

The voice

Raise your hand if you cannot hear Gary Jobson speaking inside your head. Anyone? Yeah, that's what Carol Cronin thought as well…

For more than 40 years Gary Jobson has been The Voice of Sailing: the go-to narrator for America's Cups, the Olympics and countless films and documentaries. 'There are so many great stories in our sport,' he says, when we fit in a chat between his latest podium finish (Race Week at Newport) and an upcoming day sail with the Kennedy family…

Along the way Gary created a new career – sailing promotion – and acquired a reputation for being 'All about Gary'. That combination soon led to a misguided nickname, Gary Jobless. It wasn't until I worked with him on the US Olympic Sailing Committee that I realised just how many 'jobs' he fits into every day in support of both sailing and sailors, even when it brings him absolutely no glory at all. (One tiny example: he once drove several hours out of his way to go to one of my own book signings.)

When I mention all those unseen favours he thanks me for noticing; he's well aware of his public persona. We'll get to the origins of this willingness to give back, but like me he prefers to tell stories in chronological order. So once I suggest a one-hour time constraint and possible theme ('tell us some less well-known stories') he smoothly covers the past 70 years of highs and lows and finishes right on schedule.

New Jersey childhood

'I don't think I really appreciated what sailing was all about when at six years old I got in my first boat at Beechwood Yacht Club,' Gary begins. 'We were kind of the poor club on Barnegat Bay, and that's where I grew up sailing.'

His 'epiphany moment' came at 12, when (as a 'taller than average, but skinnier than average' kid) with access to a brand-new Penguin a curious family encouraged him to join the fleet. 'Obviously I started out as the back-end Charlie, but that only got me to try to be better. Four years later I was named the outstanding junior sailor of Barnegat Bay.'

At 16 Gary started crewing for Sam Merrick on the E-Scow. 'He's the guy who taught me how to be a tactician. He would say things like, "Gary, which side of the course do you like today?" Geez, I don't know. So we'd stand up and take a look; "tell me which way should we go?" I think there's more wind on the left. "Alright, we're gonna go left." So I'd sail my Penguin in the morning and crew for Sam in the afternoon.'

By the time Gary graduated from high school in 1969 'I was probably a better than average sailor… but not great.'

The Vietnam War was raging and Gary's draft number was dangerously low, and college deferments were eliminated the same year he graduated – except for the military academies. 'Basically, I went to New York Maritime to escape the draft,' he explains, and sailing became 'my escape from the whole military thing.

'Two thousand races in four years, and I went from being better than average to good.' He was a two-time Collegiate Sailor of the Year, 'whatever that's value.'

In 1972 he was invited to the inaugural North American Interclass Solo Championship. Ten skippers sailed three very different boats (Sunfish, Marshall catboat, Laser). 'I won in the cat boats because I figured out how to use a hiking stick with the extra batten in the boat,' and he was leading overall going into the final day. 'But I lost to some puke from Harvard named Robbie Doyle.' His grin fails to hide that the memory still stings.

The regatta's biggest impact came at the prizegiving, when 'this 34-year-old, very boisterous guy came up to me and Robbie and put his arms around us and said' – Gary's vowels lengthen in imitation of another famous voice – "Boys, I don't know who you are, but we're going to sail together some day." So that was the first time I met Ted Turner.'

Gary's first America's Cup experience came soon after that, when 'I was invited to be a tailer on *Valiant*; I lasted exactly one day. And the boat was really slow…'

Fortunately the publisher of what was then *Yacht Racing Magazine* offered a better option: running a clinic on the site of the upcoming Olympic Trials. 'They arranged with Harken and Laser to have 10 brand-new 470s and 10 brand-new Lasers. Thirty kids, four weeks in a row: you crewed a 470, you skippered a 470, you sailed a Laser. I made a thousand dollars, which sounded like a lot of money.'

He also returned to college but now as a sailing coach; first at his alma mater, 'then I got hired away to King's Point [Merchant Marine Academy].' His salary was 'eleven thousand four hundred and forty dollars a year, no money at all on Long Island.'





