports, 'because your muscles start to tighten up and you're supposed to be completely loosey-goosey. Ping pong maybe, but that's it.'

By sophomore year it was clear that Peter's passions lay beyond the pool. 'The coach told me to make up my mind; either truly change or else drop out. So I tried to change for about two weeks, but now I really was interested in sailing – especially iceboating. And skiing... obviously.'

Dropping out meant losing his scholarship. Peter called his dad – who'd survived five years in a Japanese prison camp during WWII. 'And here's his bum of a son trying to tell this prisoner of war how I should learn to survive in the cold... by going to Aspen, and really learning how to ski well!'

'I was pretty decent at that time, but not great.' Peter pauses, mimes holding a phone to his ear. 'I didn't hear a peep on the other end of the phone. Finally he said, "Son, I totally agree. Got anything else to say?" I had a bad feeling in my stomach, so I said no. And he said, "Well, I think you should do exactly what you plan to do. And good luck. If you ever decide to go back to school and you start doing well with something I

might loan you some money. But don't count on it. And it will be a loan; you'll have to pay it back!" So the cheques stopped coming, and that was that.'

After making '50 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches' Peter and Mac drove out to Colorado in a 1951 Chevy convertible. 'No ski racks or anything, so we piled the skis in the back with the top down. Mac loved it; he had six inches of snow on his head! That dog went with me everywhere; he'd run up to the top of Aspen just so he could see me, and then run all the way down again. The guys operating the chairlift kept saying, "You're gonna kill that dog. He's exhausted." So finally they let me take him up on the chair – the only one allowed. He was a fantastic dog.'

But by the end of that season Peter says he 'kind of woke up' and decided to go back to school; life as a ski-bum 'didn't look like a good longterm programme'.

Boatbuilding

Back at UW, Peter (and Mac) switched majors from engineering to international economics. ('It was a faster way to get out of school and get on with real life,' he claimed on Harken's 'our story' page.) He also continued to prioritise hard and soft-water sailing. 'I don't know how many boats I built while I was going through school; two or three maybe.' He rebuilt a wooden E-Scow, and rescued Flying

Dutchman #1 from a junkyard...

'I was looking for some parts for my car and saw this hull upside down and said, "My God, that's a Flying Dutchman!" It was kind of a wreck...' He and a buddy paid 50 bucks for it and then 'resurrected it during the summer and made it really work, mainly because we had a 505 at the club that had nothing to sail against'.

By this time he was Commodore of the Hoofer Sailing Club, a student-run organisation with a fleet of old Tech dinghies. 'We had to buy the boats ourselves in those days; the university didn't back us financially.' That highlighted a need for low-maintenance craft – which preferably wouldn't sink when they capsized. 'So I decided I'd make a better boat.'

The goal was equipment that would be hard to damage, but 'that didn't mean making stuff really heavy; it was just figuring out where the weak spots were, and improving those. The MIT Tech dinghy was a hell of a good training boat, but once you turned that thing over it was just a big open bathtub. So I put a rolled rail deck on, and built a Tech which we called the Badger.' The University of Wisconsin is still building them today, he says: 'So it worked pretty decent.'

And in the winter Peter Harken went iceboating. 'I just got infatuated with it.' The school had a 'rickety old wooden stern-steerer', a class Peter calls 'the



First Harken Block



Top: the original Harken marketing department and sales department and accounts department and personnel department. Only Mac is missing from this early photo. And (*above*) an early batch of Vanguard Tech dinghies. But everything changed when those little white balls started bouncing at the start of 1968... just in time for Star sailors Lowell North and Pete Barrett to be using some early prototype Harken plastic ball-bearing blocks when they won the gold medal at the Acapulco Olympics later the same year. And after that everything else really is history. But introducing radical new sailing equipment when you are based 'far away' in the American midwest is not the easiest of tasks and initial sales of this clearly superior new product were disappointing. It was only when the two brothers were taken under the wing of mail-order marketer Gary Comer, founder of Lands' End, that things took off... It was Comer too who persuaded Olaf and Peter to market their new equipment line as their own name brand rather than as a Vanguard spin-off

dinosaurs of the ice. When they decide to do one of these' – his hand rolls up on edge – 'you'd just get heaved out. I worked on those quite a bit.' But at regattas he was 'always drooling, looking at the Skeeters. The Ferraris of the ice.'

One afternoon Skeeter expert (and mentor) Bill Mattison told Peter to take his boat for a 'good ride. But don't break anything or you're gonna have to fix it.' 'So I did.' That ride led to a lifelong friendship and many nights of building and repairing iceboats together. (See the two-part Bill Mattison story in issues 513 and 514).

