

George O'Day: *The man who loved*

*He put Americans on the water
in affordable, trailerable sailboats*

by Dan Spurr

THE BOATING INDUSTRY ATTRACTS people to it in different ways. Some people like to build things. Others like to draw or draft. Some get involved because they like to sail and think they'll spend much more time on the water than if occupied in a more lubberly profession. And a few are simply born to it. For George Dyer O'Day, there was never any doubt that sailing would be his career.

Born May 17, 1923, he grew up along the New England coast in Brookline, Massachusetts. That's not that far from the famous sailing town of Marblehead, its crowded harbor tucked behind a thin peninsula about 12 miles north of Boston. Ted Hood, who would race against O'Day, founded Hood Sails there at Little Harbor.

George O'Day started sailing, by some accounts, as a "handsome, curly-haired youngster." By age 10 he began winning races against older competition. He had a flair for it, that indefinable sense about the wind and the current and how to make a boat go. He was good. Cruising, his son Mark says, never really appealed to him. "I only remember him going cruising once or twice."

Racing turned him on the most, but he loved, too, the simple pleasure of just .-. sailing .-. getting in a small boat, grabbing the mainsheet and tiller, harnessing the wind and the water in his hands, and then just letting go. For George, it didn't get any better than that.

Childhood dreams

"I started racing in a Brutal Beast catboat inherited from my brothers," he told an interviewer in 1960. He'd

had to acquire a new sail. "Her old cotton sail had lost its drive. Not until a Boston sportswriter wrote, 'It's a shame promising young O'Day is handicapped by a horrible sail,' could my father be persuaded. I got a new mainsail in a hurry!"

Competition in Marblehead was tough. As in any sport, however, going up against the likes of his buddy Bobby Coulson (who beat him out for North American Junior Sailing Champion when they were 13), Frank Scully, Clint McKim, or Barbara Connolly, only made him better.

"Those Sears Cup setbacks taught me," George said, "that some skippers were endowed with greater natural sailing talents than I possessed. Bobby, among others, could take a boat to windward a little faster. If I was to excel, I had to cultivate certain skills to a greater degree than my rivals."

Work hard he did, developing expertise at helming a boat downwind under spinnaker and making a boat get up on plane. Using a parachute spinnaker, he won the first International 110 Championship in Detroit, capturing three firsts, a second and a third. That 1941 trophy was followed in 1948 by capturing the first International 210 Class title at Wianno, Massachusetts. Others to come included the Firefly Championship in 1953, the Jollyboat title in 1957, as well as the prestigious Mallory Cup and the International 14-foot Dinghy Championship in 1958. There were many others too numerous to list here.

Unlike a lot of Marblehead sailors, George chose not to graduate from the Brutal Beast to heavy keelboats,

preferring



George O'Day, above. At top, photo of the 1960 Olympics gold medal crew: George in center with Jim Hunt, at left, and Dave Smith, right.

lighter-displacement boats, often centerboarders capable of planing. Sailing International 210s in the Buzzards Bay Bowl, he trailed leader Eldon "Shorty" Trimmingham at the last mark by 400 yards. Then he got his *Bacalao* up on a continuous plane and raced down the last one-mile leg "as though jet-propelled to overhaul that rival easily and win going away."



to sail

For high school he attended the Rivers Country Day School, then in Brookline. During the war years he attended Harvard College, where he was Commodore of the Harvard Yacht Club and at the same time served as president of the Inter-Collegiate Yacht Racing Association. He also played varsity football. His class was '45, but he graduated in 1944 so he could serve as a lieutenant in the U.S. Naval Reserve from 1944 to 1946. For the next few years he floundered about, doing one year at Harvard Law School and a stint at the Boston University Business School. His father owned a chemical company that made fabric dyes. George spent a brief time there as well.

Writing in the 25th anniversary report for his class at Harvard, George said, "I started in the family chemical business, learned that, but it was not my cup of tea. Advertising via J. W. Thompson in New York, and market research via Lever Brothers gave me the insight into the consumer field. Commercial insurance also seemed to appeal, so in 1950, after I married my child bride, I went into business with my father-in-law. This relationship has lasted 20 years and permitted me to get into the boat business — the O'Day Corporation was started."

Becoming a boatbuilder

George O'Day Associates was formed in 1951, later becoming the O'Day Corporation. The first boats were imported from Fairey Marine in England. Fairey Marine made hot-molded mahogany boats coated with a polyester resin by Cellon called Faireyglass. Boats he imported from Fairey Marine included the 12-foot Firefly, 14-foot Albacore, 18-foot Jolly, the 14-foot International-14, and the 26-foot Atlanta.