***Opposite*: back in the saddle… Jobson at the helm of Bill Koch's superb *America*³ during match race practice in the run-up to Koch's highly successful 1992 America's Cup defence. Back in the early 1990s, while the rest of Cup world was viewing the brand new IACC rule through the prism of topside flare for dynamic stability and hiking moment, Koch's extraordinary design team led by Heiner Meldner, Jerry Milgram and Doug Peterson was first to identify what would be the defining characteristic of the new class, a slender, low-drag canoe hull quick to make use of maximum heeled waterline. Through the Cup summer of '92 *America*³ pointed higher and travelled with less fuss than her rivals. Some 15 years after his Cup win with Ted Turner on *Courageous* (*right*) Jobson was a popular choice to sharpen up the skills of Koch's afterguard. Another stage (*above*)… Jobson's latest two Emmy Awards for coverage of the 2024 Olympic Regatta to add to the two he received for his work at the Seoul Olympics and covering the 2005/06 Volvo Ocean Race**

First self-made job

To supplement that, 'I created something called the Advanced Racing Clinic, then going around yacht clubs running them.' Soon he added sailing instructor clinics as well. 'I was just doing this on my own, but I went to US Sailing and talked them into adopting it. They became so popular that I hired Ed Baird, Dave Perry, Stu Johnstone and Mark Laura. I filled everybody's calendars. And then I wrote a book, *How to Be a Sailing Instructor!*'

Later Gary will add that he also sailed two Olympic Trials: 1972 in the Finn, and 1976 in the FD with Art Ellis.

Meetings matter

In October 1976, 'I went to Chicago for the US Sailing annual meetings. I had this idea of expanding my seminars with them. Don Cohan says, "Hey, we're creating this [Olympic yachting] committee, and we'd like you on it." OK, that sounds good. Cohan, by the way, was a special guy… winning a bronze medal at the 1972 Olympics five years after learning to sail!

'So it's cold as hell in Chicago,' he continues. 'I'm hanging my coat up in the cloakroom, and Ted Turner walks in and goes, "Hey, I remember you. I need a tactician next summer. Could you do that with me?" So I walked in there selling my clinics and instructor seminars, ended up on the Olympic committee and Ted Turner's tactician.' And that's how Gary joined the winning team for the 1977 America's Cup.

Once on the Olympic committee Gary told US Sailing they should coach their Olympic hopefuls – a radical idea then. They agreed to a test, sending him to work with the US teams at the Star Western Hemispheres. 'Holy shit,' he says now. 'At 26 years old I go down to Southern Yacht Club [to coach] Bill Buchan and Tom Blackaller…' Afterwards, 'the damnedest thing happened: Buchan and Blackaller wrote a letter saying this was valuable. We need to do more of this stuff. So now I had a little credibility.' He also organised an introduction to the different Olympic classes, and 'invited all kinds of kids. One of them was a guy named Robbie Haines!'

But those projects (and the Cup) were just summer gigs, afterwards he went back to coaching college sailors. 'Finally I got hired away from King's Point; the Naval Academy doubled my salary to $23,000 a year. And that really sounded good!'

A heady time

'At this point I'm flying all around the country, doing seminars and scraping a living as best I can, and of course sailing with Ted in preparation for the America's Cup.

'At that time it was very uncool to be a professional sailor. I actually asked Turner once for an aeroplane ticket to go to the Southern Circuit and he goes' – vowels lengthen once more – "I could buy you a ticket, but I'm not going to. Everybody that sails with me finds a way to get there, and you will too if you want to sail with me." And that was the end of ever getting a ticket from Ted Turner! But looking back it was quite a heady time, because I just wanted to race all of the time.'

During this period Jobson also married his longtime sweetheart Janice; they first met when she was 16 and he was 19. 'And we're still going.' Gary shakes his head. 'That's amazing in itself.' They have three daughters – and now five grandkids.

