



Not normal, just super lucky

Carol Cronin gets to know Nevin Sayre – original windsurf legend and the creator of the brilliantly successful O'pen Un-Regatta

If I had written this profile when I first thought of it years ago, shortly after Nevin Sayre's induction into the Windsurfing Hall of Fame, it probably would have started with his childhood. Instead, when we sit down together on the family porch overlooking a late-summer Vineyard Haven Harbor, I can't help but ask about a far more recent moment: 18 October 2024, the day he almost died.

'It was blowing from the northeast,' he says, so he and several other kitesurfers gathered at a pond protected by a low barrier beach. 'Somewhere that we regularly go to sail because of the super-flat water.'

Even at 64, launching himself 20ft in the air wasn't an unusual kiting move for this former pro windsurfer. But that day, 'I wasn't jumping where I normally jump; I was downwind of the bridge.' When an unexpected downdraft hit his kite he plummeted straight down into the water – so fast that he lost consciousness. 'I remember thinking, oh shit, this is not good.'

Fortunately, a fellow kiter saw him put out his hand as if to break the fall – definitely not normal – and headed over to check on Nevin. 'I'm unconscious,' Nevin repeats. 'So first he had to release our kites, because they're dragging us down into the water. And then from behind he gives me essentially the Heimlich manoeuvre – and he's treading water. He saved my life.' Along with two

other sailors, who brought out a small surfboard and somehow managed to paddle the 200lb Nevin back to shore.

By the time he came to, the risk of infection from two lungs full of water warranted an airlift to Boston. The emergency responders cut off his wetsuit, so on the helicopter ride 'I was freezing'. He was also hungry and thirsty – a good sign – but no one would give him anything to eat or drink. 'I had a lot of water still in my lungs. So they put me into the ICU.' And then kept him there...

Two days later Nevin walked out of the ICU accompanied only by his wife Stina – another not-normal occurrence. 'Some nurses were laughing, some were crying,' he remembers, wiping away a few tears himself. 'I'm super lucky to be alive.'

Back to the beginning

Nevin was born in Washington, DC. His father was a minister at the National Cathedral, and 'he basically worked seven days a week'. They lived in provided housing, so summers on Martha's Vineyard – in this same house – were 'always uber-special'.

The young Nevin soon found success at both local and regional regattas. At 16 he began saving up for a Laser – until his first sighting of someone windsurfing inspired him to buy what's now called a Windsurfer Classic. Fifty years later he thinks that purchase was 'one of the best things I ever did', and he spent the last two weeks of summer learning all its tricks. 'My sister claims I was out there so much at dinner I'd literally fall asleep with my face in the spaghetti.'

The next summer, with a fortnight's more experience than anyone else on the

Vineyard, the local windsurfing shop hired Nevin as their head instructor – just as the sport exploded. By 1979 and 'the New England Championship was attracting 300 windsurfers'. CHASE LEWIS

That September Nevin headed off to Tulane University's school of architecture in New Orleans. 'I quickly became immersed in the sailing team, and I won B Division in the Nationals the next year,' which earned him the first of four All-American titles. But 'I wasn't quite ready to devote 29 hours a day to architecture. And our closest regatta was eight hours away; it was insane. I averaged one and a half all-nighters a week.'

The solution? Transfer to Tufts near Boston, the beating heart of college sailing. That sparked two complaints, one about whether an All-American could change schools, the other about professionalism; 'in the summertime I had sponsors who were sending me to regattas.' Both dismissed, but critics were soon proved correct; in his first year at Tufts Nevin helped rookie coach Ken Legler win his first Inter-collegiate National Championship.

Going pro

Nevin went to his first Windsurfer Worlds in autumn 1981, in Okinawa, Japan. As a dinghy sailor from Massachusetts he brought a very different skillset to a fleet dominated by surfers. Second place in the heavy division put him on the radar of industry sponsors, who paid 'a lot of money' for athlete slots on the world tour.

