

Member Spotlight, Dr. Arthur Burke

By Candace Hall

“This is my eighth decade of sailing. Can you imagine that?”

Not too many people in this world can claim that accomplishment, never mind eight decades that have included extensive offshore cruising, racing elite yachts and winning countless prestigious races. Perhaps most remarkable has been training and mentoring dozens of youth who are now some of the top ocean racing sailors in the region.

For Dr. Arthur Burke, however, sailing is not a past-time, it's a passion, and few people can match the type of energy, dedication, and hard work he has given to the sport. In fact, the retired physician, who served as NBYC Commodore from 1995-96, still gets calls today to deliver boats from exotic locations and race in major offshore races.

“People still call me to race to Bermuda, and I guess that's good!” he added.

Burke started his sailing career in Hingham Bay in the 1950s, where he sailed and raced with his sister Janet in a 15-foot Lawley sloop. Not only was he successful as a racer, but he also displayed an interest well beyond his years, reading voraciously about sailing in his spare time. The books ranged from popular sailing to technical books, teaching him naval architecture formulas that helped him succeed with sailing throughout his life.

“I was never afraid of anything. And I read everything I could get my hands on. There is an intuitive component to sailing, and if you are good, you spend a lot of time on your boat, and you and your boat become one,” he said.

Burke had found his niche, and those around him quickly appreciated his talents. He was asked to run the Hull Yacht Club sailing programs when he was just a teenager. When he started what he calls his “educational decade” in the '60s, he continued to teach sailing while attending Boston College and Tufts Medical School. He competed in the Boston College sailing team and sailed when he could on his family's sailboat, an International 210.

Both his professional and sailing career were interrupted, however, with the onset of the Vietnam War. Knowing the draft was imminent, he enlisted in the U. S. Navy and ended up in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, where he served as a General Medical Officer with the 117 Mobile Riverine Force (known as the *River Rats*).

He saw heavy casualties and received many medals, but fortunately, he returned home intact and chose to complete his service, as a Navy lieutenant, at the Newport Navy base. He got right back into sailing, buying another 210 and racing with friends in Hingham and Hull. At that time, he finished his residency and fellowship at Tufts Medical Center and Harvard while living with his parents in Milton.

When it came to settling down, he decided to buy a home in Dartmouth, and later moored all of his boats in Padanaram Harbor. He first saw the area as a high school student when he and a group of students were selected to view the America's Cup in Newport aboard the Navy destroyer, the *USS Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.* After the race, the ship cruised up the coast to Buzzards Bay, and he was fascinated with the topography. He revisited the area 12 years later, driving around while stationed in Newport, and realized it was a great place for him to settle and sail.

"I knew about the winds, the weather, and the great sailing, and I realized how nice that was," he said.

Burke worked as a radiologist, becoming chairman of the radiology department at St. Luke's Hospital, and at the same time began serious, offshore cruising. His first boat was a Concordia 41 Yawl, *Spice* (a name he would bestow on his next two boats as well), which he owned from 1975 to 1983. He cruised from New York Harbor to the Canadian Maritimes, including the Bay of Fundy, either solo or with friends, sometimes "out in the middle of nowhere."

"I liked sailing, the weather, and the nautical challenge of sail handling. And we cruised just about everywhere in that boat, and in all conditions," he said.

The cruising and offshore sailing continued throughout the decades, but in 1984, he decided to get back into racing and bought a 40-foot Valiant cutter. He cruised with his wife, Roberta, and resumed his racing career with a bang. He won his class division in the Marion to Bermuda Race in 1985, and won multiple local races, including the NBYC Whaler's Race, the Figawi Race (from Hyannis to Nantucket), and a variety of double-handed races with his brother Robert. His biggest achievement, however, was winning the Marblehead to Halifax race in 1989, for which he still holds the corrected time record.

He continued that success with his next boat, a J 44 from 1992 to 2003. At this point, he and Roberta had two young daughters, Lauren and Caroline, and he quickly introduced them to the adventures of sailing, cruising with his family from Bermuda to the Canadian Maritimes.

"Roberta was a remarkable athlete. We would be sailing at night going up to Maine, with the breeze and the sea, and she put up with me! She was amazing help as a crew member, and we had two little girls on the boat!"

He also continued his successful racing streak, winning the Beverly Yacht Club Converse Tower Race four consecutive years, the NBYC Whaler's Race fifteen times, and the Figawi Race five times, still holding the elapsed time record. Though he often raced with his brother and other peers, he also raced with his family, who crewed for him on NBYC races to Menemsha, winning every time.

