

# Jerry the Jumper

Mention the name Jerry Kirby to pretty much any sailor of a certain age, and they're likely to come back with 'Isn't he the guy who jumped off the Newport Bridge?' Carol Cronin is among them...

So when we sit down over lunch to cover an impossibly long list of sailing adventures, I have to ask for Jerry's own version of this most famous story. After turning off a constantly ringing phone he takes me back to a summer morning in 1976, when he was supposed to meet Mike Toppa to go Shields racing.

'I had this girlfriend, and her parents weren't home. We don't need to go into the details but I ended up missing the boat...' When Jerry (and the girlfriend) finally made it down to the harbour, 'I see the kite up and they're sailing towards the [Newport] bridge. I told my girlfriend to drive me up onto the bridge, so I could let 'em know I can't make the race. But when we got there I got a different idea...'

Jerry told his girlfriend to leave, got out of the car and climbed over the rail on the north side. Once he saw the Shields approaching he jumped – from about 100ft off the water. When he surfaced his teammates were freaking out: 'It's a f&\*^king jumper! Anyway it didn't kill me, so off we went.'

PPL Since then he has jumped into far too many life-threatening adventures for one short profile. 'We just did crazy stuff because there was nothing else to do,' he explains, adding, 'You had to entertain yourself...' So, with apologies if I leave out your favourite tale, strap yourselves in – and off we go.

## Unobtainable?

Jerry's a fifth-generation Newporter, and one of seven kids. His grandfather was a tugboat captain, and he watched his first America's Cup in 1958 as a two-year-old from the family tugboat. 'Growing up the Cup was like this unobtainable thing.'

But then he won the Harold Vanderbilt Trophy at Ida Lewis Yacht Club. 'It was intended to get young people to compete and aspire to be in the Cup. So Mike and I were like, "Oh, this is really cool."' It obviously worked; Jerry's been part of six America's Cups, and in 1992 he and his childhood sidekick won the Auld Mug together on *America*<sup>3</sup>.

But as teenagers they had to beg owners just to take them sailing. 'Mike and I were



the "townies" and it was really hard to get a ride if you didn't come from a big yachting pedigree. There was this big group of kids whose dads all owned boats and if you weren't part of that club you were a nobody.'

They sailed on whatever they could; 'anything that left the dock, I would go on it.' That enthusiasm earned Jerry the boat-boy spot with the America's Cup winner *Intrepid*, in 1970.

'But Mike was the king of talking people into letting us use their boats. We crewed for Carter and Nick Brown in their Shields. And then Wednesday nights, they're like, "Hey, why don't you take the boat!' It was a very serious fleet back then... at one point the yacht club called and said they weren't going to count the points from the races that Mike Toppa sailed. Mr Brown said, "I think that's not right" and suddenly they were counted!

'After racing we'd go up to the house [Harbour Court, now the summer home of the New York Yacht Club]. The maids had

these little French skirts on and it was awesome. Plus we got Coca Cola, which you didn't have in a house with seven kids...'

The season Robin Wallace loaned them his Shields they would have won the US Nationals if they'd had a better pump system. 'A lot of people helped us on our way,' Jerry says, before leaning in and dropping his voice. 'And then we took some boats that we weren't supposed to... but those will remain anonymous!'

However, both boys already had aspirations well beyond the local Shields fleet. 'We were trying to get a ride to Bermuda, or on the New York Yacht Club cruise, but that wasn't happening. So Mike became a sailmaker, and of course he took off.'

## Backwards to the bow

Jerry interrupted a college hockey career to captain *Yankee Girl*, a 55ft aluminium Olin Stephens design with an Austrian owner. Jerry says, 'And that was pretty much the end of it,' but what he means is the beginning. He taught himself celestial



JONATHAN EASTLAND/ALAMY

**Left:** Jerry Kirby preps for a reef on Puma Racing's Volvo 70 II *Mostro* en route to Rio during the 2008/09 Volvo Ocean Race. In a race dominated by Torben Grael's *Ericsson 4*, II *Mostro*, designed by Botín & Carkeek and skippered by Ken Read, won the penultimate 400nm sprint leg to secure second overall. Three editions of the Volvo Race employed the VO70s and all three were won by a Juan K design – although his design for the 2012 winner, *Groupama 4*, was considerably modified by Franck Cammas's own technical team. After the carnage of the first race of this breathtaking class three years before, this time the fleet got round reasonably uneventfully. **Above:** 'We had a great team and a dog of a boat.' Which is maybe why Kirby calls 1987 'the most fun Cup ever'. Jerry Kirby's first America's Cup was with Rod Davis's *Eagle Challenge* out of Newport Beach. Designers Johan Valentijn and Joop Slooff had a lot riding on *Eagle*... Valentijn sought rehabilitation after his lumbering 1983 Defender *Liberty* while Slooff continued to claim credit for the wings on *Australia II*'s keel... You decide, because *Eagle* was scrapped for parts before the end of the Challenger selection series

navigation on the delivery to Europe; 'I couldn't get rides, so I couldn't actually navigate... but somehow I found the Azores after a transatlantic storm.'