His big thing was family fun. He believed large, complicated boats turned people off from trying to learn

to sail. So he designed and built smaller boats that were simple to rig and easy to handle. His wife, Miriam, remembers, "He would say you played golf and tennis with others of equal skill, which eliminated your family. Sailing was an activity you could all do together .-.-. though we seldom did," she laughs. "He was always too busy!"

In 1958, he bought Marscot Plastics from Palmer Scott, an old-line builder of wooden boats who had started a

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fiberglass boat division in the late 1940s. Palmer built the Philip Rhodes-designed Wood Pussy and the Smyra, the forerunner of the Rhodes 19. He used the Marco Method developed by Herbert Muscat, a pioneer in fabricating composites. The forerunner of today's resin infusion techniques, like SCRIMP, the Marco Method used vacuum to suck resin into the laminate, in this case up from a trough into the dry fiberglass sandwiched in matched metal dies. The hurricane of 1954 leveled his wooden-boat facilities, leaving him with only Marscot Plastics. Four years later, in 1958, he sold the business to George O'Day. The first boat O'Day built at Marscot was the Gannet, which they sold to the U.S. Naval Academy.

In an early bulletin to dealers, called *Spray*, George wrote, "And best of all — Marscot fiberglass now makes it possible to get complete enjoyment

and utility from sailboats. Little or no maintenance, light weight, and attractive colors permanently molded in. In addition, spars and rigging are easy to handle and trailering is simple — all providing an irresistible appeal for O'Day Boats and 'Sailboat Living.'"

Dick Bryan, who worked for neighboring Carl Beetle and used a variation of the Marco Method, wasn't keen on the vacuum element employed in the Marco Method, noting, "It did work at times. More often than not the liquid, as liquids do, found the path of least resistance, leaving islands of dry glass fiber. These voids were later repaired and the boat made usable. It was not the economical method that it was thought to be."

In 1958, George bought *Hunter*, the first fiberglass deep-V powerboat made, designed by C. Raymond Hunt and molded at Bill Dyer's The Anchorage, in Warren, Rhode Island. At the America's Cup races in Newport that summer, everyone was impressed with a sister ship of *Hunter* that was tender to *Easterner*, Hunt's only 12-Meter. The Essex Fiber Boat Co. also began building Hunt deep-Vs, and George was sufficiently impressed with his boat and Hunt's concept that he bought the company. He worked with Hunt to develop a 16-foot version, of which more than 300 were built.

Olympic gold

A few years earlier, in 1956, George was a favorite to make the U.S. Olympic sailing team that would compete in Melbourne, Australia. He was barely eliminated in a three-boat race-off and was relegated to the position of alternate. He did not make the trip Down Under.

George's failure as a youth to win a Sears Cup continued to bother him even while piling up other medals. As a substitute, he set his sights on the Mallory Cup, an adult championship series sponsored by the North American Yacht Racing Union. The 1957 event was held off Marblehead in Thistles. His downwind prowess carried him to victory; though never leading at any windward mark, he gained 10 places in eight races, and not one of the races was in planing conditions. This helped set earlier disappointments aright.

In 1959, George won the Pan American title in 5.5-Meter one-designs, and the following year he again competed for the U.S. Olympic team. In the trials, George's *Wistful*

trailed Ted Hood's *Fantasi* by almost 1,000 points with three races left. But he achieved a startling three-way tie with *Fantasi* and Runyon Colie's *Complex* by taking a first and a second. In the race-off, George covered *Fantasi* the entire way and won.

As bad luck would have it, while George posed at the dock with *Wistful* and his family, a young man roared up in a runabout and T-boned *Wistful*. She was a loss. Fortunately, he was able to purchase another 5.5 from a competitor and had her shipped to Naples, Italy, for the 1960 summer games. There, racing *Minotaur*, he won a gold medal. His crew members were Dave Smith and Jim Hunt, son of designer C.-Raymond Hunt.

America's Cup ambitions

What does an Olympic medalist do for an encore? In sailing, he might next take aim on the America's Cup, the most prestigious match-racing event in the sport.

For the 1962 defense, George skippered Ray Hunt's only 12-Meter, *Easterner*, a beautiful boat but not particularly fast. She and George lost to *Weatherly*, but his spirits were lifted when *Weatherly* skipper Bus Mosbacher asked him to serve as assistant helmsman. Together they defeated Australian challenger, *Gretel*, by a score of 4-1.

