

Member Spotlight

Don Watson

NBYC Commodore, 20017-18, Joined in 1974

Founding Member and Current President of NBYC Foundation

Custom boat builder for a number of marine companies, including Concordia Company and New England Boatworks (Retired in 2018)

Many NBYC members know Don Watson as the owner and captain of *Swamp Fox*, the eye-catching, white trimaran that set a multihull course record in the Halifax to Marblehead race that is still held today.

Swamp Fox, designed and built by Watson, is just a small part of his boating legacy, however. Don Watson has been in the boat building business for more than 40 years, building boats that range from the last wooden boat produced at Concordia Company (a 13-foot rowing scull), to top racing yachts, including 12 meters for America Cup contender Dennis Conner. He has also worked with the most innovative materials that the boating world has produced, progressing from fiberglass and cold-molded wood, to aluminum, carbon fiber, and most recently, pre-preg carbon fiber, used in high performance sailing yachts today.

How it all started

Don, who grew up in Dedham, said he didn't always want to go into the boat building business and planned a career in business or banking. That all changed after graduating from Harvard University, when he decided to take a gap year from further education and work. He liked to sail, and had raced with his father in a number of offshore races, so he applied to work at the Concordia Company in 1973.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I didn't want to continue studies, so I took a year off, and it lasted 45 years," he said.

Don ended up working on the boatyard's marine railway, as part of a yard crew. Well before marine travel-lifts were invented, the crew hauled boats on wooden cradles placed on rails, and then moved the boats up to a turntable that was directed to one of five tracks in the yard. The boats were then moved on planks and rollers to their destination.

The work was labor intensive and exhausting, but it provided exactly the type of outlet he was seeking. Not only did he like working with hands, but he also

enjoyed the camaraderie of the boatyard culture. He worked with three Portuguese immigrants who had been there since the '54 hurricane, getting an education that was "different, but no less valuable than college." He also got to know some marine professionals, including Joe Mello and Gary Leduc (both NBYC members), who still work in the marine industry.

"It was a liberating experience and opened a lot of doors for me," he said.

During the offseason, he worked on a 43-foot wooden schooner *Welcome*, the last large wooden boat built at Concordia, owned by Arthur Snyder (father of NBYC member Carrie Griffen). He started by working with deck beams, running heavy oak planks through a planer to reduce their thickness. Later, he helped with the mast building and the bowsprit.

He soon was transferred to the boat building department, helping to build fiberglass Marshall 22 catboats. He also built a 47-foot sloop by famed designer Sparkman and Stephens, using the newly-invented Kevlar to build the hull.

Moving on

At that point, Don was eager to learn more about the latest technology, so he left Concordia in 1979, and went to work for a series of different boat builders. He started at Eric Goetz Custom Boats, building IOR racing boats with modern designs that used wood and epoxy materials. Then, wanting to learn more about aluminum, he left to work at Newport Offshore after two years. There, he was part of a crew that built three 12 meters, all made with aluminum. One of them, *Liberty*, was the defender for the 1983 America's Cup race, sailed by Dennis Conner.

He returned to Concordia in 1982 to work for Brodie McGregor, managing his custom building shop. During that time, they built 28 custom boats from 33 feet to 105 feet, designed by prominent naval architects. Three of those boats won their class in the Newport to Bermuda Race in 1990. Another boat, the Frers 66, *Kodiak*, won the 1998 Bermuda Race (with NBYC member Arthur Burke aboard as watch captain).

His Concordia team also built several boats for NBYC members that have had impressive cruising and racing performances. They built a Taylor 42 for NBYC members Blair Brown and Bache Renshaw which won the Nathanael Herreshoff trophy from the New York Yacht Club. They also built a 45-foot custom sloop, *Meridian*, for NBYC member Steve Taylor, in which he completed a Transatlantic crossing, sailing from Massachusetts to Europe and returning through the Caribbean.

Steve, who has won both world and national racing competitions in the 420 and 505 classes, worked closely with Don while he was building his boat. Launched in 1990, Steve said *Meridian* (designed by Chuck Paine) has been a great boat, cruising 9 to 10 knots under sail, and 8.8 knots under power. He credits Don with being one of the most knowledgeable boat builders in the business.