'Back then the tour was organised by the manufacturers,' he explains. 'It was called the World Manufacturers Sailing Association.' After graduating from Tufts,



Left: Nevin Sayre completes the 2025 Round Vineyard Challenge, 55nm in 5 hours raising tens of thousands of dollars along the way. **Above:** no pressure, bubb. 1980s shoot for Neil Pryde – Nevin Sayre enjoys a gybing match against fellow Danish-Dutch windsurfing legend Björn Dunkerbeck as the mortals on the beach consider trying golf. When he retired from professional riding Dunkerbeck had amassed 42 world titles... Worse, he beat his US friend and rival to the Windsurfing Hall of Fame by 12 months when inducted in 2021

'I was very lucky to get one of Gaastra Sails' three spots.' There were six events, and 'it was the overall title that was important so you had to do all three [disciplines].

'I was right out of the gate doing very well in the racing, and slalom was pretty good too.' Wave riding meant competing 'against everyone from Hawaii and the Canary Islands. I didn't really know how to sail a shortboard, so I went down to Barbados to try and learn.'

At the 1983 Mistral World Championship he again finished second. But the most significant achievement? 'I met Stina.' His default grin grows even wider as he describes this 'Swedish babe', sponsored by Mistral. At that regatta, 'there's dancing every night. There were fireworks going...' And two lifted eyebrows silently communicate that they were of the 'interpersonal' kind. 'She stayed for a week afterwards, so there was clearly chemistry.'

'But this is 1983; no internet, no making an international call without mortgaging your house. She's going back to Sweden, I'm going back to the US. Goodbye.'

Nevin then leaves me dangling on this romantic cliff while he explains just how big windsurfing was in the 1980s. 'Robby [Naish] was a household name. Every other car had a windsurfer on it; they called it the bicycle of the sea.'

He thinks it was after the 1981 Worlds that he spotted a BMW in Tokyo with a windsurfer on top. But 'there's no roof rack straps – and I realise it's through-bolted onto the rack – just for image!' He shakes his head. 'Custom Naish board from Hawaii, gorgeous, and they'd through-bolted the thing! That's how big [the sport] was.'

'Companies would pay me a thousand bucks a month to wear their sunglasses. Forty years ago! It was just ridiculous.'

European flames

In the spring of 1984 Nevin headed to Germany for the first of three European stops on the Pro Tour – and ran into Stina once more. 'She still spoke very little English, and I spoke no Swedish, and it was like, totally awkward.'

Stina was sponsored by BMW; Nevin remembers a shiny white car 'with Stina Hellgren stencilled on the side. That caught everyone's attention.' And her board was definitely not through-bolted to the roof.

When the tour moved to Holland, 'there were flames that were totally burning hot'. Again those eyebrows twitch. 'And then we go to Brittany, and this massive high-pressure system comes in. There was no wind for 10 days, and, not only that, you were pretty sure the next day had no wind. And it's warm. And her English had improved somewhat. So that sealed the deal.' When he got home Nevin says, 'I end up sending her a plane ticket.' They married in 1989.

Tour takeover

The world tour included most of the big names in windsurfing (soon to be renamed boardsailing), but it didn't include all of the biggest events. And because it was organised by the manufacturers the rules didn't exactly favour the sailors.

'You had to have one of those [big] sponsors to get into an event,' Nevin says. 'Politically, morally, that was not right. Also there was very little prizemoney, and they limited the advertising on your sail to

a very, very small area for an outside sponsor. Robby Naish was world famous, and he couldn't have Coca-Cola all across his sail if he wanted to; not great. So I was organising the sailors, saying, "Hey, guys, we should have our own tour, or force our manufacturers to do this differently." I'm 27 years old, and I led a coup!'

Terry Wyner, a wave judge from South Africa, agreed with Nevin. But 'I got a lot of personal pushback from some of the sailors whose manufacturers were saying, "You're crazy. We're going to cut you."

After several 'heated meetings' Nevin asked for a vote at the final World Cup event of 1987. 'And the sailors voted to form a union and start our own tour' called the Professional Boardsailing Association. Wyner became executive director, Nevin was the group's first chairman and Robby Naish joined the committee as well. 'Robby and I hadn't always been that close over things, so that was key.'

Right off the bat, Nevin says, 'It had huge success. Terry really got on it, we got sponsors, and the first year we had a million dollars of prizemoney. And you got onto the tour based on your ability, not on who was your sponsor.' What's now called the Professional Windsurfers Association is still going strong, 'and it's always been run by sailors. Kind of amazing.'