Wait – this legendary Bowman started as a navigator? He nods. 'I'm the only guy who went backwards! But once you do a Cup as a bow you're screwed. And back in the old days boat captains did everything. If you had to change a sail you're hooking everything up and you're coaching people through it... And suddenly you're good at it, so that's what you did.'

Once in Europe the townie tag was no longer a problem. 'And I started out there sailing with the King of Spain....'

Jerry ran *Yankee Girl* for two seasons. 'I took that boat to the Caribbean, did the whole circuit... and then shipwrecked it and made the cover of *Cruising World!*' (Well, almost. The boat was not actually on the cover, but her grounding and salvage were covered in meticulous detail.)

He was trying to get the boat back from Bermuda for engine work before delivering her to the 1979 Fastnet, but no engine meant no Loran; after days of dead reckoning in thick fog a bell buoy that he thought

was off Block Island turned out to be an identically marked buoy off Noman's Land, about 20 miles east. So, when Jerry turned to starboard thinking he was heading for Narragansett Bay, he ran *Yankee Girl* right up onto a rocky lee shore – at a spring high tide, with huge surf. 'It looked like somebody picked the boat up and put it down with a crane. I figured my sailing career was gonna be over.' He shakes his head.

'But the owner he says, "Jerry, why do you think vee have zee Lloyd's of London? Now vee get a new one!"' For that season's European regattas they chartered a boat – and Jerry had a fresh story to tell at the bar.

#### **Yankee Woman**

Back in Newport at the end of the summer Jerry began spending all his after-hours at the Chart House chatting up the hostess, Kim Vaughan. 'She already had a boyfriend, of course. And everyone told her, "Jerry's nuts – and he's a sailor!"'

'But I kept hounding her – in there every night with one of my sisters or a cousin, because I didn't want to look like I was gay! But then I was like, alright, she's got a boyfriend.' He shrugs his right shoulder (the

left has a freshly torn rotator cuff). 'So I went back to Union.'

Jerry played ice hockey for Union College, and that winter he 'randomly' ran into Kim again; the infectious grin returns. She was going to Skidmore, a girls' school that was a magnet for all the surrounding colleges, and when Jerry asked her out she said yes. For their first date Jerry took her to a five-star French restaurant, 'because when you sail a boat for the Europeans you really learn how to wine and dine. Of course I was broke, so I was pretending to be more substantial than I really was. Plus it was her birthday – 19.'

Obviously the evening went well, and a second date soon followed – which ended up with both of them spending the night in jail. When I ask how that happened all Jerry will say is 'Well, it wasn't her.' In the morning they appeared before a judge who just happened to be a big Union hockey fan. 'He said as long as you play out your eligibility you're out of this.' Jerry graduated later that year.

As for Kim, 'I figured I'd drive her home and she'd never see me again. We've been together ever since!'



GILLES MARTIN-RAGET



Following the 1987 Cup Kirby hitched his train to Paul Cayard's wagon as the St Francis YC sailor put together a core crew which he took with him from boat to boat. For 1992, however, while Cayard (*above, left*) ran Raul Gardini's (*above, right*) five-boat challenge Kirby stuck with the Star Spangled Banner, joining Bill Koch's similarly large America's Defender programme. A rather deft decision as it turned out... *America's* (*right*) beating the Frers-designed *Il Moro di Venezia V* off San Diego 4-1 to successfully defend the Cup

### Business and pleasure

After graduation Jerry started Kirby Construction in Newport. His dad was in insurance, and 'he couldn't understand why I wouldn't go into that business. I would be the worst insurance guy in the world!!!

'But I wasn't one of those kids who were subsidised, I had to make a living.' Boat captains were paid in those days (unlike the rest of the crew), but not well enough to live anywhere but onboard. 'Which I loved, but I also wanted to have a little income.'

Work forced him to turn down his first two America's Cup invites, but in 1987 he helped Rod Davis build and sail *Eagle* – and agrees that it was 'the most fun Cup ever. We had a great team... and a dog of a boat. And that was it; after that Cup [Paul] Cayard called and I started sailing on the bow of whatever he was sailing.

'Cayard had this roving band of mercenaries, all the bad boys, and an open cheque book from [Raul] Gardini. Dennis Conner started the model for professional sailing, but Cayard broke the mould by getting a wealthy Italian who didn't have to drive the boat.

'We'd practise 10 or 12 days before a regatta, and that was transformative. All these Kiwis, like an international hit squad; an all-star team on this maxi boat.

