



Nonagenarians rock

'When I grow up I wanna be Gus Miller,' says Carol Cronin. At 91, the guy is still travelling the world to race his chosen one-design dinghy...

PHOTOS ROBERT DEAVES
Gus Miller and I were first introduced more than 20 years ago by mutual friend and boatbuilder Andrew Pimental, and even then I wondered how Gus could still be sailing a Finn. So when we sit down together on a surprisingly warm May day – later than planned, because he'd misplaced his car keys and had to walk the two miles to Jibetech – I ask how he continues to race such an athletic boat. 'Muscle memory,' he claims, before adding that he also spends a lot of time in the gym.

For those *Seahorse* readers who missed this the first time round, Gus – born in 1935 – finished every race at the windy 2026 Finn World Masters Regatta in Brisbane, Australia. He also finished two races of the regular Gold Cup, though he calls that 'a mistake'. He's sailed, he guesses, 30 Gold Cups since his first in 1974. 'I did them all while I was still in the Olympic programme. But once I started coaching, then I'd go to the ones that had a coaching gig before them. Or if it was simply an interesting place that I hadn't been before.'

How it all began

As sharp-eyed readers already know, Gus learned to steer a boat at three; his father put him in a wheeled punt that was pulled along a Rhode Island beach, with 'a rudder

in the back and a yoke and ropes to steer it'. Next, he was 'taken sailing, but I'd be put in a seat and told to stay there and don't get in the way. So I observed a lot.' Once he could swim he was turned loose in a local sailing school's boat with leeboards. 'I spent lots of time sailing that.'

After World War II was over 'I remember in 1946 going with my father to sail a Thistle on Oyster Bay [New York]. It was blowing about 40, so no jib. The main was roller furling, just a tiny little sail. We were planing all over the place. And the same year,' he continues, 'I went in my first ocean race.' It was the first post-war gathering of the Storm Trysail Club, 'and these guys had been all over the world, so there were all kinds of stories. I really enjoyed it, and that opened the door to ocean racing.'

He's still a member of the STC, a club founded the year Gus started sailing; 'I'm probably one of the oldest...' He also sailed 'about eight' SORCs, and the Admiral's Cup; 'that got me into the RORC'.

Gus went to high school at Tabor Academy, where *Edlu II* – the 68ft S&S ketch now known as *Black Watch* – was the school ship. He joined the wrestling team and got a job in a boatyard. After work he'd singlehand a Herreshoff 12 1/2 around Narragansett Bay.

Marines, more wrestling, Michigan

When it was time for university 'I wasn't smart enough to figure out how to pay for college, so I went into the Marine Corps.' He also joined the wrestling team, which

'got me out of a lot of field exercises'. In 1956 he made it all the way to the finals at the Olympic wrestling trials, losing to the defending gold medallist. 'I was nowhere near his league, but it was a great experience.' He also met the University of Michigan coach. 'They said it was worth four years at Michigan just to know Cliff Keene. And he was remarkable.'

Gus went to Michigan thinking he wanted to be a naval architect, but 'I only spent a day in the Naval Architecture programme. I realised there was a lot more in that town than I had signed up for, so I went to the dean and said, "I think I made a mistake. What do you suggest?" He put me in something called science engineering. It was heavy into mathematics, physics, chemistry, and the basic engineering courses, so that when you graduated you could become any kind of engineer.'

He also joined the sailing club, and frostbiting taught him how to anticipate the lake's many wind shifts. 'If you concentrate hard enough you know what it's going to do before it does it,' he claims, adding that once he started sailing the Finn enough 'that intuition got quite strong. But it was only through really hard concentration and a lot of experience.'

After graduating with a degree in chemistry Gus was asked to become a teaching assistant. 'So I got into teaching chemistry through the back door.' And instead of locking into one speciality, 'I was like a utility infielder. I taught almost all the undergraduate chemistry courses. It



Left: Gus Miller puts the Finn class on notice that giving up Finn sailing is simply not a viable option, even when 91 years young; especially if you want to enjoy an active life of similar length to this icon of international dinghy racing. Miller is pictured racing the breezy 2026 World Masters in Brisbane in which he completed every race, finishing runner-up in the Super Legends Division. Miller was finishing towards the back of the 100+ boat fleet... but not one single time did the 91-year-old American sailor finish 'at' the back

meant I had to do as much work as my two best students to prepare. I was always terrified of not doing a good lecture.' He taught chemistry for 17 years.

