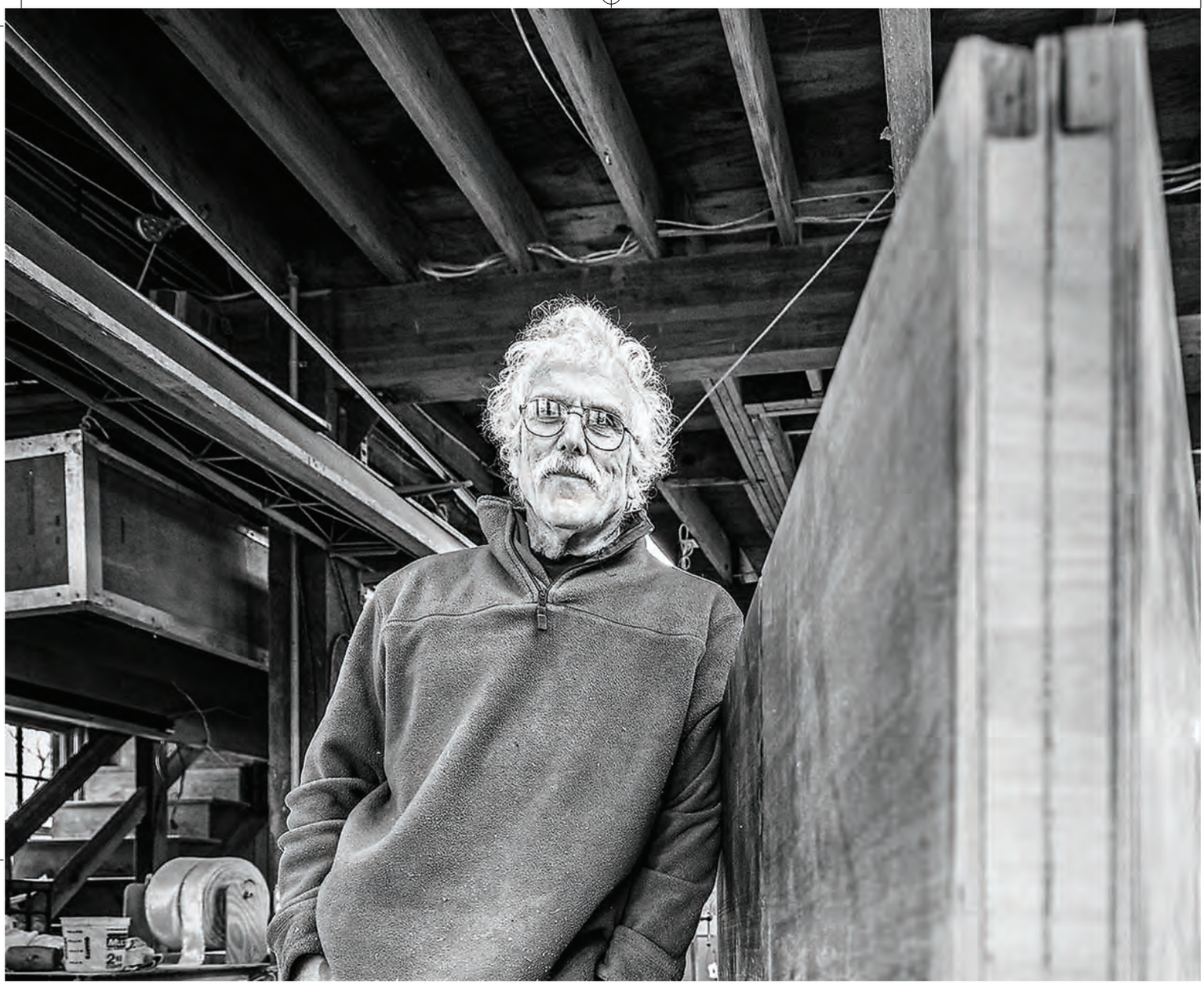


Just can't sit still

As Carol Cronin finds out… Steve Clark is truly a renaissance man: 71 years old, heart attack survivor and now a grandfather, he's still tweaking and modernising whatever comes his way

Our interview starts with a chilly tour through the many boat sheds on his property; a private museum of boating history. My hatless, gloveless guide identifies each dusty hull, apparently oblivious to the afternoon's bone-chilling temperature; it's not until my lips get too numb to form coherent sentences that he takes pity and leads me to a smaller (heated) outbuilding.

