

Stalwart

Carol Cronin enjoys a visit to Larchmont YC to learn more about sailmaker and ocean racing champion Butch Ulmer

Blaming his success on others

I've never bought a sail from the legendary Charles 'Butch' Ulmer, but I've been lucky enough to sail a few regattas run by him. When we sit down together in the library of the Larchmont Yacht Club, his home club for 53 years, I tell him that I still remember his trademark approach to regatta management: lean and fair, with zero tolerance for blowback from opinionated competitors.

Nodding as if that is too basic to even be worth discussing, he instantly credits key members of his team. I'll soon learn that blaming his success on others is a common occurrence.

Maritime childhood

Butch was born in 1939 and grew up on City Island, a small but significant marine industry hub just east of New York City. His father was a sailmaker, and his mother was a private secretary for the man who built *Bolero*.

'I was at her launch,' he says proudly. His father worked at the USA arm of British sailmaker Ratsey and Laphorn, one of five sailmakers operating on the island at that time, before starting the company we now know as UK Sailmakers. 'Dad was a very active Star sailor. So as a kid I went all over the world for the big Star Championships.

'I met Lowell North in Chicago, 1949 or 1950. Every winter we'd go to the Bahamas and stay with Durward Knowles at his house. The highlight was the Worlds in Naples, when we went on the *Andrea Doria* with Charlie de Cardenas and his family from Cuba. I got to see the world! I did crew for my dad once in Cascais, but the rest of it I was just a spectator.'

Back at home, Butch crewed for his father in the local Star fleet and also started frothing in the Penguin. Both sound like a nice weekend escape from the local school, where 'corporal punishment was certainly a member of the faculty; you got out of line, you got whacked.' Summers, he worked at the new Ulmer sail loft.

Around 1950 the family drove down to Oxford, Maryland, for a Star regatta. The Bay Bridge hadn't been built yet, so on the way home they took the ferry across Chesapeake Bay to Annapolis, where a local had suggested that Butch's father start a second loft (he did). After that visit Butch says, 'I never wanted to go anywhere but the Naval Academy. I didn't apply for another college.' He credits his acceptance to kind letters from that local, the president of the Star class, and the director of athletics at the Naval Academy – because Butch was a strong high school swimmer.



Navy and Olympic sailing

Of course sailing became his primary sport; in 1970 Butch would be inducted into the Collegiate Sailing Hall of Fame. (It would take another five decades to make it into the National Sailing Hall of Fame.)

After graduating in 1961 Butch spent three years on the *USS Waller*, a destroyer that took part in the blockade of Cuba in 1962. But active duty included more sailing than you might expect. 'I did my first two Bermuda Races and my first two Annapolis Newport races on Navy yawls,' he tells me; the UK Sailmakers website adds that his first Bermuda Race was 'in an engine-less wooden Navy yawl [with] running lights that burned kerosene'.

He also raced 1,200 miles from Buenos Aires to Rio on the first fibreglass Navy yawl. 'And just before I got out, the Navy let me try for the Olympics in the Finn...

'I was pretty long and lanky in those days and that's what you needed. We had a big group of people from around here; there were at least 10 guys from Larchmont who were travelling around to train for the 1964 US Trials. So I represented the US a few times while I was still on that ship...' He points to the *Waller* hat sitting on the table between us. 'My captain was pretty livid!'

The memory sparks a fresh chuckle.

But it was Pete Barrett who won selection for the 1964 Olympics in the Finn, so Butch got out of the Navy and went into sailmaking, 'mainly because I just needed a job'. He would try again for an Olympic berth in the Tempest, but even winning the US Nationals did not earn him the spot.

Meanwhile he'd started dating his wife Carol in 1963. One of her cousins was a good friend of Butch's; he made it back from a seven-month Navy tour just in time for the cousin's wedding. After the ceremony, 'There was a tradition then that we went to the bride's home to look at all the gifts. Somehow I ended up with my wife saying, "Come on, let's go." And that was that.' (They're celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary this year; sadly Carol is now 'fighting a battle' with Parkinson's.)

The business of sailmaking

After leaving active duty Butch worked on the floor of his father's sail loft. 'Water on the knee was the trademark injury. Everything was at that point very much eyeball and handwork.' They built 'every kind of sail', he says; 'My dad was well known in the Star class, and he did a lot of one-design sails. Snipes, Comets, Lightnings; those were the most usual at that time.' They also built big-boat sails, and Butch continued to



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Left: hard at it at UK Sailmakers in 2020 shortly after celebrating his 80th birthday, Charles 'Butch' Ulmer doing what he loves best. **Above:** the New York YC's unsuccessful 1987 Cup challenger, *America II*, being skippered by John Kolius in Fremantle. Butch Ulmer recruited Kolius in 1976 shortly after the Texan won an Olympic silver medal in the Solings; however, following the bruising and exhausting *America II* campaign Kolius stepped back from competitive racing along with his commercial involvement with UK Sails

race offshore; later he'll estimate his personal Newport Bermuda Race total at 18.