Because it's so hard

The first Finn Gus bought was 'an old wooden boat, and I just kind of hacked around with it. I'd race in local regattas'. Then, in 1967, 'on a lark I went down to Acapulco for the pre-Olympics. And Paul Elvström was there. And he did something I'd never seen done before.' Every day before launching 'he'd hoist the sail and walk around just studying it. He'd change a setting, look at it again; sometimes a quick look, sometimes a much longer look. And I thought, Why is he doing that? That opened the door.'

Back in Michigan Gus bought a new Finn. Staring up at his sail, he realised, 'you don't understand anything of what that [control] is doing!!!'

Over the next three years 'I probably bought at least a dozen masts and double that number of sails, from lots of different sailmakers. I would take one rig and work with it for about six weeks until I really learned it. I teamed up with a sailmaker in Detroit who was interested in making Finn sails; he had me design a sail and then build three of them on the floor.' That sailmaking apprenticeship 'made it much easier to translate what I was seeing on the water to what I was doing on the loft floor – I could look at a sail and see what needed changing. That's the kind of effort and thinking that it takes to rise to the top.'

Highly evolved teacher

Gus calls the Finn 'a very subtle, very highly evolved boat'. He claims he's taught 'thousands of people to sail the boat, [and] each one makes a little tweak. I remember going to Toronto for the 1971 Finn Gold Cup; I took about 300 pictures of all the boats, and every single one was different.'

Meanwhile, the class prevents changes that would 'outmode every other Finn in

the world, so it kept things competitive'.

The Finn's lessons are universal, he says. 'Learning that boat makes it easy to decode any other boat... great big ocean racers, catamarans, everything. I remember telling some Tornado sailors who were getting overpowered and trying to ease the sheet. I said, "You're crazy. Use the cunningham, throw the upper leech open." That was from the Finn. The cross-fertilisation is immense.'

With 60 years of perspective Gus claims that some aspects of Finn tuning never change. 'I remember having a particularly good mast that I'd chosen at the Needlespar factory. One day in New Zealand I was visiting Jonty Farmer, and his old wooden mast was in his garage rafters. I said, "Let's take it down and measure it." The measurements were almost identical! Wood, aluminium, the curve was the same.' The key difference was durability, he explains.

Of course today's carbon masts are faster, 'particularly off the wind; they are a wing, it adds a little more area and the flow is slightly different. Better, for sure.'

As for the hulls, 'The boat has been tweaked and tweaked, and all kinds of different hulls have been made. But it's still impossible to build a "super-Finn". If it's good in one condition it won't be so good in some other.'

Like all Finn sailors Gus loves both the tough competition on the water and the class tradition of sharing expertise onshore. At a regatta in Canada, when 1976 Olympian Sanford Riley was about to pass Gus on a reach, 'I asked him, "Sandy, what are you doing to go so fast?" He said, "Let me by and I'll show you!" So he gave me a tutorial in the middle of the reach how to sail a Finn off-wind. In what other class would some guy do that?' (The Snipe, I want to say, but he's on a roll.)

'That's endemic to the Finn class: guys just about killing each other and then coming ashore and talking about it.'

Later he remembers a training scene in

Marstrand: two sailors got so locked in a speed test 'they'd sail almost all the way to Denmark before one would give up. [Winning] takes that kind of intensity.'

Fork in the road

'In 1973,' Gus says, 'I had a choice: either go to every major ocean race in the world, or do a Finn campaign. A Romanian friend who was really smart told me that the Finn was a bigger challenge, so that's why I decided on the Finn.' He began training for the 1976 Olympic Trials. Other professors covered his chemistry lectures; 'They were fascinated by what I was doing, then when I came back I'd return the favour so they got some time off. I got amazing support from a lot of people, without that I couldn't have done it.'