Of their collaboration Mark O'Day said, "Dad always had to be president or skipper or Number One of everything he did. Sharing the helm with Bus was the only time in his life he allowed himself to play second fiddle. When later he was asked if he'd consider helming another Cup boat, he said only if he could do it with Bus. That is a reflection of the great esteem in which he held him."

And team again they did, the next time around in 1967. The two co-skippered the revolutionary *Intrepid*, the first 12-Meter with separate keel and rudder appendages. They beat Australia's *Dame Pattie* 4-0, making George O'Day the first person to win both an Olympic gold medal and the America's Cup.

Though he won more than he lost, he liked to say that sailing teaches one how to lose gracefully. "He thought it was a wonderful training and character-building activity," Miriam says. "You can be on top one minute and at the bottom of the heap the next, because no matter how good you are there are variables you can't control, like the wind and currents."

"The Day Sailer was immensely popular . . . more than 14,000 were built before it evolved to the Day Sailer II."

Meanwhile, back at the yard

While using his racing success to build a boat company, George also found time to raise a family at their Dover, Massachusetts, home. By 1960 he and Miriam had three children — nine-year-old Pamela, six-year-old Mark, and two-year-old Elizabeth.

He was active in other businesses and his community. He contributed to a number of sailing magazines: *Yachting*, *Popular Boating*, *Rudder*, *Sail*, and *One-Design Yachtsman*; wrote a series for *Sports Illustrated*; and wrote three books on learning to sail: *Sail in a Day*, *Have Fun Learning to Sail*, and *Learning to Sail is Fun*. As always, the operative word was fun!

Production of small boats had been moved from Scott's New Bedford yard to a facility in an old mill on Stevens Street in Fall River, Massachusetts. Miriam remembers George spending a lot of time at the yard there the first three or four years he owned it. Though marketing was his strong suit, here he had his hands on the product, learning the techniques necessary to master the new material. "He'd come home smelling of fiberglass," Miriam says. "The yard was right next to a potato-chip factory, and the smell of the two of them was enough to send you in the other direction."

Perhaps the first really successful boat George built himself was the Rhodes 19, whose origins can be traced to the Hurricane class built by the Allied Aviation Corporation of Cockeysville, Maryland. A keel version, known as the Smyra (after the Southern Massachusetts Yacht Racing Association), was used as a plug by Marscot Plastics. When George took over Marscot in 1958, he changed the name to the Rhodes 19. Miriam says he and Phil Rhodes collaborated on some revisions. The fixed-keel design had a cuddy cabin for overnighting. More than 3,800 were built during George's time with the company. The same hull was used for the Mariner, which had the centerboard more to George's liking. An

additional 3,500 of these were built.

Other successful daysailers were the 14-foot Javelin, the 12-foot 6-inch Widgeon, and the 15-foot Osprey. These three designs alone accounted for about 15,000 hulls. Miriam says he often made sketches of a new model and discussed his concept with a designer like Rhodes or English designer Uffa Fox, who'd convert George's ideas to lines that could be worked with on the shop floor.

In all, George O'Day "designed, created, or implemented" 32 boats, one of which was the Sabre 32 for the Columbia Yacht Corp, which he helped to develop while serving as vice-president and a director after leaving the O'Day Corporation (*see Columbia history, Page 9*). For his own company, the largest was the Ohlson 35, imported from Sweden, of which just 40 were sold. More to his taste were the smaller 23-foot Tempest and 24-foot Dolphin, which he actually built. Seven powerboats, ranging from 12 to 28 feet, were built to the names Hunter and



Bruce Hammann's 14-foot Javelin, above. Jim Adensam's 16-foot 9-inch Day Sailer, on facing page above, and also on Page 33. On facing page below, Eric Schoenberg's Rhodes 19.

Marscot, and another seven were built under the name Osprey.

The most successful O'Day, however, was the 16-foot 9-inch Day Sailer. In 1959, O'Day commissioned Uffa Fox to design an easily handled, easily trailered family sloop. Fox was a fan of small boats, too, uttering the famous words to those complaining about headroom, "If you want to stand up, go on deck!"

The Day Sailer was immensely popular. In many ways it embodied all that George held dear about sailing — simplicity, value, easy maintenance, and fun. More than 14,000 were built

before it evolved to the Day Sailer II. It sold for \$1,695 in 1961, less sails. A small outboard could be mounted on the stern for increased versatility. In the 1980s, after the fall of O'Day under Lear Siegler ownership, the Day Sailer passed to Pearson Yachts' small boat division, then to Laser/Sunfish, which spun it off (the original Day Sailer, not the Day Sailer II) to Cape Cod Shipbuilders, which produces it under license from the Day Sailer Association, which owns the molds.

