



A Nation Sails

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

HERITAGE

Stuart, like many a Kiwi, started young. A tradition passed down to him and that he has in turn passed down to his sons. He is a member of the world-renowned Royal Yacht Squadron, New Zealand's most senior sailing club.

"From the age of two and a half, I remember there was a boat on my front lawn," says Steve Burrett, the Squadron's commodore. "My father was a member of the club many years ago, and he enrolled my brother and me as cadets. I've been here ever since." Now his children too, have the boating bug.

There's a real majesty about the Squadron building, a sense of history, an atmosphere of gravitas. Resting on the shore of Westhaven, its panes afford a spectacular vista of Auckland's enchanting harbour. The best view in the city, says Steve. It may well be. A host of oak cabinets house countless trophies that shimmer and sparkle, bearing testament to the organisation's glories past and present. I am proudly informed by the commodore that it is the only club to have won every major sailing honour there is.

Under the Royal Yacht Squadron's burgee, in 1995 the legendary Sir Peter Blake led Team New Zealand to the nation's first America's Cup success.

"Sailing is my sanity," says Stuart Reed. "It's my relief, my release, my relaxation. The only place I can feel totally at ease." He captures the essence of the Kiwi love affair with the sea. From the ancient Polynesian settlers through to the age of European exploration and the myriad modern-day sporting triumphs, this isolated island nation has housed ocean-conquering greats, its relatively small size belying its sea-faring might.

Five years later, they became the first team outside the States to successfully defend what is the oldest existing trophy in international sport. Others on display include the Whitbread, the Admiral's and Kenwood Cups, the Champagne Mumm World Cup and the Sydney to Hobart Race. At last year's Olympics, Squadron members Polly Powrie and Jo Aleh brought home gold and since 1987 a youth programme has been in place to hone the skills of further champions.

Adorning the panelled ballroom walls are half models of New Zealand's most iconic vessels such as the *Endeavour*, *Rainbow* and *Steinlager 2*. The committee room is lined with photos of past commodores



Images: Mirabella V by Ron Holland Design

Ron Holland’s record-breaking designs have won a host of trophies worldwide. *Whirlwind XII* was the first ever 100-foot-plus super-yacht and the 247-foot *Mirabella V* is the largest sloop in existence

dating from the late 1800s and beneath each one sit images of their beloved boats. Steve points to the spot that waits to immortalise him, but he’s not ready to hand over the reins just yet.

“One of the great things about being involved with a club like this, aside from the spectacular yachts,” he says, “is that you get to meet such fantastic people. People that you wouldn’t normally get the chance to meet.”

One such member is the brains behind some of those most spectacular of yachts, Ron Holland.

DESIGN

The Yacht Research Unit of Auckland University is a global leader. In 2008 it was appointed Team New Zealand’s Official Scientific Advisor, having played a leading role in their America’s Cup triumphs. The university now offers a Master’s degree in Yacht Engineering and students the chance to learn from one of the world’s very best. He’s excited to be a part of it.

“New Zealand has created an enviable international reputation in all aspects of sailing,” says Ron Holland. “This degree links into the positive position that New Zealand has achieved and

as far as I am aware, no other facilities teach a module on the specific subject of super-yacht design.”

Ron Holland’s record-breaking designs have won a host of trophies worldwide. *Whirlwind XII* was the first ever 100-foot-plus modern super-yacht and the 247-foot *Mirabella V* is the largest sloop in existence. He has been commissioned by the globe’s elite to create both floating and motorised palaces and designed Morning Cloud for British Prime Minister Edward Heath. I ask him how much input his customers have.

“Sailing yacht owners are very involved down to the last detail, the power ones less so. The sailors have often grown up through a range of boats from small to large, whereas the powerboat guys tend to be very wealthy and buy one just like you’d buy a car.”