He first met David 'Sid' Howlett at the Pre-Olympics in Kingston; they became both friends and tuning partners. 'Sid was probably the best off-wind sailor in the world, though he wound up 7th in the '76 Olympics.' Gus also trained with eventual bronze medallist John Bertrand, who he says was 'the best-conditioned athlete on the entire Australian team'.

In the first week of 1976 Gus raced the Finn Gold Cup in Brisbane, Australia. 'I remember Chris Law won it, and David Howlett came in third or fourth.' (Third, behind Jonty Farmer from NZ.) 'It's the only time I've seen a three-dimensional 720,' he adds, smiling. 'Sid fouled somebody in 30kt of wind, did the first circle properly with a gybe, capsized the boat, turtled it, and came all the way around. So he did the second circle vertically!'

'Technically, it's not correct... but I wasn't going to argue.' Then, after the regatta, he says Howlett decided it was time to get serious. Three months later 'He really cleaned Law's clock at their Trials.'

Gus finished 21st in Brisbane, still a significant step up from his previous results. 'I had been 60th at the Los Angeles Gold Cup. And then in Malmo [1975], John Bertrand and I roomed together and I



Every competitive sailor has a finest moment... for Gus Miller (*left*) it was winning race 2 at the 1992 Finn Gold Cup in Cadiz at the age of 57. Miller is here with Polish coach Andy Zawieja (*centre*) and Estonian sailor and longtime Finn chief measurer Jüri Saraskin

came in 40th.' But then in Brisbane, 'I realised I really wasn't strong enough to compete with those guys, so I came back to Ann Arbor and got permission to use the football team's training room.'

Miller spent two months working with trainers on a new set of Nautilus equipment, 'and that transformed me physically'. In early May he finished third at the Finn Europeans – beating everyone who'd beaten him in Melbourne, and finishing behind only one of the eventual 1976 medallists. 'I had a duel almost every race with Andrey Balashov,' who finished second – and would earn a silver medal in Kingston. 'Those duels taught us both a great deal. So I came back from that third with really good speed, really good tactics, really strong psychologically.'

But then he got into an auto accident in David Howlett's car! 'They wanted to put me in a hospital. I said no way, I've got an Olympic Trials to go to!' Instead Gus went on some serious pain medication. 'I started off [the US Trials] with a 15 and a 10,' he remembers, shaking his head. Once he took himself off the meds, 'my finishes were five, one, three, two, one'. That left him second overall, 10 points behind Peter Commette (who is 19 years younger). 'But really the regatta was mine to win,' Gus says now. 'The skill was there. I just got undone by all the drugs.'

Craziest race

When I ask about the shenanigans that almost cost Commette his victory (Issue

557), Gus shakes his head. '1976 Trials? That's nothing compared to some of the other things I've seen...'

At the 1978 pre-Olympics in Tallinn 'I'd taken binoculars with me and the weather forecast had been for the wind coming in from the right, but with the binoculars I could see the wind coming in from the left. So the fleet went right, particularly the Soviet-bloc countries, and I went left – and got into a new breeze.' Thanks to excellent speed, Gus 'won that race by the biggest margin I ever had. I think American John Bertrand was about 400 yards behind me at the finish.'

The next day everyone knew that 'if I could get a good start I was going to be gone. Suddenly, with about 20 seconds to go, a Bulgarian capsizes directly in front of me. He'd been assigned to take me out, and I was almost DFL at the start. So that kind of thing goes on, particularly with the Olympics. There's even more ugly things I've seen on the racecourse itself...'

1976 Olympics

Second place at the US Trials earned the speedy Gus a spot as Commette's training partner; he sailed his Finn across Lake Ontario to Kingston, a distance of more than 40 miles. (After the regatta he sailed back to the US.) But the strongest memory from that first Games was joining a group of class veterans to coach sailors new to the Finn. 'The experience changed my view of what the Olympics was about.'

Before that, he says, 'the goal was to be

a master of the boat and the class. Able to get out in front and stay there, whether it was very light or very heavy'. Once he started coaching he leaned into the mental game. Two sailors really impressed him: the Australian John Bertrand, who – as well as being in 'superb physical condition' – focused on psychology. He also got to know Viktor Potapov, 'the finest Soviet sailor they ever produced'. Potapov had won bronze in the Finn in 1972, finished fourth in the 470 in 1976, and later won two world championships in the Tornado.