Brilliant… lucky

Looking back, Gary calls his self-invented career 'brilliant-slash-lucky; everywhere I went I'm staying at the yacht clubs, at the commodore's house. I'm getting to know people. I'm sailing on wealthy people's boats and building a network all around the country. And I'm with people that are helping to advise me.

'With Ted we won the Congressional Cup. We won the Southern Circuit. We won the America's Cup! I was young enough I didn't know what a big deal it really was.' But he did realise one important fact: 'If I was ever gonna make it this would be the time. I left the Navy in May of 1978, and I straight away started writing books and doing lectures.'

He was also 'unabashedly promoting myself, which is probably making people angry at me because I was so visible with Sebago shoes and Rolex watches… I had all these endorsements, so now I am actually making a living!' Not a big deal now, but in those days it was oddball enough to earn him that 'Jobless' nickname.

Dewars #1

When one of those many new connections suggested he sign up for a Dewar's whisky profile (a famous ad campaign highlighting up-and-coming celebrities in the 1970s and '80s), Gary used another connection to make it happen. One of Ted Turner's 'many, many girlfriends was in advertising, and I called her up and I said, "You know who does the Dewar's account?" "Oh yes, that's Ted Bell. He's down the hall." Ted Bell calls and says, "Oh my God, you'd be a great Dewar's profile."

'So they take the pictures of me. Turner right away gets really upset: "You can't be promoting liquor!!" He'd already done a deal with Captain Morgan and didn't need his tactician pushing another scotch. That was the end of the Dewar's profile.'



They built three new 12 Metres, updated existing designs but when the rubber met the road Olin Stephens' 1974 masterpiece *Courageous* crushed both her defence rivals and then Alan Bond's second Ben Lexcen-designed challenger *Australia* in Newport in 1977. *Courageous* was altered modestly after defeating *Southern Cross* in 1974, her winches were moved up from below following a rule change and 850kg more ballast added, to increase sailing length… and also to bring her up to her measured displacement… When she changed hands after the 1974 Cup Match *Courageous*, being found to be just a tad lighter than maybe she should have been

Three America's Cups

After winning the 1977 Cup with Turner they lost the 1980 selection trials to Dennis Conner. But Turner had 'made this deal with me. He said, "If you help me defend the Cup, when we're done I want you to come to Atlanta and I'll show you how business works." So I spent many weeks with Ted, living in his house.'

Gary credits that lifelong friendship for helping him to develop a wide range of expertise: business, public speaking and giving back.

For the 1983 Cup, 'I hooked up with Blackaller. We travelled around the country trying to raise money and everywhere we went the answer was "when you boys get a boat you come back and talk to me".

'But we got lucky; a woman named Jane Heyl built *Defender* for us. So we went back to all those guys and said "OK, we got a boat now," and they funded us.

'We had a great crew on the boat: Mike Toppa, Rod Davis, Paul Cayard. But that boat was really slow. I think *Defender* was the fastest 12 Metre ever built in 6kt of wind, going downwind. Beyond that, it was a disaster. It was too short and too light and it just didn't work.'

He also says the selection committee applied the rules differently to their upstart campaign. 'Dennis was killing us. He's fast on a heavy-air day, and he's fast on a light-air day – and in 12 Metres we know you can't get it both ways.'

Thinking the Liberty campaign might be changing measurement certificates to match each day's forecast, Gary and Tom Blackaller shared those suspicions with the New York Yacht Club. 'And McCullough says, "Well, gentlemen, we know all about it. In fact, we've encouraged Dennis to do it!" So Tommy says, "Well, why can't we change ours each day?!"'

The response was a metaphorical pat on the head, Gary continues. "Now you boys knew you weren't gonna get into the Cup. Let's be realistic, we're so glad you're here, because Dennis needed some competition, and you've sailed remarkably well. But, look, this is our little secret, and we don't want anybody else to know."'

Gary sits back. 'I went right to the press corp; hey, guess what, big headlines.' He stretches out his arms like a billboard.