During that same period, he was contacted by the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) to be an onboard advisor on a 60-foot yacht, teaching cadets the disciplines of offshore racing.

This started a relationship with the college that still holds today. The mentorship involved sailing and training the cadets for several months before participating in two Newport to Bermuda races, in 1990 and 1992. Though they didn't win, Burke said it was a great learning experience.

"It was sail training at its best. We taught them how to sail in a big boat, which could be very dangerous if you don't do it right," he said.

Burke's next boat would be his fastest, an Andrews 70 Turbosled, *Shindig*, in which he sailed for over a decade with sailors from all over New England. The high-performance boat went up to 20 - 25 knots, which he said was "the fastest sailboat in Buzzards Bay."

Every Thursday, at 5:30 p.m., Burke would take the boat out for a sail-training excursion, sometimes going as far as Block Island and returning after midnight. A mixed group of sailors – some expert, some aspiring to be top racers – joined him, sailing "hard and fast" in all types of weather.

Shindig won a multitude of races, setting course records in the NBYC Whaler's Race as well as the Figawi Race. Burke went on to win multiple races including the Converse Tower Race, the Hurricane Cup (from Hyannis to Nantucket), and the Ida Lewis Distance Race, an overnight race from Newport.

"It was a hoot, sailing that boat. It was like driving a Ferrari at LeMans, so we all enjoyed it, but we sailed it hard," he said.

Burke said some of his crew members went on to have impressive racing careers. Though he primarily sailed with young men, his daughter Lauren raced with him when they won the Ida Lewis Race, and she later competed in the IC-37 class at the New York Yacht Club.

Another sailor, NBYC member Scott Bancroft, is a seasoned racer who worked on the America's Cup build team for three years. Bancroft has spent more than 1,000 hours sailing with Burke, and he cannot say enough about his mentorship, both on and offshore.

"He works harder than anyone else I know. And I have never seen someone who is so well organized and has such a great sense of command on a boat as Arthur," he said.

Amazingly, Burke found time to race other boats during this period and to assist with a variety of sailing programs. He was project manager and watch captain in the renowned Kodiak program, founded by Llywd Ecclestone, Jr., one of only 13 people in the Bermuda Race Roll of Honour. The program prepares young men to race in offshore races.

Over the decades, Burke brought many young men from NBYC into the Kodiak program, which is comprised of different boats in the 70 – 85-foot range. In addition, Burke was very involved

with Ecclestone's sailing events in the Mediterranean, which included racing a 94-foot yacht at Sardinia, racing a 145 Dubois at St. Barts, and cruising in Italy and Croatia.

The pinnacle of his Kodiak experience was in 2012, when he served as watch captain on a 74-foot sailboat, racing with Ecclestone and fourteen other crew members in the Newport to Bermuda race. The boat flew across the waters, finishing first and setting a course record at 46:53:12. Bancroft was onboard, with three other NBYC members, and he said it was a "life defining event." Burke thinks the record will never be broken.

"Forty-six hours is unheard of, but everything went right. We had perfect weather and a talented crew," he said.

The next year, Burke donated *Shindig* to the MMA, with the caveat that he would still be able to sail and race on the boat with some of his crew members as well as the cadets. They took line honors in the 2013 Marion to Bermuda Race, and they also won the NBYC Whaler's Race and the Ida Lewis Race.

The academy owned the boat for three years before selling it to a man from New York, but Burke has continued to sail with some of the MMA graduates. Last year, the academy demonstrated its appreciation by awarding him the Admiral's Circle Platinum Medal during its graduation ceremony.

Shindig's sale did not end Burke's relationship with the boat, however. Its new owner contacted him to serve as captain and provide a good crew for a race from Florida to Havana, Cuba in 2017. Burke recruited past crew members from MMA, NBYC and other sailing programs, and they had a great adventure, finishing first and celebrating at the Hemingway International Yacht Club.

Though he no longer has a high-speed racing yacht, Burke now owns two boats – a lobster boat and yet another 210. He continues to assist with offshore races, and he plans to race in this year's Block Island Race Week on a Baltic 47 with Andy Burton, owner of offshore consulting company *Adventure Sailing*. On that same boat, he and Andy won Class 8 in the Newport to Bermuda Race in 2022.

He also maintains great friendships with many of his mentorees, some now middle-aged, who have reaped the benefits of his decades of instruction.

"It all goes back to 1958, when I was teaching sailing in Hull. It was fun to sail with those kids, and not only that, they came along. They sailed to Bermuda, they sailed to Havana, and they had experiences they never would have had otherwise," he said.