'The guy was brilliant. And a master of psychology. He wound up a professor at Moscow University specialising in the psychology of elite-level athletes.'

Sharing his knowledge

Gus also enjoyed explaining the quirks of his chosen craft to other sailors. In 1978 he was asked by the US Naval Academy sailing coach to lead a Finn clinic for a bunch of top Laser guys; the names Gus rattles off include Cam Lewis and Carl Buchan. 'I introduced that whole group of extremely good sailors to the Finn, and within a year they dominated the world.'

Indeed, John Bertrand (USA) won the 1978 Gold Cup and Cam Lewis and Bertrand finished first and second at the next two Gold Cups. And there would be two US Finn medals at the next three Olympics they sailed. Who knows what the medal colour might have been in 1980, when 'Carter did his thing with a boycott', but it's worth noting that Bertrand (USA)

knocked it out of the park at the Tallinn pre-Olympics of 1979.

By then Gus was vice-president of the International Finn Association. 'I thought we ought to have a clinic programme,' he says. 'I wound up going all over the world, broadening the base.' He met up again with Elvstrøm when they taught together in Canada. Even non-Finn sailors deepened their understanding of sailboat racing, he says – and then took those newfound skills back to their home fleets.

All that travel and giving back helped him build lifelong friendships around the globe – and took him to seven more Olympic Games. 'The Finn attracts a very bright diverse group of people, and I was fascinated. David Howlett, Luca Devoti, and other guys that I coached; those friendships endure.' Looking back, he claims that the roots of his 2026 trip to Brisbane 'go all the way back to that clinic with the Naval Academy. Without that I wouldn't have been able to do it.'

Life

Gus moved back to Rhode Island in 1984 to care for his father, sparking what he called an inadvertent retirement – 'From chemistry; I didn't retire from being active!' After his father died, 'what I should have done is gone over to Roger Williams [University] and got a job teaching.' Instead, he led a local town-planning project – and continued coaching.

In 1992, at 57, he won a (light-air) race at the Gold Cup, and his name pops up in regatta write-ups through 2023, both as sailor and clinic innovator. 'Why do I stay with it after all the other boats I sailed?' Gus ponders. 'It's a boat that someone really heavy can win in, in light air, and someone who's really small can win a Gold Cup in heavy air. It's the only boat I know like that, and every time I go out I learn something. No other boat like it.'

Of course, it's his off-the-water habits that make nonagenarian Finn sailing possible. When I ask about his training regimen he first takes me back a little. 'Everywhere I went [for sailing and coaching] I would study their training methods, and when I came home I would use them.'

'There are dozens of different ways of doing things, so I have a repertoire of all kinds of things.' For Brisbane he told an interviewer that he'd spent seven months working with a trainer. Now he offers up more detailed statistics: six different gyms, about a hundred training sessions, 'and 84 different machines. All kinds of exercises, including free weights.'

'I always try to vary the workouts, so I never know what's going to come next. On average I'll still be in the gym four days out of seven, sometimes every day for a week. Cardiovascular is the key and for Brisbane stamina was the biggest issue.'

To improve, Gus does high-intensity interval training. 'Go hard for five minutes and take a five-minute rest, then go hard for another five minutes and rest. Sometimes

I do a pyramid; sometimes ascending, sometimes descending.' For Brisbane 'I built that up to maybe 90 minutes.' He also worked hard to improve his balance.

Another tool is meditation, which he first tried in 1973. Before starting a race he's taught himself to clear his mind: 'Just absolutely not thinking about anything, and concentrating really hard on that.'

'I would tune my focus entirely on the waves, the boat and the wind. That helped develop the kind of concentration to do well. Over the years I've continued the practice... When I'm feeling bad or sick I'll use it, and if I hear somebody else is in trouble I use it to help them. Sometimes it's successful... but I admit other times it probably makes no difference!!'

In January in Brisbane, he says, muscle memory was key. But meditation allows him to 'enter a different world, and the decades fall away. Though the body says, what are you doing?'