Six months after the Cup was lost to the Australians Blackaller wrote a long piece for *Sports Illustrated* (*Seahorse* issue 533) lamenting the many US mistakes – particularly that 'the committee got so in bed with Conner and the Liberty group in the matter of multiple measurement certificates… which obscured the fact that *Liberty* had a major problem in light air.'

But after that pivotal meeting Gary says he reconsidered his future. 'I'm the tactician on a losing boat. But I had learnt from Ted how to do an interview on television and make sailing understandable. So I started doing *Nightline* with Ted Koppel for ABC, and that got me doing *Good Morning America*. Then those live radio broadcasts, which all went well.'

Dewars #2

By 1984 'Ted's out of the Cup, and I'm joined up with Buddy with Heart of America. I'm out in Chicago, meeting the PR agency, and there at the table is Ted Bell! He says "Hey, we could still do that Dewar's profile. We'll pay you one dollar, but it'll work out for you, you'll see."'

So we did the shoot. The first one I'm standing at a wheel looking like Captain Courageous, the second one I'm in a rowboat. The third one I'm sitting in a bathtub – and that became the Dewar's profile!'

He grins, remembering the ad's first appearance in February 1985's *Sports Illustrated*. Soon it's 'on every subway stop in New York City; it's in *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, *Newsweek*. It's everywhere! I am everywhere!!'

Soon after that ESPN called, looking for an America's Cup commentator. Gary found himself at a conference table 'with six guys, and all they did was ask me questions about sailing: Why is one boat faster than another? Real tough ones! So that's how I got hired at ESPN.'

But he was still on the Heart of America team. And 'I wasn't sure whether I should do this TV thing or sail with Buddy. Buddy was my hero… [but] there was no pay, even in 1987; it was unheard of.'

When Gary went to Chicago to tell Buddy about the TV offer the response was 'You should take the ESPN job!'

'So now I'm thinking, does he not want me or is he looking after my interests?' But next Buddy asked him not to make the announcement until after their boat was launched, 'because if you bail out now people might get really freaked out'.

Gary started working at ESPN in 1985, and the America's Cup show 'was a huge hit. With that, my world opened up.' He remained with the network until 2016.

Launching the Leukemia Cup

ESPN employees were encouraged to do charity work, preferably outside their chosen sport. So when one of Gary's west coast contacts asked him to help explain sailing to the Leukemia Society Gary suggested a one-day regatta. 'We raised $30,000 at that first event.' That success – and Gary's contacts – inspired Leukemia Cup regattas all over the country.

Over the next 25 years Gary says they raised $66 million for what's now the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. 'So that was a great achievement.

'One summer we did 23 regattas, and I was averaging 18 events in person a year.' Though in hindsight even this could be seen as 'All about Gary', no one could have predicted how much his own life would soon depend on the breakthroughs this fundraising helped to achieve.

Unexpected interruption

By 2003 'My status at ESPN is excellent. Plus I'm doing 100 lectures a year, writing a book every other year, doing the Cup in Auckland… and, God, I'm tired. I'm coughing, I'm spitting stuff up.

'I had 63 lectures lined up after the Cup, and I'm getting tired walking through airports.' That spring Gary remembers lying on a producer's office floor in Chicago, trying to summon the energy for his next show, when 'this doctor says, "you don't look good."' A few tests later, 'he says, "you're really sick and I don't know what's wrong with you."'

That was Friday, he remembers, and his ▷



PAUL MELLO/OUTSIDE IMAGES

'That press conference' following *Courageous*'s – and Ted Turner's – win in 1977 and a slightly stunned Gary Jobson (*left*) looks on as things get out of control with Turner, by now 'well on the way', hoisted aloft by his adoring and deserving crewmates. Accepting the situation, New York Yacht Club MC and very popular Cup winner in 1974, Bill 'Ficker is quicker' (*right*) is showing no reservations about parking his obligations, to enjoy what he already suspects will turn into one of the most famous 30 minutes in America's Cup history

doctor back home called him in for the Monday. 'But I have a talk that night in Las Vegas, and another in Erie, Pennsylvania.

