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# The Great Dane dies at 88 + Video

by Richard Gladwell, [Sail-world.com/nz](http://Sail-world.com/nz) on 7 Dec



Paul Elvstrom - London 1948 Olympic Games. He won his third Gold medal in the Finn class at Melbourne in 1956. He won Gold Medals in the Finn in 1952, 1956 and 1960, and the Firefly (singlehander) in 1948 Olympics. ISAF ©

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## One of the heroes of sailing, Paul Elvstrøm (DEN) has died at the age of 88 years.

Known as the Great Dane, and winner of four Olympic Gold Medals, Elvstrøm put a footprint on the sport like no other.

While there have been some inspiring sailors who have won a similar number of Olympic medals, none in the



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making a business from sailing.

Paul Elvstrøm competed in eight Olympic Games from 1948 to 1988, winning Gold Medals in 1948, 1952, 1956 and 1960 in the singlehanded class - being the singlehanded Firefly at the 1948 Olympics in London, and then in the new singlehanded Finn class in 1952 (Helsinki), 1956 (Melbourne) and 1960 (Rome).



Paul Elvstrøm was one of the first group of six inductees into the ISAF Sailing Hall of Fame.

He was one of only six athletes to win consecutive Gold Medals at four Olympics, which puts him in the same league as Michael Phelps, Carl Lewis, and Ben Ainslie. He competed in two additional Olympics in the Tornado catamaran with his daughter Trine, coming close to winning a Bronze medal in the 1984 Olympics (Long Beach).

Elvstrøm's belief was that after 1948 he could go on to win six Gold Medals, but the nervous intensity of Olympic competition led him to make the decision to leave the intensely competitive levels of the sport, bringing a halt to his Olympic campaigns until 1984.

Born on February 25, 1928, in a house overlooking the sound between Denmark and Sweden. His father was a sea captain but died when Elvstrøm was young, and he

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sister. A second brother died at the age of five years when he tragically fell off the sea wall in front of the family home. He claimed in his book *Elvstrøm Speaks on Yacht Racing* to be 'word blind' and could not read or write when he was at school.



Paul Elvstrøm at the helm of his Finn in 1960.

He started sailing as a crew in a club fleet of small clinker keelboats, before believing he could do better and took over the helm. 'The only interest I had was in sailing fast,' he said of his school days. 'I was very bad in school,' he added. 'The teacher knew that if I was not at school, I was sailing.'

A neighbour bought him an Oslo dinghy, on the pretense that he wanted Elvstrøm to teach him how to sail, but in reality, it was because he thought Elvstrøm needed a boat and his mother was too poor to be able to afford one.

Elvstrøm was just 20 years old when he won his first Gold Medal in the first Olympics since World War II.

He went on like some others since to firstly start manufacturing his own sails and then expanding that into what became known as Elvstrøm Sails. That enterprise then spread into boat and equipment manufacture - typified by the development of the Elvstrøm self-bailer which is still in widespread use.





Paul Elvstrøm (DEN) winner of four Olympic Gold medals

He home-developed many other sailing innovations - stacking straps which made hiking much easier, self-jamming cleats, boom vang. Sailing at that time was in an era of quite dramatic change into the current sport of dinghy sailing, which in turn slowly took over Olympic sailing which had been the domain of keelboats.

Realising that physical fitness and constant practice were the essentials to winning, Elvstrøm cut a trench through the ice in front of his home so that he could sail year round, following large ships through into ice-free water so he could train. The development of a hiking bench was another Elvstrøm response to being able to physically train when he was not sailing.

This era was typified by home-made fittings and engineering innovation which led to mass production and Elvstrøm led this period of change.

The era was also typified by sailor-driven innovation by the winners in the sport developing products and promoting these to others in the sport. One-design was not as it is today with some development being permitted, such as in the mast and sail combinations in the then new Finn class.

Between Olympic campaigns, Elvstrøm branched into many classes all with a combination of success, innovation, and learning.

This included keelboats, C-class catamarans, international and Olympic classes, off-shore racers and many more. Elvstrøm won World Championships in Snipes, Stars, Soling, Finns, Flying Dutchman and 5.5 classes often within the same year and demonstrating his prowess across all disciplines from dinghies to keelboats.



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Paul Elvstrøm trapezing and helming his 505 at the World Championships in Adelaide in 1962 with Pip Pearson, a local sailor he picked up off the beach. They finished a close second.

In the 505 dinghy, he sailed one world championship as a trapezing skipper rather than the crew using the trapeze wire.

In that regatta his regular crew had to leave just before the regatta began due to a family bereavement. Elvstrøm picked up local sailor Pip Pearson from the beach and came within an ace of winning placing second behind (Sir) Jim Hardy. In the final race they had a four way contest with Larry Marks (GBR), John Cuneo (AUS) and Jim Hardy (AUS). Elvstrøm had to win with Hardy worse than 4th and Cuneo worse than sixth. Elvstrøm was leading with Hardy initially in 22nd. 'But he had fantastic speed and he came up faster and faster and I could do nothing. Finally he finished second but I was so pleased that such a good competitor and such a nice person could have beaten me.'

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year Elvstrøm was able to win two world championships and came close in a third.

When the then IYRU - now rebadged as ISAF/World Sailing announced their intention to hold trials to select a new, possible Olympic singlehander, Elvstrøm devised a dinghy, the Trapez, that could be sailed as either a singlehander with the helm on the trapeze or with a second rig become a two person boat with a jib and trapezing crew. The trapezing helm concept was taken up by the Bob Miller (Ben Lexcen) designed Contender which went on to win the second set of trials.



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1956 Olympic Games - Melbourne - Finn Medal Ceremony



Medallists in the Finn Monotype. From left : 2nd A.Nelis (BEL), 1st P.Elvstrom (DEN) and 3rd J.Marvin(USA).  
Copyright IOC / 1956 Olympic Report

1956 Olympic Medal presentation - Paul Elvstrøm (DEN)

Elvstrøm had a very strong sailing ethic of perfection and preparation, hours of practice, innovative thinking and competing intensely on the water against people who were always his friends off the water. These included his compatriots Helmer Pedersen and Hans Fogh, who left for New Zealand and Canada respectively, both establishing their own sailmaking businesses and winning Olympic Gold and Bronze medals respectively for their adopted countries (Fogh also won a Silver Medal for Denmark in the 1960 Olympics).

Paul Elvstrøm died in his sleep at his home in Hellerup, Denmark. His wife Anna pre-deceased him by three years; he is survived by four daughters Pia, Stine, Gitte and Trine.

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epitaph.



Paul Elvstrøm sailing his new Finn at the age of 70 years.



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