As we settle into a cosy sitting room Steve Clark explains that he and his wife Kim lived here while their main house was being updated. 'Reminds me of a narrow boat,' I say, which launches him into a fond memory of sailing on the English Broads and why it should be my very next destination. It's the first of many digressions from talking about his own achievements, so forgive me if I miss a few.

Island upbringing

Steve grew up on a tiny sideways comma of an island that protects the inner harbour of Marion, Massachusetts, from Buzzards Bay. 'If you could do it on a boat my dad did it on a boat,' he says. 'I don't remember learning to sail' or rather, 'I don't remember ever not knowing how. 'But at probably age nine I was pretty much off the leash. I could take any boat that we had, any day of the year, and go sailing. It could be the middle of winter, and my mother would say, don't get wet. It could be blowing 40mph in March. It wasn't even a question of asking; you just went.'

When he was about 15 he took the family's 40-footer out with a bunch of friends for an overnight race around Buzzards Bay. Afterwards he remembers his mother saying, 'It's a little bit more complicated than you thought, isn't it?'

'I loved the fact that there was always more to figure out.' He learned to work on boats too. 'Mostly fibreglass, with polyester resin. And screws and bolts and nuts. But even then my brother used to give me constant shit about customising things.'

What he wasn't good at was structured education: 'I sucked at school. If you haven't figured out, it's ADD, and they didn't know about that. Well, actually, they did know about it…' And we're off on an opinionated historical tour of Attention Deficit Disorder, which he claims was discovered just up the road from his prep school many years before he was born. (I didn't take the time to fact-check that one!).

'I was a good boy. We'd come home from school, have a cup of tea, I'd go upstairs to my room and try to sit at a desk – and be unable to do my homework. They had these parent awareness slips: Stevie hasn't done his homework. I'd take one home every night, and my mother and father would bawl me out. And I keep getting them, and they keep bawling me out.'

But 'My mother was action-packed with issues… one of the things that you couldn't tell her was that there was

CHRISTIAN FEVRIER

***Above*: 1996 and Steve Clark has decided that an 11-year run of Little America's Cup success for Lindsay Cunningham's Australian team has become intolerable, prompting the creation of the Duncan McLane-designed *Cogito* (*above*), a C-Class that without any further development was still faster than anything else 10 years later. 'How high did we raise the bar? We built a pretty nice boat and we sailed it pretty well. We didn't do a Dennis [Conner] and build two boats. We didn't build three wings, we built one complete boat. We could have spent a whole lot more! NASA wasn't involved. We did no wind tunnel work – Lindsay did wind tunnel work. He grouses about how we spent $500,000. I say, "You built four boats. I built one".' While *Cogito* went racing at 380lb it had been 60 years since the last time someone (*left*) built a new wooden 110 dinghy – 910lb dry – so who better to pick up the mantle than one of the most speed-oriented sailors on the planet? Steve Clark at home with the boat he now sails more than anything else… for now**

something wrong with one of her kids: he's fine. It's just the way he is, he doesn't think the way other people think. All true, but I'm still getting my ass handed to me at school. I still cannot do my homework.'

He was sent to boarding school as a teenager, which is how he met Kim; she was his sister's roommate at a nearby all-girls' school. 'Her parents had a boat in Essex [Connecticut], which is where she learned to sail. They went off on the boat every weekend from May till October.' He claims now that all she was really learning was how to go on a boat ride. 'If a girl knows what side of the boat to sit on, and can talk like she knows how to sail, that's usually good enough.

'And I think that's still a big chunk of why sailing programmes suck; really all they're doing is teaching kids enough about boats to talk to a CEO, or marry one. Once the girl knows how to say port and starboard and isn't freaked out by sitting on a boat, she's done it. What's the point of a yacht club? Well, that's where you're going to meet the influential, rich guy who's going to give you a job. It's like the reason you learn to play golf.'

His house wasn't like that at all, he says. 'Ram Island, in the 1960s, you had to build your stuff. And actually, sailing in the '60s, you had to build stuff because Harken didn't exist yet. There weren't any good blocks anywhere.'