Butch took over running the City Island loft in 1968. 'My mother was the business brains and she contracted cancer, so they retired.' His sister took charge of the Ulmer loft in Annapolis. 'The sails at that point were cotton, but the change to synthetics had already started.'

Butch credits his early sailmaking success to Owen Torrey, a 1948 bronze medallist in the Swallow class. 'Owen was a genius. He was a wonderful guy, a very well-known Star sailor. And a practising admiralty attorney... he was just a genius,' he repeats.

But 'Owen was not a businessman' and, when Butch realised the sail loft Owen had a partnership in was going under, he bought up the assets. 'And by now I was having a helluva time making spinnakers...'

So the deal was that Owen would help set up a spinnaker design and construction operation, and then go back to the practice of law. Well, when that time came he said to me, "I don't want to be a lawyer. I want to be a sailmaker." The two worked together until Torrey's death in 2001.

Radical radials

Another City Island sail loft was making radial head spinnakers; Torrey suggested they figure it out too. Then, 'About a week later Owen said, "Come on up on the roof. I want to show you something." We had a flagpole up there, and he had done the [radial] head of a small spinnaker... absolutely flawless!

'Smooth as hell. He'd found a table in Bowditch [*American Practical Navigator*] that gives you the distance between meridians at every latitude. So at the top was the North Pole, down to the Equator, and he took all the math from this table.' All of Torrey's computations were made with a 3ft slide rule. 'So we started making them.' Soon they had big guns like *Running Tide* and *Courageous* placing orders...

All that success sparked an interesting call from a rival loft, the owner of which had patented a radial-head design of his own. But Butch had seen a radial-head spinnaker years earlier in California, and once he tracked down a date-stamped photo, 'that was the last we heard of it. By the next year we'd made over 400 spinnakers.' Their

radial cuts were so much smoother and Ulmer Sails quickly became the sailmaker of choice for big boat spinnakers.

Of course it helped that their spinnakers were also 'dramatically less expensive'.

Instead of buying cloth in 100-yard rolls, with trimmed edges – and throwing out the last five or even 10 yards – 'I was buying 750-yard rolls that were untrimmed.' They stored all the cloth on 'carts that stood about 8ft high; 3/4 ounce, ounce and a half, we'd just peel off the colours they wanted. A good sewing machine operator could sew together a big spinnaker in a day, day and a half; it was extremely efficient.'

Going global... thanks to technology

'We also started using what was called a computer,' Butch continues. 'An Olivetti Underwood thing you programmed with cards; really a programmable calculator.'

'But the guy who sold it to me said that Sparkman & Stephens was using one, so I called Olin and he went, "Yeah, it's pretty good." So we started using that.'



The next year Torrey bought what Butch calls 'a real computer' and taught himself to program. 'Next thing you know we're doing everything on the computer!'

The next innovation was a machine to cut cross-cut panels. Loft workers could 'just put a roll of Dacron on it, cut the whole sail and sew it together.' (The UK website claims this apparatus as 'one of the first computerised cloth-cutting machines in sailmaking, which ran on an Apple II computer'.) 'And that's why I say that Owen [was] a true genius.'

Once word got out, Butch says, machine-cut panels were 'something that every sailmaker was looking for. So I started franchising.' They set up deals with lofts around the globe, and they also took over the Horizon Sails group; the founder was 'smart as hell, but a crappy businessman. And that's how we got a whole bunch of other lofts in Australia and Hong Kong.'

Becoming UK

It was a couple of Texans who would eventually spark the most significant name and logo change. After John Kolius won a silver medal in the Soling at the 1976 Olympics the owner of the UK loft in Seabrook, Texas suggested to Butch that

they bring him onboard. 'We had a short meeting, I hired [John], and the rest is history. We became really good friends. I never set foot on a boat with a better sailor than John, and I sailed with all of them. John, he just had it by the seat of his pants; he could figure out how to make a boat go fast. And he was a good guy to sail with.' They did a lot of ocean racing miles together, and won the 1980 SORC on *Acadia*, a Peterson Serendipity 43.

A *Sports Illustrated* story soon afterwards gave credit to the eight-man crew, adding that only one (the owner, presumably) wasn't professionally involved in sailing. But 'when most SORC crews are about as Corinthian as the Chase Manhattan Bank, such professional involvement is not at all shocking. To [owner Burt] Keenan it makes sense. "If they don't measure up as crew," he said, "pros are easier to kick off your boat than your friends."'