When travelling the world’s harbours, Holland still gets a real kick from catching a glimpse of his boats, especially any long forgotten designs. He was pleased to recently discover that *White Rabbit*, the first he built as an apprentice in Auckland in the mid-60s, is still floating, and intends to track down “the little bit of history” next time he’s in the area. The industry, thanks in no small part to Ron, has since changed beyond all recognition.

“In the last 15 years the yachts have got bigger than we could’ve imagined,” he says. “When I designed my first 100-footer, we thought that would be the ultimate, but then came the *Mirabella V*. Though, bigger isn’t necessarily always better. There’s a trend now for smaller boats as people want to reduce the size of their crew and simplify their sailing lives.”

Holland, now 66, has been sailing for as long as he can remember, embarking on offshore Pacific voyages in his early teens. In the late 60s, he moved to San Francisco to further his maritime dreams.

“You can imagine what that was like! For a 20-year-old Kiwi arriving there in 1968 it was pretty scary.”

Did you make the most of it?

“I was too conservative to make the most of it!” he laughs. “But I certainly know about the Grateful Dead.”

A world championship trophy for a 1973 design gave Holland the chance to start up his own studio. He did so in Ireland and remained there for nearly 40 years. His reputation – and customer list – boomed.

“Each project is driven by the client,” he says. “They all want something different and it’s always a great challenge for me.

My approach has always been driven by my competitive experience."

Last year, he relocated his eponymous company to Vancouver, but for all his globetrotting still considers New Zealand as one of the top sailing spots.

"The north island, especially around the Bay of Islands, is pretty unique," he says. "It's definitely special."

SAILING BLIND

Perhaps the most inspirational members of the Royal Yacht Squadron are a group I meet during preparations of their defence of a world title due to take place in Japan. These are, however, sailors with a difference. They can't see where they're going. What they lack in sight, they more than make up for in skill, determination and enthusiasm and are also very, very funny guys.

When back on dry land, Dick Lancaster, Chairman of Blind Sailing New Zealand, is a keen horseman: "I'll be riding with friends and when we come to a steep hill they'll all get off to decide whether or not to walk down, but I just give my horse a kick and away I go! You can't frighten me. I don't know what the hell's going on!"

"I'm forever telling my wife," adds Vice Chairman Dave Allerton, "that she looks as good as the day that I married her!"

The Blind Sailing World Championships have been going for over 20 years, and this team is among the most successful in its history. Dave Allerton has sailed all his life. He began to lose his sight in 2001 and though he is still able to make out undetailed outlines, his vision is in a state of terminal deterioration. Dave discovered the team through the Blind Foundation, it gave him a new lease of life but he says some people tried to wrap him in cotton wool. They'd tell him he shouldn't sail.

"Once you get a disability you like to be faced with a challenge," says Dick.



Above: Steve Burrett, Commodore of the Royal Yacht Squadron

"We've been affected at a time in our lives when we're still active and keen to get out there. If you say to a blindy, 'you can't do that', then it's a case of 'well you just watch me.'"

Interestingly, Dave says blindness has made him a more skilled sailor and other members of the team agree. They appreciate the sport on a whole new level. They have learnt to sense changes in pressure, read the feel and movement of the boats, and, most importantly, listen. Communication is the key to their success. For safety reasons, each vessel does have a sighted tactician and crew member on board, though they are not allowed to be professional sailors and are forbidden from aiding with the sailing duties.

"We like to think that we can do it all on our own, but we are still dependent on the sighted guys," Dick tells me.

The sighted help are all volunteers. The team are keen to express their gratitude to them and also to those who have donated funds and loaned their boats. Though, Dick says with a smile, they could always do with some more. World Championships aside, the team's long-term goal is to have the sport embraced by the Paralympics and they're currently lobbying for inclusion in the 2020 games.

Their fearlessness, zest and can-do attitude are an absolute inspiration. Best of luck to them.

To offer your time, funding or lend a boat to the team, email dicklancaster@farmside.co.nz

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