

Barnegat Bay's Age

By balancing power and grace, and closely guarding their old-school charm, the Barnegat Bay A Cats are thriving 80 years after they first started racing.



The numbers—28-foot boom, 48-foot mast, and 688-square-foot main—speak of raw power and speed. However, such dimensions don't belong to the latest experimental sportboat or skiff; rather they describe the A Cat, a majestic 28-foot wooden catboat that has ruled the shallow waters of Barnegat Bay, N.J., for more than 80 years and continues to thrill local racers today.

The A Cat is in the midst of a 21st-century rebirth, with five new boats launched since 2001. Last summer, 10 raced for the

2004 Barnegat Bay Yacht Racing Association season championship, and as many as 12 may hit the starting line next summer. This is no small achievement considering a new A Cat takes roughly 4,000 hours to build, costs \$250,000, and requires a crew of seven to 10 to campaign.

With varnished spars, and sails with letters or symbols rather than numbers, A Cats appeal to racers' romantic side. Many owners were first drawn to the boats as children, marveling at their size and speed. Others value the tradition; the class races for a bevy of old trophies including the

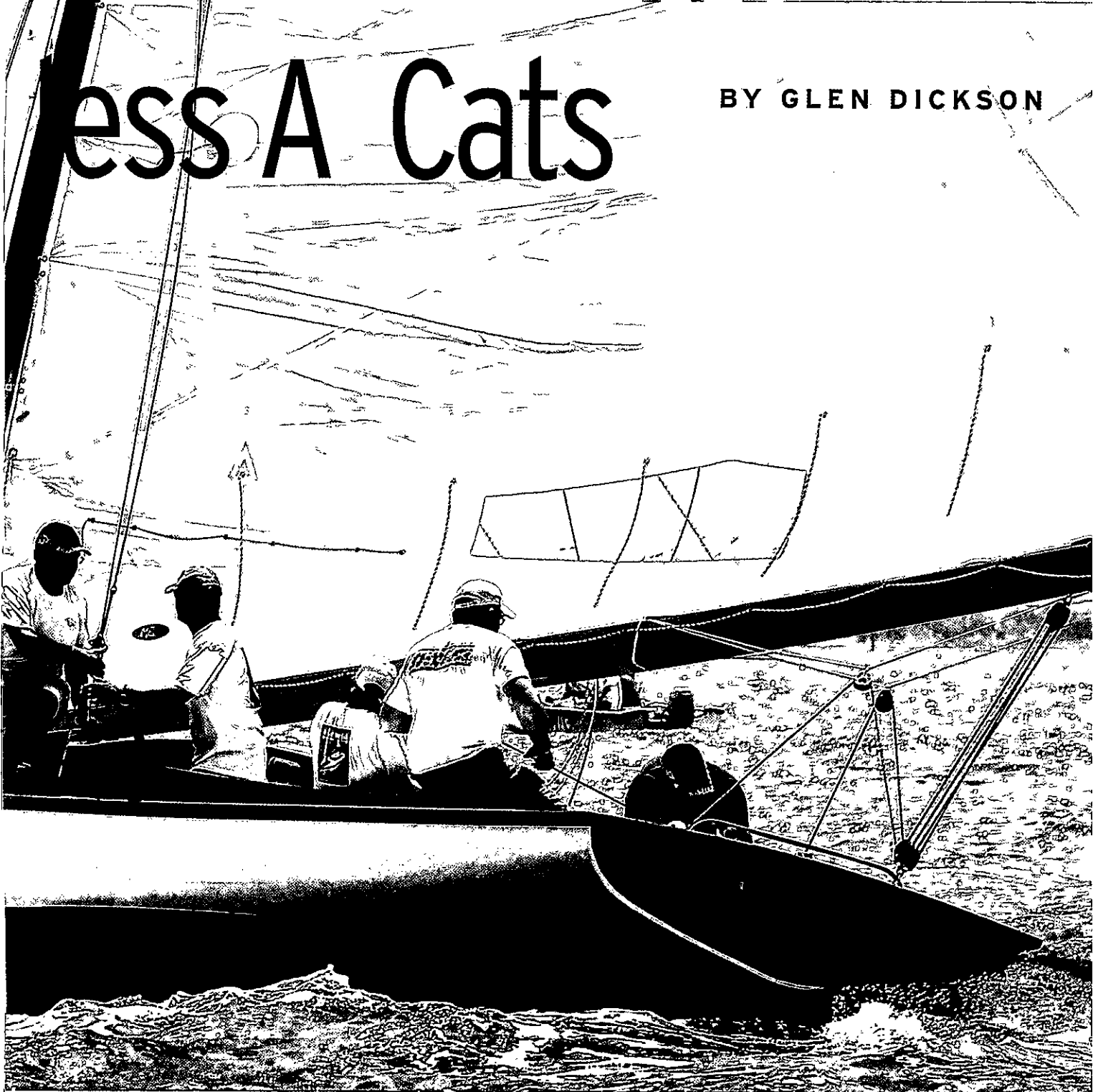
Toms River Challenge Cup, which began in 1871 and is touted as the oldest perpetual sailing trophy in the United States.