Kolius eventually became president of Ulmer Sails International, and the name was changed to Ulmer-Kolius. And for the 1983 America's Cup 'John sailed *Courageous*. I went up to be a tactician, but I was no good – plus I had a business to run. So he got [the USA] John Bertrand. They lost the defender trials to Dennis – thank God,

The Butch Ulmer Bugle

Butch Born to Charles & Charlotte Ulmer December 18, 1939

Also Born in 1939

Mike Ditka Robin Knox-Johnston
Ralph Lauren Francis Ford Coppola
Lee Majors Tina Turner
John Cleese Lily Tomlin
Ali MacGraw Paul Hogan
Lee Trevino Bobby Hill

Nominations for Best Picture

Dark Victory
Come with the Wind
(Best Picture winner)
Goodbye, Mr. Chips
Love Affair
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
Ninotchka
Of Mice and Men
Stagecoach
The Wizard of Oz

Books Published

A Farewell to Arms
Ernest Hemingway
And Then There Was None
Agatha Christie
Crimes of War
John Steinbeck
The Big Sleep
Raymond Chandler
The Sound and the Fury
William Faulkner

In Ocean Racing

Richard J. Reynolds' 56-foot cutter
BLITZEN won the 1939 Honolulu
Race. She was designed by S&B and
built on City Island by Nevins.

BLOODHOUND, the Nicholson-
designed 63-foot yawl won Fastnet.

The Bermuda Race was not called
in 1939, but BARENA, 72-foot yawl
designed by Ciri Stevens, won in
1938. The race resumed in 1946,
the year Charles Ulmer, Inc. began.

New Haven-born sailor turned
showmaker Paul Sperry received
a patent in 1939 for the Sperry
Top-Sider boatshoe.

12-Meter YMA was launched after
being built by Nevins.

Butch's first boat.

Germany Invaded Poland Initiating World War II

Sports

World Series: New York Yankees
Stanley Cup: Boston Bruins
NFL Champions: Green Bay Packers
World Heavy Weight: Joe Louis
Horse Racing: Johnstown won the
Kentucky Derby and Belmont Stakes

What Things Cost

Avg. Monthly Rent: \$28
Wages Per Year: \$1,750
Postage Stamp: \$0.03
Loaf of Bread: \$0.08
Gallon of Gas: \$0.10
New Home: \$1,800
New Car: \$700
Ground Meat: \$0.14/lb
Min. Wage: \$0.50/hr

Most Popular Song

"Somewhere Over the Rainbow" By
Judy Garland

Above: as well as making fast sails and steering racing yachts, from time to time Butch Ulmer dabbled in publishing too. **Left:** Ulmer's first offshore experience was acquired aboard the 39ft ketch *Hoot Mon*, jointly owned with two others by Butch Ulmer Snr – and later described by Ulmer Jnr as 'a giant Star boat, with its sharp chines and flat bottom sections'

because Dennis ended up losing [the Cup]!' After the next Cup in 1987 Kolius announced he was getting out of sailing and requested that Ulmer-Kolius stop using his name. 'But all the guys liked the UK logo, so we stuck with it and became UK Sailmakers.'

Whatever we have to do

The next big business move was merging with Halsey Sailmakers, which brought in some 'really good lofts' as well as Tape-Drive technology. 'And shortly after that I actually made a trip around the world to meet all of the new loft owners.'

That's just one example of the personal attention Butch continued to lavish on his business, even as sailmaking moved offshore. Here's another: 'a client who called a week before the Newport Bermuda Race and said, "I need a new main for the race." I said, "You've got to be kidding me!" Butch shakes his head. 'I always gave him a good discount because he bought a lot of sails, so I said, "Well, you can kiss the discount goodbye...'

'There was no way we were going to get a mainsail from Hong Kong in time. But City Island could do it, so I kept everyone here till 10 o'clock at night and we made the sail. And then I got in the car and drove it up to Newport myself...'

This customer felt comfortable making such a demand 'because we were by now good friends and he had been a valuable customer,' Butch says. 'I think he probably said to himself, well, I deserve this kind of thing. And truth be told he did.'

The only reason they could meet such a last-minute request, he continues, was that they had enough staff to 'do whatever we



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Above: Charles 'Butch' Ulmer (left) with US Naval Academy Sailing Squadron teammates Ed Lutz and Jim Sand in 1960. **Left:** Koliuss's disenchantment with sailing following the America II campaign was not helped by the enormous pressure on the Texan skipper – not just representing the New York YC, who had lost a trophy they had held since 1851, but also having to compete for Challenger rights with strong US rivals including a highly motivated Stars&Stripes team led by the equally hungry Dennis Conner... who would take the Cup back home with him to San Diego

had to do. And I've preached that gospel more than once because it really made a difference. There was no way anybody else was going to do that kind of thing.'

