

BIRTH OF THE US YOUTH CHAMPS

By Founding Chairman Bob Johnstone



Youth sailing in America has changed dramatically in 80 years... from 6 boat fleets to 300 boat fleets... from keel S/Boats to trapeze 29ers... from a regional to a national to a global phenomena. The evolution of youth racing over four generations of our family not only illustrates this change, but became the springboard for creating the United States Youth Sailing Championship in 1973.

In 1926, my father sailed in the Sears Cup on Narragansett Bay. Four months before the stock market crash of 1929 he was crewing as a freshman on one of two Princeton S/boats out of Seawanaka Corinthian YC on Oyster Bay. Intercollegiate yacht racing started as an elite affair between Harvard, Yale and Princeton. For a key race that June, Harvard was a “no show”. So, Cornell was invited to fill in. The NY press reported concern about watering down the quality of competition. Not to worry. Cornell’s skipper was Rod Stephens.

In the 1950s, we didn’t have youth boats. I sailed Lightnings in Stonington CT sailing against other Juniors on Wednesdays and in Fleet #183 championship races on Saturdays against adults. This incredible learning experience propelled me all the way to the ECYRA Lightning District Championship at age 17, to 4th in the Sears Cup finals and then to becoming Coach of the Sears winning Indian Harbor YC crew in 1952. Yet, I could only dream of sailing against the Walt Swindemans and Bill Lippincotts of the time, never imagining that I had a chance outside my local pond. Nobody encouraged me to take the next step.

By 2007, two generations later, youth sailing in the family had gone global. Grandson Nick (14) has competed in a half dozen countries and as a US Team member in the USODA Worlds in Montevideo. Quite a transition!

The big change started in the 1960s. With the kids under 10, we initially sailed as a family crew winning a pair of Rainbow National Championships and the Penguin Internationals. It was at the ’71 Soling NAs in Houston, that son Stuart (13) made a comment that put the kids in their own boats.

My wife Mary (130 lbs.) and Stu (125 lbs) were not what you’d call a competitive Soling crew. But, we were fast in light air and had just rounded the weather mark in 1st place, when Stu said, “OK, Dad, now don’t blow it!” Uh-huh. It was obviously time for Stu and his brother to sail their own

boats if they were so smart. Time for a regime change.

On their own, the boys dominated the North Shore of Chicago in Sunfish and the occasional 420 event. Seems they were pretty good, after all. Stu also finished 10th in the Optimist Florida States on Biscayne Bay which was a rare “only time in an Opti” result for a non-Florida sailor in those days. And that was with 2 broken masts.

These youth sailing activities were great fun, but they were hardly a path for success in competitive, large fleet, international class racing... learning the disciplines of preparing and optimizing a serious racing boat in order to win. In some ways, my Lightning days in the 1950s sailing against adults was a faster track than Stu and Drake were getting in “youth” boats. How could I help them progress in ways beyond those available to me as a kid in the ‘50s?

The key had to be a greater challenge, competing against adults. Put them in over their heads. Buy a 470. That would keep them busy. This was May 1972. They were 14 and 13.

This now gets interesting. After sailing in the boat for only 30 days, the boys asked if they could go to the 470 Great Lakes Championship. This was a 40 boat fleet with FD, 505, Fireball National and World caliber crews. The top sailors were jumping into the 470 at the time as the new Olympic class. Why not? Let them get roughed up a bit. Be a good learning experience. I’ll help Art Mitchell from Harken on the RC boat. Time to take a break from racing.

Wouldn’t you know? Stu and Drake walked away with the championship, qualifying as 1 of 8 US boats for the 470 World Championships in Montreal. “Dad, can we please go to the World Championships and also to the Nationals in Hingham just before?” And, here I thought I was going to be the world class sailor that year! They ended up 32nd in the Worlds and as the top and maybe only Youth crew under age 15.

In Montreal we purchased a Zodiac with 10 HP motor as a tender to use as a Judges Boat during the event. Peter Harken afterwards made the family team complete by lending Mary and me his 470 to sail while two new boats were built. The Soling was sold. Peter age 6 and Helen age 12 would run the tender/tow boat. Mom & Pop in US 616 and Stu & Drake in US 600 raced the 470s. This all-family mini-Olympic team traversed North America in a large Ford wagon and 2 boat trailer to RI, FL, TN, WI, MI, OH and ONT on the 470 pre-Olympic circuit for 2 years. I still have copies of letters written to teachers asking for the kids to be excused for a week here or there. Wow! Sailboat racing had become a great adventure and even greater family focus.

The results were clear. When Stu and Drake competed in 420s for Chicago area junior events, it was no contest. The high-performance 470 taught them things about teamwork, trim and movement that a 420 never did.