He pauses for a reverent remembrance of the Lands' End catalogue, which in those days was the mail-order mecca for sailing gear, before returning to the self-sufficiency theme. 'You had to rig the boat yourself, but also you had to repair everything yourself. And so I would take a piece of wood, break it and repair it into a boat.'

What makes it work?

The young Steve built hundreds of model sailboats. 'My education in naval architecture was completely self-directed. Every boat that showed up in *Yachting Magazine*, I built a model of it,' using what he describes as 'Styrofoam, lead and dry cleaning bags. Quick and dirty, awful, but I tried to figure out what made it work. I put lots in the water that didn't work, and then I'd screw around until it either started working, or broke. 'That would go in the trash and next day I'd build another one.'

His testing location was an island pond that 'when the tide's up is a pretty damn good model boat pond. There was one particular occasion when I built a three-point hydroplane with a kite that I set off in a full southerly. It went across the salt pond at about 18kt, jumped the causeway, jumped the beach, flew across the harbour…' and crashed into a neighbour's house. 'At least it didn't break a window,' he adds, pausing for a brief chuckle before he asks a few rhetorical questions.

'Why did you have to learn that? What about that was hard to figure out?' Like dropping a match into gasoline, 'and it blew up; just kind of obvious, right?' But at least in hindsight his career highlights could be seen as a series of similarly 'obvious' experiments.

He grew into 'a big, strong kid', he continues. So 'I was expected to do things that other people can't.' Whenever his mother's age and bad back got in the way of picking something up he'd take over. 'I used to call myself her muscular shadow. I'd spend the day following Mom around, carrying stuff and spending that time with her. And that was actually wonderful.'

US Sailing's sportsmanship trophy is named after Steve's father, Van Alan Clark Jr. In 2012 Steve wrote on a forum that 'When you have a number of kids (I'm #4 of 6) you have special things you share with each kid. I was Dad's "boat kid".'

***Left*: the most recent Little America's Cup took place in Geneva in 2015, Franck Cammas and Louis Viat defending the title they won two years earlier in the UK. With their unmatched success in ocean racing events it appeared that there was nothing the Groupama technical team could not successfully turn its hand to**

Steve's parents sailed the 1970 Tempest Worlds together, but in 1971 Dad signed on his big strong 'boat kid' for the next regatta in Sweden. 'I got to meet Valentin Mankin,' Steve says proudly, lacing on a Ukrainian accent to add that the three-time gold medallist (Finn, Tempest and Star) told them to move out of the US, because 'sailing is all fxx!ed up in America. Work your ass off 10 months a year, sail for two. In Soviet Union I work my ass off two months a year, sail for 10.' Steve laughs at the memory.

It's probably not just coincidence that the 1972 US Trials in both Finn and Tempest were held in Marion, Massachusetts. Steve teamed up with his dad again, and they were the youngest and oldest in the event. 'We finished sixth or seventh, because we'd figured out how to make a fast Tempest.'

Around that time Steve also remembers racing the brand-new Laser, 'enough to get bored with it. Get far enough apart, you're not going to pass anybody; no one's going to pass you. So are you having fun sailing? No, you're really not. So let's find something that's fun to sail, really hard and really fast – like a canoe.'

But first, a few life realities

'Until I was 18 years old I didn't have any idea how I was ever going to have a career,' he tells me. 'Because if you sat me down in an office it was going to be just like school. And I was going to fail.'

Fortunately, 'something called the artisan's movement' appeared – which spawned publications as varied as the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *WoodenBoat* magazine. Joel and Steve White, son and grandson of author EB White, were using MIT educations to build wooden boats. 'There was a whole bunch of stuff that said craft is cool. Being a carpenter or a cabinet maker or a boatbuilder is actually an interesting and honourable thing for people to aspire to be.'

That helped Steve Clark realise that 'figuring out stuff, and making stuff, is just a fine future for a son.' Or a daughter, I add. 'Fortunately my parents were really cool.'

Rowing to Cornell

Steve won several rowing championships in high school, which helped balance out any academic deficiencies; as he puts it, 'One of the ways they talked themselves into letting me into Cornell was that I was the preppie world champion at rowing.'