Even after moving to Pewaukee, an hour away, Peter would drive up to Madison after work almost every night to slave away in Bill's shop; 'Even during the summer, because Bill said this process never stops. It really dominated my time. It sure got in the way of girlfriends!'

A real job, and the draft

Peter funded his final years of college with a part-time job at Gilson Medical Electronics; after graduation he worked there

full-time as a designer and engineer. He helped to develop a new fraction-collector (for chromatography) that was compact enough to be carried out into the field, a project he describes as 'packing 10lb of crap into an aluminium box this big with a handle, quite a chore.' And because the US military thought the invention would help them in Vietnam, 'well, that kept me out of the army for a year or so because I was put on the critical list...'

Meanwhile, Doctor Gilson gave him access to a full machine shop. 'I learned how to run the machinery; lathes and drill presses and milling machines. And he let me work after hours in the shop, making gear for the boats. I had to build my own equipment because I was still playing student, and I didn't have the money for anything.' Peter also built boats 'on the side', eventually taking over an old horse barn on the Gilson property.

But once his war-critical project was complete the draft board... 'they got me.' Unlike brother Olaf, who chose officer training school, Peter says he found a

quicker method. After only six months of active duty he went into the reserves. 'So I could still go after sailing and everything else. I just wanted to get through it; because I already had ideas, I had things to do!'

The most famous of those ideas solved a classic iceboat problem: how to get enough purchase on the mainsheet without adding so much friction that the boom had to be pushed out downwind. 'Iceboating, your reactions have to be really fast. When you let the sheet out a little bit it has to happen right away – or you're going over!'

Plastic balls bounce higher and faster

There are no exact dates even on the Harken website but Peter thinks it was around 1967 when another project for Gilson – a lazy-susan device to rotate test tubes that would operate even inside a clean room – inspired a solution. 'I was scratching my head, because there couldn't be any oils or greases or any kind of lubricants... so I couldn't just use a plain shaft with a regular sleeve bearing; it had to be



Clockwise from above: It was never going to be about ‘bring your kids to work days’. Peter Harken gets to know two or three new recruits during one of Harken’s now legendary bring (all) your dog(s) to work days – it is a rare time indeed at Harken that there are not at least a few dogs keeping things nice; Russell – now Sir Russell – Coutts doing his ‘thang’ at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, where after a nervous half-hour having his initially too heavy wet clothing re-weighed he took the gold medal in the Finn class – by this time Vanguard and Harken were the class’s official equipment supplier to the Games; while it is deck equipment that most now associate with the Harken name, Vanguard produced a prodigious range of well-built performance dinghies – the Vanguard Finn remains a favourite on the Classic Finn circuit; Vanguard Boat Transport Inc prepares to deliver a batch of new 420s... good times

much more free-rolling... And that’s when I thought, I wonder if somebody makes plastic balls... because they were not popular at all.’ He found a company that produced quarter-inch plastic spheres for Honeywell thermostats and promptly ordered 100, ‘which was nothing to them’. Then he machined a groove into an aluminium plate and loaded the balls into it. ‘And, damn, they worked pretty well! But in the meantime... some of them rolled off my workbench and hit the cement floor next to me. And I saw that they really bounced high...

‘Now the only class I was any good at was physics, because I enjoy it. And I looked at that, and I went – *wow*. Compared to a steel ball this is lightweight with faster acceleration. And that’s exactly what a sailboat pulley needs!’

That evening Peter made a napkin sketch. ‘The next day I made a couple of pulleys and blocks; pretty crude – but with plastic side plates, very much like the design today. I just made it for myself,’ he insists; ‘I wasn’t planning to go into business.’

But other iceboaters soon noticed that Peter no longer had to push out his boom when he turned downwind – and then asked for their own. ‘I was hand-making these things!’ he remembers, shaking his head. ‘And I didn’t have the heart to charge for labour costs...’

When Dr Gilson offered him ‘a really good position’ he decided to focus instead on his own projects. ‘I damn near took it. But finally I said, “Doc, I love working at your shop. The trouble is I love this other stuff even more. So I better not do it.” To this day I don’t know why I didn’t take it! I

could have been number two at the company... But then I started my own thing.’

Around the same time Olaf also turned down an attractive job offer and moved to Wisconsin to help Peter build boats. ‘Why I made that decision then I’ll never know,’ Olaf said in the company history, which describes the first Vanguard offices as a rundown garage. (In other interviews Peter has claimed that Olaf came to Wisconsin ‘because the parties are better’.)

‘He became the brains of the business,’ Peter tells me now. ‘We always interfered with each other; like brothers, we fought like hell, bashing each other good. And it really worked out.’

In part two: how Olympic visibility plus an accidental marketing push propelled those prototype blocks to unexpected stardom □