Having motivated the participation and racing success of our own kids, maybe the same could be done for others. It was disheartening to see how poorly the USA was doing at the IYRU Youth Worlds. At the time, the US representative for the single-handed boats was the top Florida Optimist sailor who was undersized at 14. The double-handed crew was the Sears Cup winner, age 17 who'd won in a change-boat series of 8 boats. Hardly a comparable venue. They were competing against 19 year old big-fleet one-design sailors. It wasn't fair to the young US sailors. Team USA had no chance. Something had to be done.

Frustrated with the lack of a North American Yacht Racing Union (now US Sailing) youth development track in late 1972, I wrote my friend Ding Schoonmaker who was in charge of NAYRU's Junior Sailing Committee. Ding and I had sailed Lightnings against one another as juniors in Fisher's Island Sound. I recommended (a) a single US qualifying regatta for the Youth Worlds for Youth aged 19 or under; (b) in bring your own (or chartered) Lasers and 470s; (c) the top youth sailors in any class would be identified and invited during the 2nd or 3rd week of June after school and before instructor jobs started, and (d) well-known US Olympians and world class sailors would conduct daily critiques. This event would challenge the top youth sailors of America to become better... an even more motivating format than racing against adults. They'd make friends for life all over the country.

Ding responded saying that the magnitude of this event with 125+ kids was beyond what the NAYRU was capable of pulling off, let alone managing, particularly on such short notice, BUT, if I would agree to run it and could get the Sheridan Shore YC in Wilmette to host such an undertaking ... NAYRU would back it. I agreed to do it and am ever grateful to Ding for his courageous support.

As the 470 Class Representative to the US Olympic Yachting Committee, I became its Secretary-Treasurer, responsible for managing athlete sponsorship and funding. This happened as part of the changing of the guard at the March, 13, 1973 USOYC meeting in New York, when long-time Chairman Paul Smart stepped down and Star silver-medalist and fellow Wilmette IL sailor, Dick Stearns, was voted in as part of a more pro-active USOYC. Near the end of the meeting, Bob Bavier, then publisher of Yachting Magazine, excused himself to send out the April issue. Worried about missing a chance to publicize the Youth Champs, I stood and asked Bob B. if he would please insert a regatta notice. He replied, "It was too late, the magazine has been put to bed." Crestfallen, I sat down. Then Dick Stearns with a devilish grin, said, "It doesn't matter, Yachting is just for old farts, anyway." That got Bavier's attention. He returned at lunch, pen in hand ready for dictation, and asked what we wanted to say about the Youth Champs. The event was launched.

With two months to go, it was still touch and go. How could we possibly identify, invite and get the commitment of the top young sailors from around the country?

Wearing two hats now, the solution was at hand. Leverage the network of USA Olympians and sailmakers by asking them to identify the 2-3 most accomplished youth sailors in their area. Since, as USOYC Secretary, I had reams of Olympic Committee letterhead, the next step seemed logical. Compose an "Uncle Sam Wants You" style letter of invitation saying:

"You have been identified as one of the top youth sailors in the country who represent the future of the United States success in the World Youth Championships, as well as Olympic and Intenational classes.

We therefore are pleased to invite you to compete in either Lasers or 470s in the inaugural NAYRU US Youth Sailing Championship at the Sheridan Shore YC in Wilmette IL. You may use this letter with your yacht club or YRA to help secure sponsorship and travel funding.

The top 3 finishers in each division shall receive USYOC funding to the Youth Worlds or to World and National Class Champs.

Be assured that everyone will return home a winner. Buddy Melges, Dave Ullman, Bruce Goldsmith, Bruce Kirby and Manton Scott are just some of the world class sailors who will be there to observe, video, critique and discuss your performance and convey their racing experience every evening after racing.

Housing and food is arranged at no charge for all contestants. 8 new 470s are available for purchase. Other 470s as well as Lasers are available for charter."

Lasers numbered only about 6,000 hulls at the time. We had a 100% acceptance. Only 2 of the 120 youth identified were unable to attend. One was a Laser sailor from NJ who had broken his leg. He wanted to sail with a cast, but the doctor said no. The other was the top freshman, single-handed sailor in New England, a cadet at the Coast Guard Academy in New London. I argued with the Commandant of the Academy for an hour as to why this cadet's attendance at the Youths would be better for him and the USCG than his cruising on the bark EAGLE... without success.

That's how it all came about. The Sheridan Shore YC membership pitched in. The 5-star bagged lunches were all donated... delicious PB&J on Roman Meal, an apple, drinks and a SuperScrunch candy bar.



From this start in June 1973, there are at least 120 other versions of the story that has become part of this country's sailing lore. The United States Youth Championship was born and the rest is History.