"Everybody follows the fleet, and everybody on the Bay has sailed on one once in his life," says Wall Street investor Peter Kellogg, 62, who began sailing A Cats as a teenager and now campaigns *Torch*.

While the emphasis in other classes is on individual skippers, fans of the A Cat ask which boat won. "Some of these boats have been around for 80 years, while the skippers only sail them for a few years," says Kellogg. "So the skipper's not important."

Less A Cats

BY GLEN DICKSON



Besides history, the A Cat has something more elemental going for it: the boats are a thrill to sail. Because they're heavy—the minimum racing weight is 4,700 pounds—you don't realize how fast the boat is plowing through the chop until you find yourself cruising past every class on the BBYRA course except the 28-foot E Scows. In a breeze, the A Cat is a beast, requiring a stout trimmer to tend the main—and an assistant for starts, jibes, and mark roundings—and an equally strong skipper to fight the boat's natural weather helm. Despite their heft,

A Cats can capsize, and jibing successfully in heavy air requires equal parts faith and good boathandling.

"It's not for a weak person," says fleet captain Roy Wilkins. "With an A Cat on a reach, it's two hands on the tiller." Wilkins started racing A Cats in 1978.

As with most traditional Marconi rigs, there is no effective way to depower an A Cat main besides reefing. There's no vang or adjustable traveler, and the running backstays mainly prevent the rig from toppling forward downwind. So the helmsman and mainsheet trimmer have

Nelson Hartranft's *Wasp* and Peter Kellogg's *Torch* race in close quarters on New Jersey's Barnegat Bay. *Wasp*, built from 1980 to 1982, was the only A Cat built between 1925 and 1991. Since 1991, eight have been built, including *Torch* in 2002.

to work in concert to keep the boat tracking. Adding extra ballast through crew weight can help keep the boat on its feet, but most teams don't go much beyond eight crewmembers because the deck-sweeping boom requires forward crew to run around the mast during tacks and jibes, and there is a practical limit to how



many bodies can make that trip—about four. In big breeze downwind, weight aft will keep the boat from nose-diving. Only the forward-most crew member, who serves as a “human vang” by sitting on the boom, is allowed near the mast.

The helmsman usually sits in the cockpit to battle the tiller, feet braced against the centerboard trunk or foot chocks. From that vantage point all one can see is the sail, so the driver depends heavily on the tactician and mainsheet trimmer to call tactics and warn of oncoming traffic. “When you’re sitting in the boat, you can’t see what’s going on,” says *Raven* skipper Pete Stagaard. “When someone says another boat’s coming, you stand and look up. Then you go back in your little hole.”

The A Cat’s power is borne mainly by its 48-foot Sitka spruce mast, which weighs slightly less than 200 pounds rigged and is supported by two forestays, upper and lower shrouds and upper and lower running backstays. The mast comes under incredible compression loads, particularly when the boat inevitably stuffs its bow while running in Barnegat Bay’s close chop. Wilkins has seen four masts break in his A Cat tenure aboard *SPY* and *SPY II*. With a new A Cat mast costing \$16,000 and requiring 200 hours to build, dumping the rig is no small matter. Class rules mandate that racing is cancelled in sustained winds of 20 mph and races in progress are shortened or abandoned when the winds reach 24 mph or greater.

Racing Through History

The A Cat came to life in 1922 with the launch of *Mary Ann*, a racing machine built by Charles McKeehan, a federal judge from Philadelphia, solely to defeat cat-rigged workboats in the Challenge Cup and other local trophy races. The *Mary Ann* blew away the competition, and six more boats of similar design were built by 1925. Three were eventually lost to fire or neglect, leaving *Mary Ann*, *Bat*, *SPY* (an acronym for Seaside Park Yacht), and *Lotus* to fight amongst themselves for nearly six decades.