'We did sail testing!! Cayard took it to the next level because he was paying people to be there, so guys would show up and practise.' And for Jerry this opportunity lined up perfectly with a severe business slowdown; 'because 1987-1992 was just the worst time to be in construction.'

But it was a great time to be part of a professional crew setting high standards – and earning decent salaries – especially if you were a little crazy.

'We were pretty cavalier about safety. Climbing out to the end of the pole in the Southern Ocean, no harness. Free climbing up the rig – because later on the Volvo 70s

we had that fractional rig. So if you had a problem with your masthead halyard you'd go up as high as you could get to the top of the forestay, climb onto the spreader and then free climb the rest of the way. So stupid, but that's what everybody did.

'We had so many incidents where people probably shouldn't have come home, but these were really high-level sailors.'

He says they did lose friends at sea, and he was onboard *Pirates of the Caribbean* when they turned back upwind to search for Hans Horrevoets. After that 'safety went Richter scale. We did survival school and we had onboard medics; we were much safer.'

### Rambler's capsize

Jerry was on watch – and wearing his life-jacket – when halfway through the 2011 Fastnet George David's 100ft *Rambler* lost its keel. But it was daylight, so like the rest of the crew on deck he hadn't yet strapped on the safety pack that contained his personal EPIRB. 'Mick Harvey's EPIRB saved us,' he remembers now, but first he had to save Mick – who had been off-watch and had leaped into the water wearing bibs gaitered to boots, with no lifejacket.

'By the time I got to him he was maxxed out.' A few crewmembers had already managed to climb up onto the upturned hull, but Mick 'hired everybody on that team so he felt responsible. I think mentally he was like, "I can't be the first guy out of the water."'

After suggesting I ask Mick about his experience in the water, 'because literally, he was drowning,' Jerry casually mentions that he also happens to be a trained rescue swimmer. 'So Mick's clutching onto me, and every time he dragged me down I'd swim him back up.'

Finally, they both made it onto the bottom of the boat – and the personal EPIRB in Mick's bib was the only one to successfully transmit a Mayday.

'Just a whole chain of events... so many people did little things that made a difference, all in a split second.

'All the Volvo experience, and years of heavy-weather sailing.' One of the guys was a Navy SEAL. 'Things just happened, and nobody died. If you'd had that scenario later in the race, or on a Transatlantic, nobody would've made it.'

A couple of those same teammates were onboard for his most recent misadventure, when the former *Rambler 88*, ironically now named *Lucky*, lost her rig during the 2023 Middle Sea Race. 'Just cruising along into a real punchy wave, and the brand new high-modulus mast goes over the side.

'But all of us had been through the 1980s with aluminium rigs, then the '90s with the carbon rigs going over the side; it's just normal and you deal with it. So everyone's moving, and nobody's talking. And the owner can't believe it – you guys are acting like it's just another day! That crew is so much fun because we've sailed together for decades.'

Team plans already extend out to December 2025, he adds. 'Sydney-Hobart at age 70, on the bow?' The grin grows even wider. 'That'd be awesome!'

In October 2022, just after finishing a race in St Tropez, Jerry fell through a hatch. 'Just another day with a broken back,' he remarks, never losing that trademark smile. 'The funniest thing was flying home with two collapsed lungs, internal bleeding and my back broken in four places. But it was better to tough it out and get home... and I'm a hockey player.

'We say you're hurt, or you're injured. You can always be hurt. But if you're injured you've gotta take care of it.' This was definitely an injury; 'I ended up in the trauma ward for eight days...' He's back to full strength – except for that pesky rotator cuff, torn during a recent hockey game. 'Now I gotta go get that operated on...'





### Most unbalanced

So how did Jerry build such a well-respected company and simultaneously do so much high-level racing? 'It wouldn't have been possible without my brother-in-law, Tom Perkins,' he says, adding that he's just recently bought him out – though the Kirby-Perkins name will remain.

'In the years when I was doing the Cup and the Volvo he would have my back; it would have been difficult to leave if he wasn't there. I gave him half the company right before the first round-the-world race [the 1997 Whitbread Race, on *Chessie Racing*]. And he says, "You're not going around the world, are you?" I said "Nah, I'm gonna get the boat built up and train the crew, then I'll do the Transatlantic."

'So I did the Transatlantic, and I never stopped! It's like Tom, just keep doing what you're doing. But having him was a huge thing, because I could bring my family on that around-the-world-race.'

And on the next four America's Cups: 'I won with America<sup>3</sup> in 1992 – that was a great team. Coached the [America<sup>3</sup>] women in '95, 2000 with Young America, 2003 with Stars and Stripes.' Next he went around the world again, and again; '2005-06 with Pirates. 2008-09 with Kenny [Read and Puma]. Then *Rambler*... and working like crazy in between.'