In addition to having a building gifted by his grandparents, Cornell was 'the first college to admit women on a co-educational basis… therefore radical and agrarian at the same time.'

When he first walked onto the campus Steve remembers telling himself two things. 'One is that whatever happens here you pretend you're smart. See how long it takes them to figure out that you're not smart. The other: you're going to go to every fxx!ing class. If you go to class and listen the professor is probably going to tell you what you need.' As it turned out, the less structured university education 'worked fine for me. Three classes a week – and no homework to hand in.'

He also went to other people's classes, especially once Kim transferred from Vassar. 'It's two o'clock in the afternoon, you've got to hang around till rowing at five. So you go to a history of art lecture, sit in the back and look at slides – next to a pretty girl!'

Steve still didn't know what he was going to do for a career, but he stuck to his two rules. 'I achieved by the charity of the professors,' he claims now. 'They basically gave me credit for showing up every day. And I was clearly capable of having an English degree.' At Cornell, 'They say you come out knowing two things: how to swim and how to write. Swimming actually is pretty important, because the number of people who drown is still pretty high. And I got a varsity letter in writing; eight semesters of creative writing!'

After college he and Kim settled in a small town nearby. Steve also got a Master's degree in teaching, but 'I was about as good at being a teacher as I was at being a student.' Time to figure out a different plan.

Can you canoe?

Steve's boatbuilding career started off with a simple purchase. 'I found a sailing canoe in City Island, New York. Canoes go upwind at Flying Dutchman speed; really fxx!ing fast. They're pretty fast [even] when you don't know how to sail them, but then when you learn how it's suddenly just…' for once words fail him.

Of course there was much tinkering – and plenty of room for improvement. 'I was pretty athletic, and I was pretty savvy about putting stuff together. But that boat was breaking as fast as I could keep it repaired. I couldn't get anyone to build [a new] one, so I decided I had to build it myself. Along the way I sort of got the idea that maybe other people wanted these things too.'

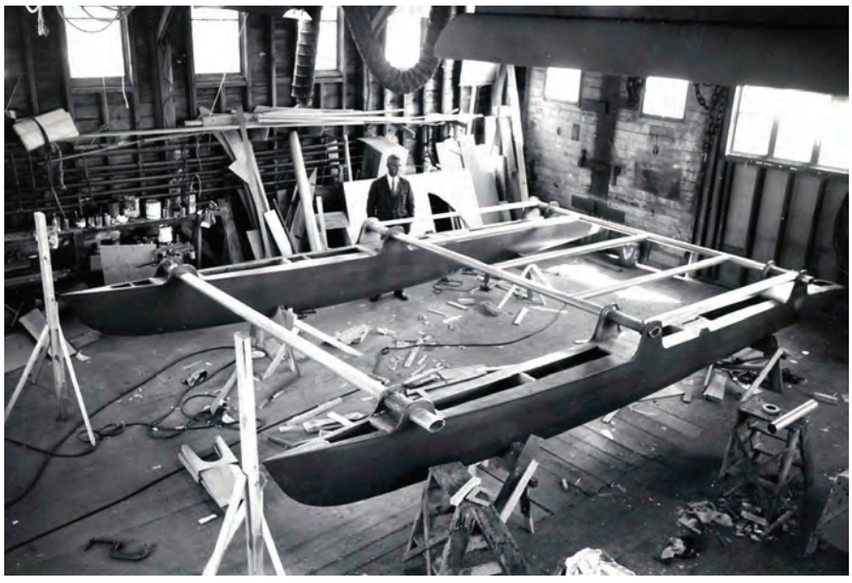
At the time most International Canoes were constructed in England. 'I talked to a bunch of people and was going to import hulls and put them together to sell. But that turned out to be a complete cluster, because the people in England couldn't do anything right. So I ended up importing a whole plug from Germany and getting Paul Hemker to build the mould, who was the only person who would talk to me about it. We designed a construction method that put plywood decks on a fibreglass hull, which got you something light enough and stiff enough to actually work.'

Hemker built the hulls, because while 'laminating fibreglass was something I did, pulling stuff out of moulds wasn't something I really wanted to do then. Which is good, because this was before cored fibreglass had actually been figured out.'