Another A Cat wouldn’t be built until 1980, when Nelson Hartranft of Ocean Gate (N.J.) YC commissioned David Beaton & Sons, of West Mantoloking, N.J., to build *Wasp*. After admiring A Cats as a young sneakbox sailor in the late ’40s, Hartranft bought *SPY* in 1974. “It leaked like a sieve,” says Hartranft, who remembers how his wife and her friend spent entire races down below in the cabin working a galvanized pump. Throughout the ’70s, he bought and repaired each of the four surviving boats, then sold them cheap on the condition that the new owners maintain and race them.

“The class would have died without him,” says Tom Beaton, who built *Wasp* with his late father and now runs David Beaton & Sons.

While the existing A Cats had been built to the plans of naval architect Charles Mower, Hartranft chose a design by Francis Sweiguth, the architect of the *Star*, for

Peter Kellogg (facing page, at the helm of *Torch* last August) played a significant role in the rebirth of the A Cats. He owns *Torch* and *Vapor* (yellow hull). In 2003, he won his first bay championship aboard *Torch*.

Wasp. Sweiguth had designed *Tamwock*, a fast A Cat from the ’20s, but the boat was destroyed in a fire, and the plans had been lost until a local sailer found them in an old chest of drawers in an antique shop and gave them to Hartranft. *Wasp* was launched in 1982 and dominated for several seasons. “Everybody else was bailing,” he says, “and we weren’t.”

The success of *Wasp* convinced the owners of the four original boats to look into renovations. *SPY* and *Mary Ann* were rebuilt by new owners and both found renewed success. The badly rotted *Bat* was saved by a different method. Then-owners Mike Frankovich and Bob Lostrum glassed both sides of the hull, essentially creating a fiberglass boat with a cedar core. *Bat* was now not only dry, but much lighter, and with the experienced Frankovich driving, it won the BBYRA championship in 1990 and 1991.

The next A Cat to surface after *Wasp* was Kellogg’s *Tamwock*, launched in 1991. Kellogg had owned and raced *Lotus* in the ’60s, but left the class when he was 28. He became involved again by aiding in the restoration of *Mary Ann*, and commissioned the wooden boat workshop at the Philadelphia Maritime Museum (now part of the Independence Seaport Museum) to build him a new A Cat.

The new *Tamwock* was a Mower design, built to traditional specifications. She was beautiful, but too heavy to be competitive except in strong breezes. So Kellogg asked *Tamwock* builder John Brady to build another boat, and *Vapor* was launched in 1994. Brady chose the Mower design again, mainly because Beaton was already building a Sweisguth A Cat for Dr. Bill Fortenbaugh.

Fortenbaugh, a classics professor at Rutgers University and an accomplished E Scow racer, was looking for a "retirement boat." Now 68, he admits he didn't know what he was getting into when he launched *Ghost* in 1994. "I wanted a boat that was slower," he says. "I had no idea of the forces, and I didn't know how much strength it took to sail one."

Upwind action at the 2004 A Cat Worlds in October, with Bill Fortenbaugh's *Ghost* crossing astern of (left to right) *Lightning*, *Raven*, and *SPY II*.

helmsman Gary Stewart, a former collegiate All-American at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. Kellogg approached Wilkins with a sweet deal: *SPY* would be donated to the Toms River Seaport Society & Museum for display and Brady would build Wilkins a new A Cat, with Kellogg supplying the bulk of the financing. While the new boat would technical-

possible, hoping to drive some change in the class.

A Wooden-Box Rule

Brady's gambit worked. In fall 2001, A Cat owners met at Beaton's to weigh all the boats, and as suspected, *SPY II* was the lightweight at 4,100 pounds—more than 1,000 pounds lighter than the heaviest

boat, *Tamwock*. After consulting with naval architect Jim Teeters, who agreed that weight was the critical issue to performance, the fleet agreed to set a minimum racing "wet" weight in the middle—4,700 pounds—and boats that were light would have to add lead and structural additions as required. Since 2001, the A Cat fleet has adopted other rules regarding hull construction, rig configuration, lead placement, and running rigging, with the aim of fostering tighter racing.