'And then one test leads to another. I'll never forget this doctor; he comes in and he says, "You have non-Hodgkin lymphoma, and we're going to have to do some serious treatments."'

Gary says his first question was 'Will I be better by next week? I have six lectures in California.' This guy puts his head down and says, "Well, if we can get you through the next 30 days you might be doing some lectures in six months." And I sat there. I could feel this tear rolling down my face.

'So two bone marrow transplants, really hard stuff; in an incubator for 23 days, like being a prisoner – and hurting. The doctor said don't be a hero, get rid of the pain, so you go…' – he mimics pumping a drug into his vein – 'and your troubles go away. You can't dial a phone number, you're gibberish when you talk. But you feel OK.'

Turnaround

Lying in that hospital bed Gary made a resolution. 'If I could work my way out of that, somehow I was going to become a lot more helpful to people; try to return to society and not be taking all the time.'

It took a year and a half before 'I declared myself OK and continued.' He served as President of US Sailing from 2009 to 2012 and as Vice President at World Sailing from 2012 to 2020. He has also done his share outside sailing; 'I've served on over 50 boards, between education, healthcare and the environment.

'Ted Turner was the one who got me going with boards; he said, "You want a seat at the table because you can make decisions. You don't want to be an outside activist. So when you get these opportunities, take them."' Soon, 'All I was doing was going from one board meeting to the next one, all over the world.' Though at the same time he also maintained an active speaking, writing and sailing schedule…

Volunteer pride

'One of the things I'm quite proud of: I was one of the loud voices at World Sailing that we needed to achieve gender equity in sailing in the Olympic Games. And having a male do it, in this case, that played to my advantage. Paris 2024 was the first year we had equal numbers of men and women, which I feel really good about. That was really cool,' even though 'nobody will ever remember how all that happened!'

… and disappointment

Gary also championed a less successful notion, which he says 'wasn't my idea; it was Sherman Hoyt's in 1936, to have an offshore race in the Olympic Games.

'I orchestrated getting Stan Honey to be the chair of offshore and oceanic, knowing I could work with Stan to help make this happen. I got World Sailing's Council and 76 per cent of the countries to vote for it. The French really wanted to have it; they're good at offshore sailing! Of course, looking back, they probably wouldn't have had any wind; Marseille was just a terrible venue.'

Unfortunately former World Sailing President 'Paul Henderson lobbied really hard against the idea.' Gary frowns. 'His purpose was to keep the Finn in the Olympic Games. The Finn had nothing to do with the offshore! I love the Finn, but that was a whole other kettle of fish. Tremendous disappointment because frankly the Olympics needs a boost.'

Time to breathe

Many who credit Gary with increasing the visibility of our sport mistakenly assume all of his hard work is motivated by self-interest. When I mention this he nods. 'I'm well aware. It used to bug me, but it doesn't any more because I can look in the mirror and know that I did a lot of good things.'

After 20-plus books and millions of air miles to give thousands of speeches, I ask if there's anything still on his list – and he finally pauses to think. 'What have I not done?' he eventually replies. 'Probably breathe a little bit and relax more. Hang out with the grandkids.'

Sarcastically I ask how that's going, given that he won't head home to Annapolis until after that sail with the Kennedys and yet another speaking engagement, to support a junior fundraiser on Nantucket.

'I'm still involved,' he admits. 'I'm on four committees at New York Yacht Club, and Rear Commodore of the Annapolis Yacht Club. The Hall of Fame has worked out really well. But I'm 76. I'm not waking up every morning worrying about the next sailboat race. I do like the writing part of it,' he adds. 'Did I tell you I have two more books coming out?'

If there was actually someone who started reading this piece without hearing Gary's voice in their head, I hope that's no longer the case. Either way, this 'jobless' guy has accomplished so much – and there's probably much more to come, even if he does slow down enough to breathe.

The Voice of Sailing has for ever changed our sport – and we should be grateful. ❑