The boats they built 'ended up being pretty fast', Steve continues. 'We took them to Sweden for the first world championship in 1978; I finished second, and I actually beat the world champion [Swede Martin Gullberg] in a race!' Later a search would reveal that Steve also won the last race, which Gullberg sat out having already won the regatta. And oh, by the way, in 1984 and 2002 Steve himself was crowned IC World Champion.

Back to New England

Steve's first shop was in his garage. Not surprisingly, 'That turned out to be not big enough,' so he bought an empty supermarket. '70,000ft² for $12,000! It was a ghetto, but that's where I learned to build boats – more than one at a time. I built probably 20 sailing canoes, a couple of ▷



William Van Allan Clark Jr, seen during the build of his groundbreaking C-Class *Beverly*, which swept all before it in the US trials to select a boat to challenge the British holders of the Little America's Cup. Clark's design was the first use of alloy cross beams in the class, replacing a traditional plywood bridge-deck. Sadly the waters of the Thames Estuary were less kind to the US team, which went down 1-4 against *Hellcat II* sailed by no less a team than cat pioneers Reg White and Bob Fisher (they never stood a chance – *ed*)

Rhodes Bantams and an International 14.'

By 1981, though, he and Kim were ready to move back to the east coast. 'We wanted to have kids, and we didn't want to have them in central New York… didn't want to have to explain why you weren't going to have a snowmobile and a shotgun.' They chose Rhode Island to raise their three children; it's in between their two childhood homes – and also historically significant. 'My mother's family is descended from William Harris, the bane of Roger Williams' existence…' and one of the founders of what became the Ocean State.

In 1680 Harris was heading to England to resolve land disputes when the ship was captured by an Algerian corsair. 'He was enslaved,' Steve says, before raising his hand to answer another rhetorical question: 'Who here has a slave in their family?' That leads to an insightful comparison of slavery in different countries. Though we're well off topic already I can't leave out this comment: 'The British Navy looks an awful lot like slavery to me. OK, you're in a bar. You get captured, you get put on a ship and held there at gunpoint, until they let you off. That's a fxxk of a lot like slavery…' though, unlike the American version, 'it's not permanent and inheritable'.

Before Vanguard there was Quarter Moon

Rhode Island has been a boatbuilding hub since that British Navy was still trying to 'enslave' the locals, and Steve set up a company called Quarter Moon. He says the goal was to 'build more recreation-focused boats, but the price points were all wrong.

'We built these lovely things called Delaware Duckers…' a duck-hunting boat 'you have to sail over open water, row, pull up into marshes; operate in the thing all day and then get home. So it's probably a pretty good use case, right? A far more exhaustive testing process than we're ever going to do in the modern world.'

Steve built lightweight cold-moulded Duckers, which both carried more weight and were easier to cartop; 'everything about it is gonna get better. The problem was that the customer would have paid $1,500 for a boat like that, and we couldn't buy the materials for 1,500 bucks.

'One of the classic moments was when I showed up with a Ducker, and a guy said, "I was gonna buy one, but you weren't at the boat show the year I went." When was that? "Oh, 1986." Dude, I'd have starved to death three times over by then!'

He was 'trying to figure out what to do next' when he came up with a concept for a simple doublehanded boat that could handle people his size. 'The FJ sucks and the 420 sucks; there has to be a better answer. So Bob [Ames] drew this thing that later became the Vanguard 15, and soon I was actually tooling it and paying for the moulds and everything else.'

But first Steve would follow his passion for speed on what became a major detour.

Fabulous and frightening

Steve was only nine years old when a C Class catamaran first made a family appearance; his father sailed in the 1962 Little America's Cup. 'This is a fabulous thing; fxx!ing frightening at that point, but fabulous. So all of a sudden that whole stream of early catamaran development is going on, and I've got a front row seat.' By 1968 his father's final catamaran had a solid wing… though sadly that 'destroyed itself in a cold front'.

As soon as Steve and Kim settled in Rhode Island he began working with Ted van Dusen; 'learning how to actually build hot shit composite stuff. I started this composite mast business with Ted, and was working with him on other projects as well. I built a bunch of components for the C-Class *Patient Lady V*.'