Going corporate

It was some time in the mid-1980s, while Nevin and Stina were in Maui, that he received a life-changing phonecall. Peter Quigley had just beaten several US Finn champions so handily that the class had outlawed his carbon mast, and now he ▶



JOHN CHAO

Right: Nevin Sayre is captured demonstrating the accessibility and potential of the mobile telephone for an early brick manufacturer. **Above:** the O'pen Skiff class has been doing its own thing for 20 years but growth is now accelerating more dramatically with the big championships for those who want them, alongside a still growing plethora of Un-Regattas and the like for the thousands of other kids who, for now at least, just want to have fun afloat. For those entering their teens the O'pen Skiff enjoys big advantages over the once dominant Oppi: the boats and gear really are one-design and the mere concept of paid coaches is seriously frowned upon. Plus of course the boats look great! Sure, when future Moth World Champion Mathias Coutts asked his famous dad for advice in his O'pen years he no doubt got it, but when he won the U13 O'pen World Championship it was against a very different backdrop from a big bucks Oppi event, with RIBs and well-paid Argentine coaches whizzing in every direction. Remember... it's the kids who get into sailing just by having fun on the water who are more likely to stick around long after most of the 'the next Ben Ainslies' have gone down the pub

wanted to apply his patented carbon braiding to building better windsurfer masts. 'He says, "Nevin, I've got this technology".'

Nevin suggested making booms, because existing ones were 'flexible aluminium and heavy. I knew they could be improved'. But Quigley already knew how to make masts, so started sending samples to Nevin for on-the-water testing. 'I'd go, it's way too stiff, and he'd go, it's the same measurements.' So he just made the mast softer and softer and softer, and once the bend matched my sail all of a sudden it was magical.'

Along the way Peter developed not just revolutionary masts but tests to empirically measure both bend and reflex response. 'So we started Fiberspar together,' Nevin says. 'I was at the World Cup in San Francisco and between two regattas I flew back to incorporate!'

By 1991 it was time to retire from the pro tour. 'We were pregnant,' he explains, and 'I was at my peak; I was national champion [three times in a row], and number two in the world in slalom and course racing; number four overall, including wave riding.' So he took a role at Fiberspar and settled down on Cape Cod, the closest he and Stina could get to Martha's Vineyard without a ferry commute. (Robby Naish predicted Nevin would soon return to the circuit, because 'Nobody that competitive can stay away long.')

Daughter Solvig was born in 1992 – a time when Fiberspar was growing almost too fast. 'I think I have it right that at one point we were making 80,000 carbon masts,' Nevin recalls. 'Half of that or more was for Neil Pryde; and we were shipping thousands of masts to Japan.'

Their products carried an unbreakable

reputation – until they built a batch with faulty resin. 'So many stories there... we started breaking masts every day to test them. It was a huge time sink.'

By the time son Rasmus (Raz) arrived in 1997 Fiberspar had branched out into spoolable pipe for the oil industry. 'And then we sold up to one of the big oil service companies, which is why I can live here.' Nevin gestures out across the harbour, smile fading just a touch as he notes that it's still too light for wingfoiling.

O'pen to fun

Even after the Sayre family moved out to Martha's Vineyard full time Nevin continued to work with the company that took

The whole Opti thing, I've just seen so much badness. Raz's friends, Solvig's friends, dropping out in droves'

over Fiberspar's windsurfing arm. Which is why, when BIC Sport bought out that group, he was first in line to test what was then the O'pen BIC (now O'pen Skiff)...

'Raz was nine years old and just loved windsurfing. He would do the Opti because his friends were doing it, but he didn't love it.' Solvig was already into 420s by then. 'The whole Opti thing,' he says, shaking his head... 'I've just seen so much badness. Raz's friends, Solvig's friends, dropping out in droves.'

When Nevin first brought home two O'pen BICs it was April – and blowing hard from the northwest. Vineyard Haven

Harbor is wide open to the north, and their house sits atop a bluff on the west side. 'I was gung-ho to try it,' and so was Raz, even though 'he's nine years old, the water's cold and it's blowing gusts of 18+ offshore'.

As soon as Raz left the beach, 'he goes right into a death roll – and I'm, like, this was the stupidest thing I've ever done!' All the worried father could do was watch. 'But he just reaches for the centreboard, pulls, and the boat comes right up. When he hops in the back, the boat's dry, and he planes off. I'm, like, this boat is cool.'

