



## Paul Elvstrom: An Example of Excellence

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*Legendary Danish yachtsman Paul Elvstrom died in his sleep at the age of 88 years on December 7, 2016. Joe Cooper shares the impact 'The Great Dane' had on a young Aussie sailor..*

For sailors of a certain age and those of a highly competitive nature, Elvstrom was The Signature Sailor of the day. I had known of his brilliance since perhaps the mid 1960's when I first started racing and my dad bought me that little booklet 'Elvstrom explains the Yacht Racing Rules', the one with the little boats in the plastic cover. Those little boats helped me navigate the seemingly impenetrable world of racing rules, as a child sailing a Sabot and later as teenager in Lasers first and then, ultimately the Finn.

I was lured into sailing a Finn for the first time by a local Sydney notable and when spending time at his house after sailing, was exposed to the other books Elvstrom had written. I forget the titles at the moment, but there was one on setting up the boat, full of pictures on mast bend, sail shape, how to steer, set kites, a compendium of sailing racing knowledge and experience. My favorite book though was the autobiography of sorts written with Richard Creagh-Osborn about Elvstrom's life to date; I was reading it in the mid to late 1970's.

Tony James, my notable mate and successful Finn sailor in his own right, was of the opinion that if I put my mind to it, I might be the Australian Finn Rep in 1980. Accordingly I soaked up the pictures of Elvstrom working on, sailing in and looking at, sails, made by him, on his Finn while it was hauled up on the beach. I ran harder and farther, hiked harder and pushed harder to suppress the burning fire in the quads as I approached another time record on the hiking bench. I visualized, or more probably fantasized, I was in a mortal battle to the finish against The Great Dane, a Gold Medal as the prize for excellence and endurance while sailing and if he could keep hiking, well I was going to, too.

But the most impressive image was of him practicing in Denmark, after hauling his boat out over the ice flows in the dead of winter. This in the days before wet, or dry, suits, when wool was the warm clothing of choice, simply because that was all there was. This was also the time when sailors were allowed to wear 20 kg. of weight while sailing. Think if you will, about sailing a Finn with your 3 to 4 year old on your back, in freezing temps, alone and no coach RIBs in sight. This was a classic lesson in self-reliance.

It was probably this picture more than any other that lit in me the endless search for getting better, particularly in the Finn. His famous comment, on winning and respect, was in essence a metaphor for his life, and a great suggestion for all lives, one that stuck to me like a composite part made in an autoclave. 'Try as hard as you can, and be a nice person'. Like many of the lessons we learn from sailing, it was a simple concept that applies to all aspects of our lives. This phrase is written on the wall in the Dr. Wallace Junior Sailing Center at Sail Newport in Newport, RI.

In the spring, several high schools sail out of this building. I bring this phrase to the attention of my team members pretty regularly. One day I was talking to my team about Elvstrom and realized their

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faces were blank. On inquiring who knew the name Paul Elvstrom, I was greeted, not surprisingly with blank stares. I gave a thumbnail sketch of the man and his life in sailing and what he had brought to the game and his impact on my generation of competitive sailors, noting that it had taken around 40 years for his four gold medal streak in Sailing to be equaled.

To stick with the sailing metaphors, his passing is a bit like an ocean race where you cannot see the others, but you know they are there somewhere, just over the horizon and their presence will always have an impact on your decisions.

His moniker was 'The Great Dane'. It could just have easily been the Great Person.

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