By 1961, the O'Day Corporation had stockholders, and George was made chairman of the board. Harvard chum Lyman Bullard was installed as boss of day-to-day operations. The company was quite profitable. During this period it was purportedly



the largest builder of sailboats in the U.S. It employed 350 people, had 450 dealers, grossed \$15 million a year, and sold more than 70,000 boats in all.

In 1966, the O'Day Corporation was bought by the Bangor Punta Corporation. George retired only to resurface with the Columbia Yacht Corp. He also started a company called Gemico, which imported the Olympic class Soling and built the Wildfire and Chipmunk, experiments in thermoplastics. Another was the Super Gamefisher for Sears, Roebuck and Co.

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The O'Day Corporation began to build much larger boats, such as the O'Day 22, 23, and 25 trailersailers, the 27 and 30 keel sloops, and the center cockpit O'Day 32. In 1975, on the heels of Robert Saltsonstall, Jr., and Jack Howie, Bangor Punta made Jim Hunt president of the O'Day Corporation. Jim, of course, sailed with George in the 1960 Olympics in Naples, so his selection seemed only fitting. Small boats gradually disappeared in favor of larger family cruisers.

In 1983, Fortune 500 conglomerate Lear Siegler bought Bangor Punta and renamed the company the Lear Siegler Marine Company. Then it became Starcraft Sailboat Products, and then in 1987 it was bought by L. T. Funston & Co. and renamed The O'Day Corporation, building boats ranging from the Day Sailer to the O'Day 280, 302, 322, and the O'Day 40, a joint venture with French giant Jeanneau.

Then in 1989, the company was dead. Gone was another of the great fiberglass sailboat companies of the 1960s and '70s that reshaped American boating. During the same several-year period, between the late 1980s and early 1990s, Columbia, Islander, Pearson, Cal, Ericson, Ranger, and Irwin all went down. It was the end of an era, an era George O'Day lived from beginning to end.

Sailing into the sunset

Miriam remembers a telling event back around 1951 or so that involved the O'Day warehouse outside Boston. Someone was breaking in and stealing parts. She suggested that George hire a watchman or at least buy a watchdog. He said, “No, I have another idea.” When spring came he began getting up early every Saturday morning and disappearing until noon. The thefts stopped. Miriam asked him what could he possibly be doing on Saturday mornings to thwart vandals? Turns out he'd put up a sign on the building

advertising free sailing lessons Saturday mornings at 7 a.m. Rather than rounding up the wagons and defending his property, he reached out to the area youngsters and offered them something they probably couldn't have found or afforded elsewhere — friendship and some great time on the water.

In his late 50s, George took up boardsailing, which, despite the difficulty of the sport, isn't really that surprising since he sailed everything else he could get his hands on. This was probably the last craft left that he hadn't conquered.

At age 62, George began a battle with cancer that was to last two years. He died in July 1987.

Of all the boats he raced, the International 14 was his greatest love. It was the 14, Miriam says, that “made him say, ‘Whoopie! I enjoy this! This is great!’”

Dave Smith, who sailed with George and Jim in Naples, recalls sailing with George all over the “western world.”

“Those were our best days,” he says. “George never had a harsh word, even when we got in a jam .-.-. and we got into some nasty jams! He'd yell, but never nasty — always exuberant.”

Some years before his death George wrote of his own career: “Sailing and boats have been a great way of life, not easy and not very remunerative, but very rewarding. I have friends from Israel to Alaska, and Norway to Australia. I have sailed with Kings and Princes, Communists and industrialists, tycoons and sailing bums, and down to the last man, they are all great people. The sea is the great equalizer. The challenge of the wind, water, and the elements seems to bring men closer and more equal than at any time in their lives. Ashore they are different, but at sea they have to depend upon each other.”

In a sport where bigger often is seen as better, a sport where money makes a difference, George O'Day embraced the small daysailer. For on an open boat, close to the water, with sheet in one hand and tiller in the other, one tames the elements and turns them to his own purpose. That is sheer joy, and for all the big boats he raced, all the kings and princes he met, none could equal that simple pleasure of getting an International 14 up on plane and kicking tail.

Because we understand, he need not have told us: “Sailing and boats have been my love and life.” 