“There are a handful of really great boat builders in the world, and he is the most diversely experienced with multiple materials of all of them,” he said.

Don and his crew also built a 105-foot sailing yacht, *Wallygator*, which at the time was the largest carbon fiber-hulled boat in the world. It was launched by two cranes off the Padanaram Bridge in a snowstorm.

Building and living on his own boats

From the beginning of his career, Don said the best way to learn how to build a boat was by doing it, and so he has built, or done major repair work, on all his boats. He has lived on some of them, and done some serious cruising and racing on others.

He bought his first boat in 1974, a Malabar Junior, a wooden sloop designed by John Alden. Over three years, he completely reframed it; installed new floors, new keel bolts, and planks; and built a new interior. He lived onboard during three summers, and went on a 6-week cruise to Maine in 1976.

His second boat was much different – a 52-foot power boat, *Linda Lea*, that he spotted at F.L. Tripp’s in Westport after it had recently sunk. He wanted to live on a boat, and knew that a powerboat would provide a lot more room than a sailboat, so he bought it in 1982. The boat was roomy, including two staterooms, two heads, a 10-foot square main salon, a galley, a dining area, and a back porch and flybridge.

He lived on the *Linda Lea* for eight years, docked off South Wharf in Padanaram Harbor, and he said it was the “best years of his life.” His wife Ellen moved in during the last seven years, and their son, Nat, lived onboard for two and a half years. It also provided some unexpected adventures, which Don recounts:

“In 1986, our boat was tied to the wharf when she was hit in the transom by a Grand Banks, and nearly sank completely. Smart work by the yard crew at Concordia dragged her stern-first onto the launching ramp at the club. The aft sections remained somewhat above water, but the decks were awash forward. All this happened when

Ellen was six months pregnant. She didn't leave me, in fact she stayed on board for three more years, and miraculously is still with me today!" he said.

Don and Ellen then worked on designing and building a home on Potomska Road, which they moved into before their second child (daughter Caroline) was born. They moved in before all the doors and upper kitchen were done, so Don completed the finishing touches, building the cabinets, doors, and floors, and doing other carpentry work.

"Crazy to build all your own doors and cabinets, but we are happy with the result. The house is like a boat in that all the walls are white, and the joinery is varnished butternut from Vermont," he said.

Swamp Fox

While still living afloat in 1985, Don decided to build his own boat from scratch, a 35-foot trimaran. At that point, trimarans were starting to catch on in the area, with renowned naval architect Dick Newick designing and building multihulls in Martha's Vineyard. The boats gained popularity when many of their owners were racing successfully in Trans-Atlantic races.

Don said NBYC member Larry Bedell, who built three trimarans, inspired him to build his own trimaran. He also got to build and sail a Newick-designed trimaran while working at Concordia.

"It was a real eye opener. When a puff of wind came, instead of heeling, it accelerated. I was standing up on the boat and all of a sudden it was moving two knots faster. It felt like walking off the back of the boat," she said.

Don worked with a partner, NBYC member Jeff Graber, and after three years, they launched *Swamp Fox* in July of 1988. The boat has had a memorable career, racing in eight Marblehead to Halifax races and winning three times. Their best finish was in 1991, when they finished second over the line behind an 80-foot boat, *Congere*, which had won the 1990 Bermuda Race. *Swamp Fox* set a multihull course record that year of 35 hours and 10 minutes that is still held today. Don also served as the race committee chair for the New England Multihull Association for 20 years.

New England Boatworks

Don's last job was heading up custom boat building at New England Boatworks (NEB) in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, and his accomplishments are

staggering. He helped produce 37 boats in 24 years, building boats for top racing competitors and other serious sailors. He continued to seek out the latest technology in boat building construction and kept learning over the years.

His first boat at NEB was a Nelson/Marek 47 for past NBYC member Bache Renshaw, built with pre-preg carbon. His second, a Whitbread 60, was built for Team Dennis Conner, which competed in the Whitbread Round the World Race. Don and his team also built three America's Cup boats for Team Dennis Conner, which competed in 2000 and 2003.