Today Kirby-Perkins Construction has around 180 employees. Asked how he balances work with everything else, Jerry laughs. 'I am the most imbalanced person you've ever seen,' he says matter-of-factly. 'I work seven days a week. Always have, probably always will. People ask me, why not retire? Like, what the hell is that?'

'I'm never going to retire because I really love building and historic restorations, and general construction. It's just like sailing; the team's been together for years, we work at a very high level, and it's a great group of people.'

There are loads of Kirby-Perkins signs on impressive projects around the greater Newport area, but Jerry says that's just the tip of the iceberg. 'We're in Barbados,

Virginia, Panama, Europe. And all these young guys are coming up, including my youngest son. He's been in the business for a long time now, got a degree in historic preservation; he runs the jobs now.'

### Favourite memories

When asked to pick his top sailing memory, Jerry's stream of chatter finally pauses. 'Just one? Jeez...' But then he finds an answer: 'Winning the Cup, on *America<sup>3</sup>*; that box was checked. What a great team!'

Less predictably, he claims his next favourite race was as a spectator; watching son Rome help Oracle sail back from the brink of extinction to win the 2013 America's Cup. Historians tell that the Kirbys are the only father and son who have both sailed on a winning Cup boat.

Later he adds another favourite: finishing second in the 2006 Volvo Ocean Race on *Pirates of the Caribbean*. 'That team of guys... We had the most fun, and that programme was thrown together just 60 days before the start.' It was the first race in the Volvo 70s. 'We almost sank; sailed out into Hurricane Katrina to do our qualifier and turned around and surfed back... Cayard and I, at two in the morning, we're all the way aft with a little plastic cup bailing into a plastic bucket, because when the shore team cleaned up they were in such a hurry they took all the bailing equipment!'

'Water was coming up through the stock... those boats were nuts! Untamed beasts... There was no chance to beat *ABN Amro*, because it was like racing a moped against a Harley. So to get a second, from where we started – last entry, boat sinking – was monumental.'

He has high praise for the skipper. 'I've done a lot of miles with Paul, and I love sailing with the guy. Nobody outworks him as a skipper. One of the toughest offshore sailors – he's the real deal.'

Which somehow sparks another memory: breaking the Middle Sea Race record on George David's original 90ft *Rambler* in 2007. 'That was an epic race; some of the worst sea conditions I'd ever

Kirby stayed with Bill Koch's Cup team for the 1995 edition where he coached the mainly women team onboard *Mighty Mary*. Then after the Cup moving to New Zealand in 2000 Kirby joined skipper Ed Baird at Young America (yes, the one that broke in half), remaining with the country of his birth once again in 2003 when he went back to Auckland (left) with Ken Read on Dennis Conner's 'average' *Stars&Stripes*

seen, and most of the boats never even finished.' Out of the 69 registered entries, only 17 completed the course.

'Actually I became pretty convinced that God wanted George [David] to die; every time we left the dock it was thermonuclear. And that race was just hair on fire...'

*Loki*, an Australian 66-footer, had to be abandoned after losing her rudder. 'Once we turned the corner we let it rip. There's a great photo of all these waterspouts that look like something out of the Ides of March... we just stayed as far away as we could and held on. But that particular boat handled so much better when it nuked!'

'55 [knots] and above, mini skirt [fully reefed main] and little tiny storm jib. As soon as we get down to 51 staysail back out and throttle on. There was so much power in the staysail when it was blowing 50... it was like sailing your Laser. Whee! Totally controllable, surf the waves... but the whole boat flexed so much we tore the hatch off.'

They'd had the same problem on the Transatlantic so they quickly duct-taped and Spanish-windlassed the thing back down into place. 'We had all the right guys, bunch of round-the-world knuckleheads.' Jerry laughs. 'If you sail offshore you have to have some stories like that. Or you're not having fun.'

### Goes on for ever

I ask for more, but his phone-free lunch hour is over, so instead he gives me another one-shouldered shrug. 'There's so many, I don't even know where to start.' Unlike other offshore sailors he has no idea how many hundreds of thousands of miles he's sailed. 'I'm not really a counter. "For ever" is the only measurement you need, because any offshore race just goes on for ever!' Like this interview, I realise.

There's just no way to shoehorn all of Jerry's escapades into one weekday lunch – especially when he doesn't want to go public with everything. 'Luckily not all the stories are out there,' he says, chuckling again. 'If I grew up in the era of social media I'd still be in jail!'

Yet his enjoyment has 'never really been about winning or losing', Jerry explains. 'Sail at the highest level you can, and whatever happens happens. I've been blessed to sail with unbelievable people on unbelievable boats – and what matters is the company.'

Maybe we should schedule another profile after that 2025 Hobart, because this 68-year-old plans to 'keep the throttle down. Time's gonna catch up with all of us so I'm just gonna keep going as hard as I can until it does.' Great plan – just no more bridge jumping, OK? □

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