Steve first raced the Little America's Cup in 1985, but even a brand-new design wasn't enough to beat the Australian team. 'The last boat I built at Quarter Moon was *Patient Lady VI*,' he explains, pointing outside towards the sheds where all of his hulls are stored – which of course includes *Cogito*. Duncan McLane and Erich Chase first beat the Australians with 'that' C-Class cat in 1996… *Cogito* continued to dominate until 2007, when Canadians took the coveted trophy north.

Not going to lie down

Like many major life pivots, Steve's purchase of Vanguard Sailboats was part happenstance. 'I was looking at building college dinghies so I called up Peter [Harken] and said, "Does the college dinghy business suck or not?" And he said, "Oh, it's pretty reliable… 100 boats a year, something like that' and this is before Title Nine ("unlimited access to participate") a law which Steve credits with the huge growth of US scholastic sports in general and sailing in particular.

'The answer I got back from Peter was that, yeah, it doesn't suck, but you're going to have to beat us at it, and it's going to cost you a pile of money because we're not going to lie down.'

Steve's father had recently died, 'So I said, "How much?"' The company wasn't really for sale, but 'they gave me a fairly attractive price. I basically put half down and had a chance to earn the rest out. A leveraged buyout! We moved the business east, and I made one of the best decisions of my life…' He stops. 'The best decision was marrying Kim,' he says. 'The second best decision was calling up Chip Johns and saying, "How would you like to do this with me?"'

One reason Peter and Olaf were willing to sell off their boatbuilding business was because, as Steve puts it, 'the 470 class had screwed over Harken. They were building 300 to 500 new 470s a year, the dominant producers.' Class rules stated that 'you had to measure your plug, and the plug had to be half the tolerances of the finished boat. What they didn't say was that the mould has to look like the plug.'

According to Steve, another builder 'took the plug, built a mould and fxx!ed with it: straightened it out, pinched it – then they said, "Oh, it was just out in the sun and it sagged." There was no way you could build that boat off a legal plug. And when Harken said, time out: how about you enforce your fxx!ing rules? the 470 class said, Oh, no.' That started what he calls a cheating war, which 'basically poisoned my relationship with the 470 class'.

Building better dinghies

Finns were supplied equipment through the 1992 Olympics. 'We built 40 for Barcelona,' Steve says. 'The secret of the ▷

CHRISTOPHE LAUNAY/DPPI

Steve Clark's *Cogito* held onto the Little America's Cup for over 10 years in undeveloped form – a deliberate choice on Clark's part 'pour encourager les autres'. It was not until 2007 that *Cogito* finally ceded the trophy to the fast Canadian team of Fred Eaton and Magnus Clarke. But Clark was back with a new C-Class (*above*) for the 2010 event in Newport, *Aethon*, which showed all the signs of being a worthy successor to its era-defining predecessor before being badly damaged prior to the series in a high-speed capsize. *Right*: hotbed of design ingenuity… standing with the tiller of France's 2010 C-Class challenger is a young Antoine Koch, champion Imoca sailor and the designer who, working with Groupe Finot, produced Yoann Richomme's Vendée Globe runner-up *Arkéa Paprec*

Finn business was that every four years you got a chance to build 40 boats. We spent eight months of the year without any debt; we didn't make any money on the boats, but we made a f*ck load of money on not having any debt, right?'

But four years later 'we realised that Atlanta was not going to buy boats.' And, he claims, what was then called ISAF didn't want a dominant builder. Even though 'they always are going to have a dominant builder, because Olympians are going to follow each other like lemmings.

'That's why Marstrøm was going to build all the Tornados, and Vanguard was going to build all the Finns. Now, stupidly, Larry Lemieux and Luca Devoti decided they wanted a chunk of our 50-boat-a-year market. The second they decided they wanted to compete with us we stopped. OK, fine, have at it, because there's not enough money in this to fight over it.'

Vanguard also built Europe dinghies (an Olympic class from 1992 to 2004). Their design started with a Winner because 'it seemed to be a fine boat. Added a little Bondo to make a bunch of minor cosmetic adjustments: crisped up the radiuses on the back corners; changed the stem profile to make the point on the bow sharper…

'We knew we could do a better structural job, so we used thin Klegecell and cloth and vacuum-bagged the whole deck. Europe dinghies that you could stand on!'

