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Paul Elvstrom - Sailing's true Champion

by Ralph Roberts on 8 Dec



Paul Elvstrøm (DEN) training ahead of the 1960 Olympics . . .

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Ralph Roberts (NZL) competed with Paul Elvstrom in the 1960 Olympics in the singlehanded Finn class.

By then Elvstrom was the winner of three successive Olympic Gold Medals and was chasing his fourth in Rome, on his way to what he believed could be six Olympic Gold medals in successive Olympics. Roberts was sailing in his first Olympics and first met The Great Dane during their build up to that Olympic regatta in Europe in 1958, and the start of a friendship which lasted for their lifetimes.

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Back in 1958, I had an opportunity to go to England as a crew to sail on an International 14 footer for the International teams racing championship and then compete (and win) for the famous blue ribbon event the Prince of Wales Cup Championship at Cowes on the Isle of Wight in the UK.



International 14 Ft. Dinghy Team Races in Cowes, Isle of Wight, UK. 1958
L-R: Gerald Parks, Geoff Smale (NZ), Bud Whittaker, (CAN), "Bungy" McCrae (NZ), Uffa Fox (UK), Harry Jemmet (CAN), Jim Stephens (CAN), Ian Pryde (NZ), ???, Bruce Kirby (CAN), Stewart Morris (UK), Michael Pope (UK), Mike Peacock (UK), Ray Simich (NZ), Keith Shackleton (UK), Ralph Roberts (NZ), Doug Roberts (CAN), Ron Watson (NZ), Harvey Bongard (CAN), Paul Henderson (CAN) © . .

I was at the time very keen on Finn sailing. The previous February I had been racing on Sydney harbour against the top Australian Finn sailors and winning most of the races. One of the keen Australian Finn Sailors, the late Colin Ryrie of the Melbourne Olympic fame said to me that I should think about going to Europe to race. Not much chance there I said, it is too costly.

In those days money for me was very tight. I had only just concluded all my electrical exam papers.

I had only been back home in Takapuna a week when I was asked to become a crew member on an international 14 footer for the New Zealand team trials to go to Cowes. Geoff Smale and I became the first qualifier in the New Zealand three boat team.

This changed the whole picture for me and I started dreaming that I also could compete in some Finn regattas in Europe before I was needed to be in England. Colin Ryrie enthusiastically wrote to me when he heard about us winning the International 14 NZ

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top Finn sailors before the Rome Olympic Games.



Constantine II of Greece and Paul Elvstrøm (right) 1960 Olympics, Rome

Time was against me, it was already Easter and there was not enough time to ship my Finn to Europe and the cost was prohibitive. I wrote many letters inquiring about chartering a Finn, I received a reply that a Belgian Finn sailor would kindly lend me his boat. With a footnote, 'I haven't used my boat for two years since our baby boy arrived. It would require you to bring new ropes, maybe some fittings need to be changed, toe straps and you will need to repair the beach trailer etc. please bring your sail.'

The 1958 Finn Gold Cup was to be held off the Belgium seaport of Zeebrugge in early May.

I arrived at Brussels airport after flying for three days such was the speed of planes in those days when flying from country to country around the world. I was met at the airport and driven to the Royal Belgium Yacht Club in Zeebrugge and given a bunk on keel boat to sleep on. I had no manager or coach with me.

The following morning my new Belgian friend came and took me to pick up my Finn. Yes it indeed did need a lot of work to be done but the boat was in good condition. I repaired the beach trailer, then started working on cleaning the hull bottom and

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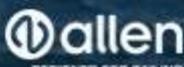
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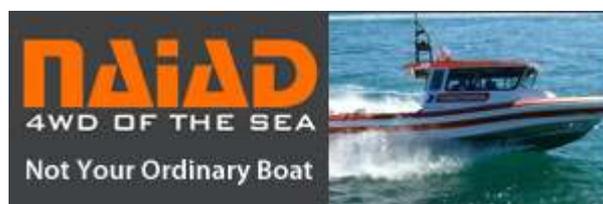


Winner of four consecutive Gold medals - Paul Elvstrom (DEN)

By mid afternoon most of the 80 plus sailors had arrived and were sizing up their opposition. I could hear the banter of voices but I only spoke English, everyone else seemed to me to be speaking anything but English. I kept my head down working away replacing equipment and getting the Finn ready for it's measurement the next morning.

Late in the afternoon I had a tap on my shoulder by a big man who spoke to me in broken English. "Do you need a hand I can help you make this Finn go faster". To my surprise it was Paul Elvstrom , then triple Olympic Gold medalist from Denmark, of whom I had only previously seen a photo.

Paul said to me, 'I help you on one condition that we must train together before racing each day. I sail hard



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These words still ring in my ears some 58 years later.
Two hours later we concluded the jobs that needed to be finished.

I was like a kid in a candy shop having the Olympic Champion not only offering but helping me.



Paul Elvstrøm 1960 - The big jerseys were not worn to keep warm.

That night back on the boat, I remember writing to my family about how lucky I was not only to have met the great Paul Elvstrom but for him to come over and help me. What an experience.

During the Finn Gold Cup so many of the sailors helped me pull my boat up and down the very steep Zeebrugge ramps and I was overjoyed with my new found Finn friends many of whom I still Skype with today.

Right to the end Paul and I regularly Skype and talk about old times plus what our grandchildren doing and they regularly come to New Zealand to stay with us.

Many people ask me what has made the Finn Class such a great class . When you have a champion who leads by example like Paul did that day, and of course on many other days you can understand why the Class is the strongest Olympic class in the world.

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Delah Roberts Talking New Zealand 1/21/20



Paul Elvstrom was one of the first group of signatories into the SA Sailing Hall of Fame.

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