When I ask if he has any regrets about giving up ocean racing all those years ago he shakes his head. 'I wouldn't be able to get around, I couldn't get up on the fore-deck, I couldn't climb the mast.' The typical reaction to ageing as a sailor – hanging onto the backstay, barking orders at younger sailors – clearly holds no appeals.

Golden anniversary

Last January Gus braved 22 hours of air travel to return to the Royal Queensland Yacht Squadron. Three regattas – the Australian Nationals, Gold Cup and Finn World Masters – gathered together Finn sailors from 16 countries for almost three weeks. In a pre-regatta interview with 'Spiky Mikey' Middleton, Gus called his return 50 years later 'an anniversary... of an important turning point in my life. And I've always liked Australians; they're more laidback than my own countrymen.'

But the adventure wouldn't have happened without the help of many friends, he repeats. 'Cam Lewis knew the sailing coach, who then introduced me to Stuart Watson, who set me up with a boat. And Spiky Mikey dreamed up this YouTube thing,' a reference not to that sit-down interview but to a filmed romp around launch ramp, boatpark and racecourse. 'It's a whole cast of characters there.'

Gus chuckles. 'Kerry Spencer had this old wooden Raudaschl Finn, and one day he put the wooden rig in and a new sail that Hubert Raudaschl had made for it – 60-year-old boat with a 60-year-old mast...' He claims the older rig was faster than some of the carbon ones... hmm.

Gus sat out the Gold Cup – until the last day, 'and that was a stunt. When Spiky Mikey and Stu Watson get their heads together, watch out. So they dreamed up this skit.' Watson's Finn was loaded onto a 50ft catamaran and motored out to the racecourse. 'I had a nap on the way out,' Gus deadpans. 'They rig the boat, lower it into the water, I step aboard...' Of course, they filmed the whole thing.

'There's some craziness that went on that didn't get in the video,' Gus continues. 'I was supposed to race the first race, and Stu was supposed to race the last race. Which meant I really pushed it, thinking I wouldn't have to do the second one.'

But after finishing Gus couldn't find Watson. When the next warning gun went off, 'I was 50 yards behind the line, but I'm going to race. I finished it and sailed in alright, but when I got to the dock I couldn't stand up.' Two volunteers lifted him out of the boat.

Another detail left out of the video: 'I capsized, first time in years, because the mainsheet cleat was on the floor and I hadn't released it so I couldn't get under the boom. The boat just rolled and I thought, boy, is this stupid. Plus at my age, was I going to be able to get up?'

'The sheet was cleated and I couldn't reach it. Every time I'd get up and start to climb in the boat would weather vane and roll me back in [to the water]. Must have been a dozen times I was almost in the boat. Finally an Aussie dove in and gave me a shove in the butt.' Grinning, he adds, 'I bought him a beer later.'

Best regatta ever

Gus calls the 2026 Brisbane Regatta the best he's ever seen. 'Their attention to detail, all of the volunteers working; they've been running races with each other for decades so they really know each other well and they just had a great time doing it. The whole regatta was fantastic. Americans have no idea what glorious fun it can be – only the Australians can do that.'

Over five days Gus finished all seven World Masters races and ended up 84th out of 102 boats. His best result was in the final race, which several (perhaps less fit) competitors sat out.

When I ask Gus if he will go to the 2027 World Masters in Italy he doesn't say no – but admits that 'There's an awful lot of other things to do. And I can see a physical decline, so the question is, can I do it?'

'My power output now is about a third of what it was. Strength is about a third. I've shrunk 4in. There's 20lb of muscle I had back then I don't have now. It'll take me half a year to get physically ready.'

And then there's the sailing. 'This time my body was hardened, but I did not have the practice time. So I was maybe a quarter of the way to where I needed to be.'

Another consideration is cost. 'Financially the sport has gotten 20 times more expensive,' Gus says. 'I would go to 12 big regattas a year when I was hard at it. This one trip to Brisbane cost more than all of those dozen together. No way I could do now what I did back then.'

At 91, Gus is an inspiration: to keep sailing our chosen one-designs – and embrace the challenge. To give back and share our knowledge. And to keep working out, if only to build more muscle memory. I don't want to grow up, but if I have to – I wanna be Gus Miller. □