Design-wise the Vanguard Europe was the same boat as the Winner, he repeats… yet 'the boat could not go downwind in more than 12kt of breeze.' ('I thought that was just me!' I reply, glad to have a new excuse for my dismal Europe results.)

Discouraged by the Olympic chase, Steve pulled the moulds for the Vanguard 15 out of storage and created a brand-new class that would keep many college sailors racing dinghies long after graduation. 'I was Vanguard's executive chef,' he says; 'I let the other people run the company while I actually figured out what the boats were.'

Vanguard also built the Club 420, which was designed 'to teach people to go out on trapezes and set spinnakers', as a stepping stone to the 470. Instead, 'the Club 420 turns out to be the largest national trapeze sailing class – and I'm enormously proud of that. But you're done at the end,' he adds; 'the road stops and nobody goes anywhere else. The way it panned out isn't the way I expected.'

Highlights

Steve owned Vanguard for 30 years. 'I did the Nomad, which was a pretty successful family day sailor.' Next, he spent two years working up the Vector: an unbreakable double-trapeze boat, with 'strings to pull that actually do something'. Though he 'got to a pretty good answer, fact is no one wanted that boat; we sold exactly one.' Too expensive, he says. 'If you get over $10,000 you're not going to sell anything.'

When I ask what he considers the highlight of his Vanguard career Steve smiles and quips, 'Selling it.' (Laser Performance took it over in 2008.) But he quickly adds what he calls the real 'high part of it: making money building boats, actually running a profitable company'.

That came after the 1997 purchase of Laser/Sunfish. 'At that point we had a large enough organisation that was well enough managed that we were reliably profitable. Essentially the thing you had to do was support the cuckoo, which was the Laser. It would suck up every dollar you would let it suck up.' Instead of budgeting '$180,000 to promote the Vector, I said give me $180,000 and I'll add 25 per cent to the Laser business.'

Time for another rhetorical question: why not stop building everything else and just build Lasers and Sunfish? After all, 'The more Lasers and Sunfish you built the more profitable you were.' But of course that would have been far too boring a plan for a Renaissance man.

As for Steve, 'I wanted to sail 505s and International Canoes; boats that fxx!ing went places. But we couldn't sell those things because people didn't know how to sail them.' Selling the company allowed a return to his passion: building and modifying whatever fast boat caught his eye.

The end of the road

In 2010 the Little America's Cup came to Newport. Steve built a new boat, *Aethon*, which he sailed with his nephew Oliver Moore. In all, seven boats from four countries showed up; impressive for a development class so leading edge that the America's Cup teams were sniffing around the boat park. As Steve said before the regatta, 'Just getting a [C-Class] to the regatta and competing is a significant achievement.'

Unfortunately a 'freak accident' before the first race damaged their wing so badly they had to withdraw. ('Please don't include that fxx!ing photo of the boat on its side,' Steve will beg me later; 'I still have PTSD from that crash…' Oops – ed.)

And that was, as he puts it, 'the end of the road for super high-end one-off racing boats. There wasn't going to be another project as good as that one. And for a long, long time we were sitting there, going, what the fxxk do we do now? The boat broke; no one's gonna ask me to build anything. And I've got a payroll, so I need a new model.'

While ready to flog off the family silver when it comes to C-Class development, there is a second strong theme flowing through the Clark family bloodline… making the sport accessible. The commercial success of the popular Vanguard 15 (*right*) helped to fund a lot of that other rather higher-end development, while their little vinylester mass-manufacture UFO foiling pocket-cat (*left*) was jointly developed by Steve with son David to offer proper foiled sailing at a more realistic price point. Dave Clark also sells an excellent low cost way into the IC10 canoe class – his competitive hard-chine Machete design is sold in CNC-cut plywood kit form for $2,000 for a hull kit including carbon seat tracks; a complete kit with carbon spars, seat kit, seat carriage and foils will set you back about $5,000

Red Herring

One significant piece of family history that is no longer part of Steve's fleet is *Red Herring*, a boat his father 'caused to be created'. Designed by Dave Hubbard and built in 1980 by Eric Goetz, 'she was the first canting-keel boat that actually worked. The good news was: she worked. The bad news was: she didn't work anywhere near well enough.'