While there has been some grumbling that advanced construction techniques still give new boats an edge, the 2004 season scores suggest the rules have been successful. After a 10-race series with three discards, only 5 points separated the top four A Cats, and seven boats recorded top-three finishes.

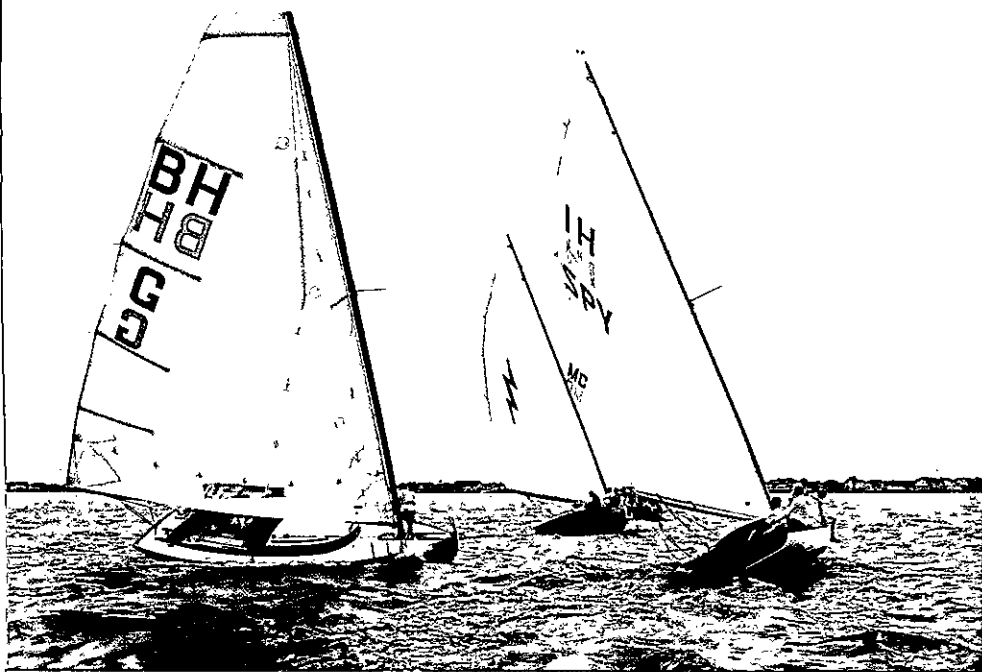
"I think that having the class rules stems the arms race," says Stagaard. "It prohibits anybody from pushing the envelope to make them lighter and faster."

Bill de Rouville, who built Austin Fragomen's 2002 BBYRA champ *Witch*, did a complete rebuild of *Tamwock* to lighten her up, replacing the deck, skeg, centerboard, rudder, mast and cabin top. With A Cat veteran Frankovich driving, *Tamwock* took second in one race and finished a respectable sixth overall.

"She's not up there with the top boats, but she's right in the mix," says de Rouville. "Any day she could have a good day and finish first."

While no new boats are on the immediate horizon, two first-generation A Cats look primed for a comeback. The original A Cat, *Mary Ann*, has been lightened and stiffened and is currently for sale. And *Lotus*, launched in 1925, is also scheduled to be refurbished.

"With *SPY* retired, it's one of only three originals," says Steve Brick. "I feared the person who bought her wouldn't do what's needed. I want to make sure it's done the right way." ♦



After flipping in their first race, Fortenbaugh and his crew learned fast, and *Ghost* swept all its races in 1994, beginning a seven-year BBYRA championship run. *Ghost's* success ended the era of Mower-designed boats. While *Vapor* came close, it could never quite edge *Ghost*, and the next generation of A Cats, which hit the water beginning in 2001, all carry the Sweisguth lines.

One of those new boats is *SPY II*, which has captured two of the last four BBYRA championships. By the late '90s the rebuilt *SPY* had slowed considerably, despite the best efforts of Wilkins and

ly belong to the Independence Seaport Museum, Wilkins would operate and maintain the boat.

Brady set out to build a very fast Sweisguth design, using what he had learned from *Tamwock* and *Vapor*. The new boat launched in 2001 and dominated the BBYRA.

"My focus after *Tamwock* was not history, but to make an A Cat go fast," says Brady. "I think I figured it out." Brady refined *SPY II's* skeg and centerboard design and played with mast position and rake to improve upwind performance. He also intentionally built *SPY II* as light as