

## **On The Water: These Cats can flat-out run**

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**By G. PATRICK PAWLING**

They're just sailboats. Sailboats come and go. And so it was with a tiny and obscure class of wood boat called the A-Cat. Back in the 1970s they were tired, on their way out — leaking, peeling and ready for the shelf. Then something went wrong. They lived.

How they came back is the story of why some people fall in love with sailboats as much as they fall in love with sailing. And there is a difference.

Owning a boat, as opposed to just jumping in and using one, can be expensive and exasperating. And when you're talking about wood, that can be a whole different category of pain. But an A-Cat? People talk about A-Cats the way older folks talk about Benny Goodman, the way surfers talk about a hurricane swell, the way Baby Boomers talk about the Good Old Days when they actually made money in the NASDAQ. A-Cats dig in, somehow. How else to explain the fact that there are nine of them now?

Roy Wilkins owns part of one. He's the women's soccer coach at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and a special-ed teacher in Toms River. There's something about him that suggests John Madden, but less hyper.

Wilkins took me out on his new A-Cat the other day. Spy II, she's called. The original Spy, built in 1924, which Wilkins also owned, has been donated to the Toms River Seaport Society, where she will be kept on land for display and thus will never again be at risk for sinking, which probably would have happened many times over late in her life except for a real strong pump working the bilge.

Some people look at a wood boat and say, "Gorgeous. Like a piece of fine furniture." Spy II isn't like that. As her builder said, she's more like a living thing — curvy and sexy, but athletic as an Olympian. Spy II is born to run, which only makes sense because A-Cats are found only in New Jersey.

Listen to Gary Stewart, one of Spy II's owners:

"It sounds corny, but when I first looked at these things I thought they were the most beautiful things I had ever seen. And I said, 'Some day I'm going to own an A-Cat.' They're gorgeous. To sail one of these boats is an honor."

It all goes back to July 4, 1922, when a Philadelphia judge raced a new kind of boat for the first time. Her name was Mary Ann, named after the judge's wife. She had been built for one purpose: To win the Barnegat Bay Challenge Cup, which remains the oldest yachting trophy in the United States, going back to 1871.

Mary Ann was a catboat and more — she had the characteristic forward mast, with a single triangular sail, a tiller and a retractable centerboard for the shallow bay, but unlike the workmanlike catboat she was made only to go fast. Her sail was huge.

The first time she raced she smoked 'em. In fact she won every race that year, dominating so

completely that the catboat fleet had to be broken up into two classes. The older boats went into the "B" class and Mary Ann — and the other boats being built like her — went into the "A" fleet. Thus was born the A-Cat, a most perfect boat for Barnegat Bay: Shallow draft, fast, easy to handle, beamy and just plain fun.

With the exception of World War II, the boats raced continually — weekends, nights, whatever. But by the 1970s they were tired. Wilkins bought the original Spy in 1978, when there were only four on the planet. Thus he helped keep the tradition alive. But it wasn't a huge sacrifice. He was having a blast.

But all the remaining A-Cats, including his, were on life support. Then in 1980, one of the A-Cat angels made a decision. Nelson Hartranft, who had owned four of the boats, ordered a new one built. It rolled out of the boatyard in '82, and was the first new A-Cat since 1925. Wasp, she's called. That was the spark. Soon the fire was out of control. Four other boats were restored between 1980 and 1988. Now there are nine, and that's a fairly big thing, considering they cost about \$200,000 each. They're wood, don't forget, and building them requires expensive craftsmanship and materials, right down to the Sitka spruce that goes into the 49-foot masts and 28-foot booms.

For Wilkins, the new Spy started with something everybody wants: a phone call from a nice man with a lot of money. His name is Peter Kellogg. He made his money during the bull market, and he had raced A-Cats when he was in his 20s. Kellogg had an interest in keeping the A-Cat tradition alive. The call lasted maybe two minutes. When it was over Wilkins had an offer: If you form a syndicate, Kellogg said, I'll help you build a new Spy. So Wilkins started making his own phone calls, which all contained this phrase: "It's gonna cost you some dough ..."

Build her they did. She's 28 feet, standard for an A-Cat, and seductive. There's no other way to describe her. Wilkins likes to use her as a party platform. That is, he likes to bring people out who haven't sailed and watch their eyes get THIS BIG.

"I took out a guy who was a pro soccer player for 20 years, and he came back saying, 'I've never seen anything so intense in my life! I could NEVER do that! That was SO INTENSE,'" Wilkins said.

But that's what love is like. It hits hard and leaves you breathless.

"This is the coolest thing I've ever been involved with," said Stewart. "Hey, it's only money."

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