The 55-footer's keel could be lifted and canted, though not at the same time. 'My father described her as a rather large and non-negotiable asset.'

In 2012 Steve wrote about this unique vessel. 'When I was a kid Dad and I talked boats all the time. He drew on the back of paper place mats at Howard Johnson's when we were stopping for a hot dog. As often as not it was something that would eventually turn into *Red Herring*. When I brought home my first International Canoe he went for a short sail and said, "That's it. I'm building the skinny boat."'

Sadly his father died only three years later. Over the next few decades Steve experimented with various rigs, sailplans and underbodies. By the time he sold the boat, 'I'd changed everything.' But the new owner is 'treating her like the trophy wife she ought to be. She's at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, the most interesting thing there; fxx!ing magical, with about an 8ft bowsprit and twin asymmetrical spinnakers. She's optimised for Lake Ontario and she doesn't get beaten very often.'

What he's doing now

After surviving a heart attack a few years ago Steve started a new project: 'a sailing canoe I can still sail. I've designed a geezer boat that has more stability than the current fast canoe. Same hull shape underwater, but it's got flare on the topsides which is pretty cool. The boat is absolutely the same beast, but I'm not that guy any more. Now I'm trying not to fall off the perch.'

He's also deeply involved in the 110 Class, a classic hard-chine design he calls 'old school in a lot of ways', but also 'a pretty happy little boat. I don't think I can ever get old enough that I can't sail a 110.'

He still has dozens of opinions about what's wrong with the sport, he adds. 'One of which is I think all the adventure's gone out of it. Going to a weekend regatta just sucks, and it doesn't fit in with two-income families. And the sailboat race, as practised at a regatta, is not a lot of fun.' I want to remind him that he said the same thing about the brand-new hot Laser, but instead we digress again to discuss wing-foiling, which Steve hasn't (yet) tried.

'There's a lot of people playing with wind and water,' he points out, wondering out loud if the sport is actually healthier than it seems. 'It's like if you thought skiing was dying because all these people are on snowboards; there's a lot of ways to interact with snow and gravity, and the parking lot's full either way, right? So is the sport really dying, when you don't see 30 Snipes out but there are 25 wings over there that didn't used to be there?'

Still sailing too

It's long past time to wrap up, but I can't resist asking what boat he actually sails the most nowadays. I'm thinking he might wax poetic on taking his young granddaughter out for a harbour tour, but 'sailing' clearly means 'racing' to him. 'Last summer I sailed the 110 a lot,' he replies, adding that the 24-footer can be raced one-design or PHRF for longer local races. A friend hangs on the trapeze for him; 'You get to go spend a couple hours together, and what's wrong with that?'

On our freezing tour of his property he'd pointed out several 110s in need of love; now he repeats his wish that other sailors will take them away. 'I was trying not to restore them, but…'

After another shrug the next observation reminds me of his childhood role as Mom's muscular shadow: 'I'm one of the few people who can, or one of the few people who will' rebuild old boats. 'I wish that wasn't the case, but what am I supposed to do? I have a hard time just doing enough; it's like, how can I make this really cool?'

He does admit to one change of heart. 'Having done all the attempts to be the next boat for junior sailing, I'm now thinking that the next boat really ought to look a lot more like a 110 – so it actually has the capacity to do more things.'

Of course Steve has built a brand-new 110, the first wood boat the class has seen in something like 60 years. 'Just because,' he says, before quoting himself from a previous article about why he builds boats: 'Why do dogs lick their balls, right?'

When I suggest that it's because he's good at it, he shakes his head. 'I don't know whether I'm good at it or not. I'm just the only one doing it.'

I finally manage to tear myself away, though long after the drive home my head remains full of an eclectic mix: slightly out-there theories about a very wide range of topics, plus all the practical perspective earned over decades of tweaking and modernising whatever boats come his way.

Obviously he's also still thinking about our conversation; a few days later Steve writes what he calls 'A more accurate answer to "Why do you do this?" Because no one's asked me to do something else.' ❑