They also built a Volvo 70 for Ken Read, a well known racer who competed in the Volvo Ocean Race with the PUMA team, and a 66-foot yacht, *Zaraffa*, which won the Bermuda race in 2002.

Other notable yachts include a Langan 80-footer, *Sagamore*; three 72-foot mini-maxis named *Bella Mente*; a Reichel/Pugh 75, *Titan*; and the mighty Rambler 88, which is 88 feet and has two rudders, two daggerboards, and a 20-foot canting keel.

His team also built a 92-foot Hunt-designed power boat, and several cruising boats, including *Surf*, for NBYC member Arthur Ullian.

He retired in 2018, after a long career that he enjoyed right to the end.

“My whole working life, I loved what I did. I loved building boats and I loved that every day was different. There were always new problems to solve and processes to develop. The materials and the processes were changing all the time and trying to figure out how to make the materials work together was an interesting part of the job,” he said.

New Bedford Yacht Club

While working at New England Boatworks, Don became actively involved with the club. He served on the race committee and volunteered to run the Wednesday night races when he learned the club was paying an outsider to run them. He also designed and built race marks that are still used today.

“I had a trimaran and couldn't race (there were not multihull classes), so I found a way to help out,” he said.

Don eventually served as race committee chair for five years, and served as commodore from 2017 - 2018. When he was rear commodore and membership

chairman, he succeeded in reducing the club's fees for intermediate members (age 26 - 34) by one-half, which resulted in more members.

As commodore he focused on improving the sailing profile of the club as well as making the club more accessible to nonmembers.

"I really made an effort to meet people I didn't know. We had several world renowned speakers come to speak and we competed in the Resolute Cup (the U.S. Qualifying Series for the Rolex New York Yacht Club Invitational Cup).

He also used his building skills – assembling and building parts of the club flagpole.

In addition, he initiated a plan to rearrange the club's docks in order to install a lift so boat owners could haul their one-designs. The current lift is slow, he said, and can only be used during short interval openings during high tide. That project is still ongoing because of complications of getting a dredging permit.

NBYC Foundation

Don helped to found the New Bedford Yacht Club Youth Foundation in 2012. It is a nonprofit organization (separate from the club), and its mission is to promote youth sailing in Dartmouth and to preserve the historical character of the clubhouse exterior.

He was inspired to help create the foundation because he felt that young people should have access to sailing instruction and boats despite the costs involved.

Working with past Commodore Joe Nauman, the club and the foundation bought seven Sonars, commonly used for team racing, used by the club's sailing programs and all club members. Last year, the foundation bought 12 Optis and a coach inflatable boat for the sailing school, and a J80 (a 26 foot racing sailboat) that advanced sailors can now use for racing on Wednesday nights.

The foundation also accepted a donation of a J44 (offshore cruising and racing sailboat). They planned to provide funds for young sailors to compete in the 2021 Marion to Bermuda Race in that boat, but it was canceled due to Covid. Instead, the foundation organized a cruise to Bermuda.

The Foundation recently helped to finance a trip involving six young yacht club members, who raced sailing 420s last December in the 2023 Orange Bowl Youth Regatta, in Miami, Florida.

Retirement

Not having had more than a week's vacation for 20 years, Don decided to retire when he turned 67. He also wanted to spend more time with his mother, who was ailing, which was a decision he said he would never regret

“The time spent with her the last year of her life was really priceless,” he said.

He also took on another project: buying and fixing up a 28-foot power boat, *Puffin*, which he hopes to get into the water by 2025. He bought the boat to take his mother out during the last years of her life, and since then he has worked on rebuilding it.

He also has had more time for sailing on *Swamp Fox*. Though he had a hip replacement this past year, and couldn't get out on the water until late in the season, he has enjoyed spending more time on Buzzards Bay.

“Sailing is my church. I have a regular route that I do, sailing across the bay through Quicks Hole, around Pasque Island, back through Robinson's Hole, and back to Padanaram. It takes about three hours, and these hours are just magic - it's so beautiful,” he said.

Written by Candace Perry Hall