It was such a contrast to the Optimist, he continues. 'It wasn't built 60 years ago, and you could self-rescue even as a little kid.' When BIC asked him what he could do with the boat, building a regatta circuit 'became my thing'. Right from the start Nevin set up O'pen regattas to focus 'on fun, plus learning and improvement and boat handling. Basically, what I did as a kid windsurfing. There's freestyle, there's slalom, there's fun on shore; parties, and a lot of camaraderie. And not so much emphasis on the results.'

His approach became the Un-Regatta, and Nevin was never afraid to improvise. He'd be leading the kids through a slalom course, and impulsively 'I just say: "As the leader is approaching [the mark], you've got to stand up until the next mark." And they all do it! "And then you've got to capsize." Some kids take a long time to recover, but by the end of the regatta they're all dry-capsizing and loving it.'

Courses might require passage under the Bridge of Doom, an inflatable structure that a mast will only clear if the boat is heeled over 45°. As Nevin put it in the standing-room only, pre-race meeting at

the 2023 O'pen Skiff Un-Regatta in San Diego, 'Capsizes, freestyle, speed, obstacles and *fun* will be required.' Eighty-five sailors from around the world participated.

Twenty years later sailing federations are now copying his approach – because 'all these kids coming out of the O'pen Skiff are kicking butt', Nevin says proudly, rattling off several names (including Moth champ Mathias Coutts) that he claims add up to a 'whole generation of change'. In contrast, he says many US Opti sailors drop out of the sport when they get to college – once 'they have to rig their own boat and sail against everyone on an equal basis'.

A family of sailors

Both Sayre kids have certainly stuck with the sport. Solvig is the sole employee of a non-profit dedicated to youth sailing and safety in the Pacific Northwest; she's 'totally involved in sailing', her proud father says. Raz is a team rider for a wingfoiling company (while also earning a Master's). 'He's very good at feedback,' Nevin says, a skill they share; when companies sent Nevin products to test, 'I could legitimately communicate what was good or bad.'

Stina never took to kiting, but now she's into wingfoiling – so family vacations are always planned for spots with breeze.

Giving back by setting records

After almost two decades as the O'pen Skiff guy Nevin stepped down from an active role in September 2025; now he has more time to apply both his on and



Before everything went completely tonto, for them and for the sport. Robby Naish and Nevin Sayre make the most of the primitive facilities at an early World Cup competition in the 1980s – Naish had won the first of his 24 world titles aged just 13. Later on when Sayre went off to create a global youth sailing movement with the O'pen Skiff class Naish was inventing kiteboarding then SUP paddleboarding

off-the-water skills to giving back. We haven't even touched on the Martha's Vineyard Windsurfing Challenge, an event he started in the late 1980s that sent boardsailors around Martha's Vineyard (a minimum distance of 55 miles) and raised money for Martha's Vineyard Community Services. The biggest year brought in \$16,000 – but by 2008 the event had outgrown its volunteer-run safety limits.

Then in 2024 Nevin declared a fresh fundraising goal: he would try to become the first person to wingfoil around the island, escorted only by a safety boat. 'I was hoping maybe to raise \$8,000...' The

first-ever wingfoiling circumnavigation of his home island brought in four times that.

Though many former participants in the Windsurfing Challenge begged to be included for 2025, keeping it a solo event made it possible to choose the perfect September day: strong all-day southwest breeze, when 'the seaweed wasn't too bad'.

Even as donations poured in, Nevin thought the suggested fundraising goal of \$1,000 for each mile sailed would be unrealistic. But thanks to good publicity and a live tracker, 'there were people donating more and more all the way around!'

And it wasn't all sailors. 'They were getting questions like "how many days will this take?", because a lot of people don't understand how big this island is, or don't know wingfoiling. It seems to have captured a lot of people. There are so many fundraisers here, an auction or art opening or a speaker. And then this wacky idea!'

Nevin finished in just under five hours, an hour quicker than 2024 – and a much happier story for the local paper than last year's near-death experience. 'It's not getting any easier,' he told a reporter. 'But it's just so gratifying to be able to do this 37 years after I first went around as a windsurfer.'

Yes, this story might have started differently. But happily it ends in the same place: with a 65-year-old Nevin Sayre standing on a beach, exhausted but jubilant, raising his arms in a vee to celebrate promoting his favourite sport while giving back to his community. Definitely not a normal guy, and also a super lucky one. □