A PRO, but not a pro

By 2013 'It became apparent that it was time for me to start looking for greener pastures. And so I sold the group to the group.' About 50 lofts worldwide are now managed by a majority of loft owners. 'So they control their own destiny, which they like.'

Butch had already gained a reputation as a top-notch race committee guy by then, especially after a difficult 1992 Soling Worlds. 'I put together a good committee and we had a really great regatta – with every kind of weather you can imagine. The winner was Dave Curtis, with Dennis Conner breathing down his neck.'

'One race, Dennis was leading by a mile. But Etchells class rules said we couldn't shorten the race, and there was only 7-8kt of wind...' Even Dennis wasn't going to make the time limit. So I shot the race in the head. And he... good God! The bitching. I said, come on Dennis, I'll buy you a drink.'

'And then, the last day, it blew 30 from the east, with tide against wind. When I got there in the morning there's a congregation of guys saying, "You're not going to race in this, are you?" And I said, "We're talking about 30ft+ keelboats. We're talking about a world championship. We're not going to race?? Watch this!"'

There were a lot of breakdowns that day, but 'Dave and Dennis finished the race almost overlapped, and half the fleet hadn't rounded the leeward mark yet!' It was a dramatic end to a regatta that 'came off really well'. From that point on, whenever Larchmont hosted a significant one-design regatta they asked Butch to be the PRO.

As a longtime member as well as former commodore of the Storm Trysail Club, he was also tapped to run the Intercollegiate

Keelboat Regatta; that's now an important highlight of college sailing's autumn season. 'I ran that for almost 20 years, and it grew into what it is now. That was, I would say, the hallmark of the stuff that I did.'

When I ask Butch how many kids he and Carol have, he says five – before adding, with only the tiniest hint of a telltale smile, that 'We stopped at three and [then] had twins.' Before I can parse that he relates it all back to our favourite sport: 'My daughter is probably the most serious sailor. And then my two oldest granddaughters.'

'For a couple of years the [Larchmont YC] Interclub fleet had myself, my daughter, my son and my son-in-law, all sailing against each other!' And the twins both helped him win a season championship. 'I did the IC sailing here for about 20 years. Then I got tired of getting beat by my son, so I gave that up. He's bigger than me, so he could handle the kinetics pretty well...'

Never got a nickel

Asked for the biggest changes over seven decades in sailing, Butch pauses for just a moment. 'Well, sailmaking evolved!! The materials we used improved dramatically, as has the design of the sails. I mean, everything got better.'

But the sport itself 'has evolved less successfully than the sailmaking industry. I think the biggest negative influence is the professionals; they're killing the sport.'

'When I was a sailmaker everybody called me a pro. But I never got a nickel for sailing. Never. I went on a boat to look after a product, not to get paid.' The current situation, 'I'm sorry to say, is unhealthy for the sport. It's inordinately expensive, and getting more so.'

'And what happens to somebody who spends a lot of money to get into it? Then he looks at having to pay the crew and says to hell with that.' He mentions a surgeon who became a sailmaking client:

'He couldn't learn the sport fast enough for his desire to win. He would get infuriated, and I'd say, "I didn't learn all this stuff I'm showing you in one day!"'

It's a complicated sport, I agree. 'Exactly, and that's what's good about it. I used to tell people that DeCoursey Fales was 75 years old when he won the Bermuda Race!'

'But it doesn't happen overnight. Some of these guys, because they've been successful in their own field, they think this is going to be a piece of cake. And it's not. And somebody in a rush like that, who comes into the sport with money, he wants to compete against his peers, not against pros.' (Later I come up with the all-too-obvious comeback: hiring one of those pros Butch thinks are killing the sport can also help newbies fast-track up sailing's steep learning curve.)

Another trend he disagrees with: the Newport Bermuda Race's move to add weather forecasting to its rating system in 2024. 'I've done 18 Bermuda Races. And I've never done one where the weather at the end of the race was anything like what they'd said it was going to be. Sometimes a person's biggest enemy is himself.'

Both sport and world have definitely changed since *Bolero's* cotton sails, water on the knee and eyeballed handwork. But Butch is still hungry to do more racing, something he hasn't been able to fit in since his wife got sick. When I ask what type he'd prefer if he had the chance, he doesn't hesitate: 'I'd do more big boat stuff, because a lot of that is experience. And I'm sure we have a lot more to learn.'

As we leave the club library Butch mentions that he's heading down to the dock to help with a regatta currently underway. As I drive away I'm certain that those competitors – just like me, 30 years ago – are grateful to this tireless volunteer for his lean and fair approach to racing sailboats. He's definitely made our sport better – even if he does blame all of that success on others. □