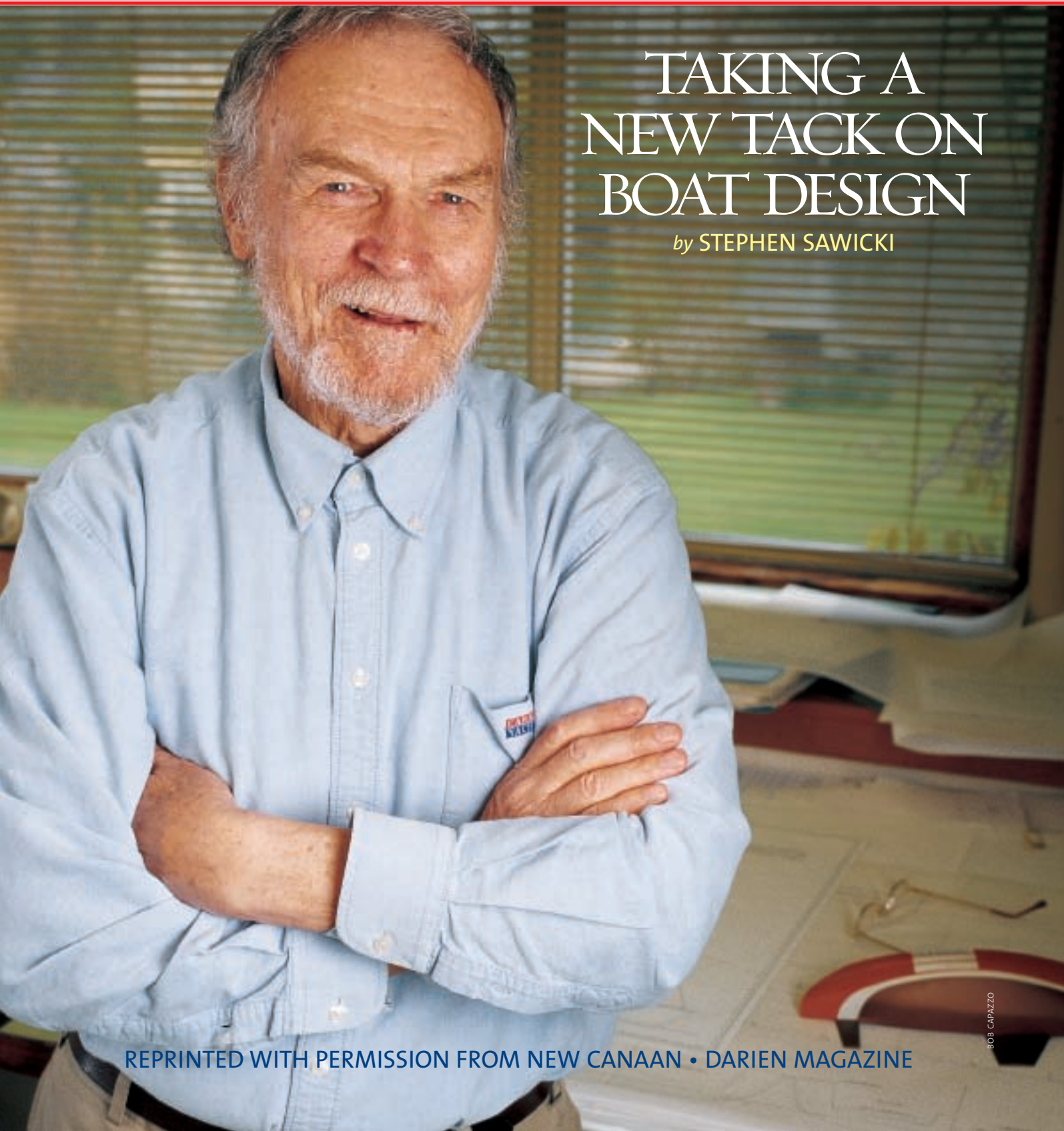


BRUCE KIRBY

TAKING A NEW TACK ON BOAT DESIGN

by STEPHEN SAWICKI



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BOB CAPAZZO

AS A FORMER OLYMPIC COMPETITOR, EDITOR OF A SAILING MAGAZINE AND DESIGNER of more than sixty sailboats, including the popular Laser, Bruce Kirby gets plenty of respect in yachting circles. One trade publication dubbed him “the wizard of Rowayton, Connecticut.” Another referred to him as “the great one.” Among other accolades, he was one of fifty accomplished Canadians invited to Ottawa to meet Queen Elizabeth II three years ago in celebration of her fiftieth year on the throne.

SO IT HAD TO HAVE STUNG that day when, in the midst of a Laser regatta off of Westport, a teenage sailor not only failed to recognize Kirby but treated him like so much flotsam and jetsam. “I called my right of way,” Kirby remembers. “I said, ‘Starboard tack,’ or whatever I called. And he yelled back, ‘If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen!’”

For Kirby the affront was less a blow to his ego than an insulting breach of behavior in a sport that is largely self-policing. “He was just plain breaking the rules and giving me crap verbally,” Bruce says. “Unfortunately, I couldn’t identify him in the heat of the moment. I would have liked to have gotten him on shore and shown him that guys my age aren’t necessarily pansies.”

At age seventy-six Bruce Kirby can still take the heat — in a sailboat if not the kitchen. He broke his hip last year, crashing to his kitchen floor while coming down from a chair after changing a lightbulb. That, combined with a dangerous staph infection that developed after surgery, kept him in dry dock. But only temporarily. “I’m still competing,” Kirby says. “I still race my butt off. I broke my hip and it cost me most of last summer, but I can’t wait to get back into it.”

Although Bruce is not as lithe a sailor as he was in days past, he may only now be hitting full stride at the drafting table. “There’s a lot of stuff that’s crammed in my old headbone that’s paying off now,” he says. “Your eye gets better at it, so that you’re more likely to draw the boat right the first, second or third time rather than keeping at it for weeks before it looks right.”



Bruce Kirby winning the fourth race of the U.S. Nationals in 1975, when 116 boats competed. It was held in Barnegat Bay, New Jersey.

His greatest commercial success, hands down, is the Laser, which in the thirty-five years since its creation has surpassed 182,000 in sales and continues to grow in popularity around the world. Male athletes have raced the Laser in the Olympics since 1996, and women will compete in a smaller-rigged version of the boat beginning with the 2008 games.

Built in five countries, the Laser has earned Kirby between \$4 million and \$5 million, and royalty checks continue to arrive.

Bruce is also the creative force behind other renowned sailboats, including the San Juan 24, used for racing and cruising, and the Sonar, a twenty-three-foot day-racer for a crew of three to five people, which is used in traditional international competition as well as in the Paralympics, by individuals with disabilities. And he designed two America’s Cup entries — the same

basic boat but modified the second time around — for his native Canada. (Kirby holds dual citizenship in Canada and the United States.) “Bruce is the most important small-boat designer in North America,” says John Burnham, editor of *Sailing World*, the latest incarnation of the magazine Kirby once edited. “He’s had as much if not more influence than any other designer in the country.”

“I’m still competing,” Kirby says.

Kirby’s most recent endeavor is the Pixel, a thirteen-foot-nine-inch, two-handed dinghy for junior sailors. The name, of course, is culled from computer jargon. (Pixels are the tiniest of color elements that together produce an image on a computer screen.) The word has no particular relation to sailing, other than that Bruce thought it a catchy, science-related term that young people could relate to. That kind of thinking, after all, didn’t hurt the Laser.

Opposite: Bruce Kirby in his boat-design studio at his home in Rowayton

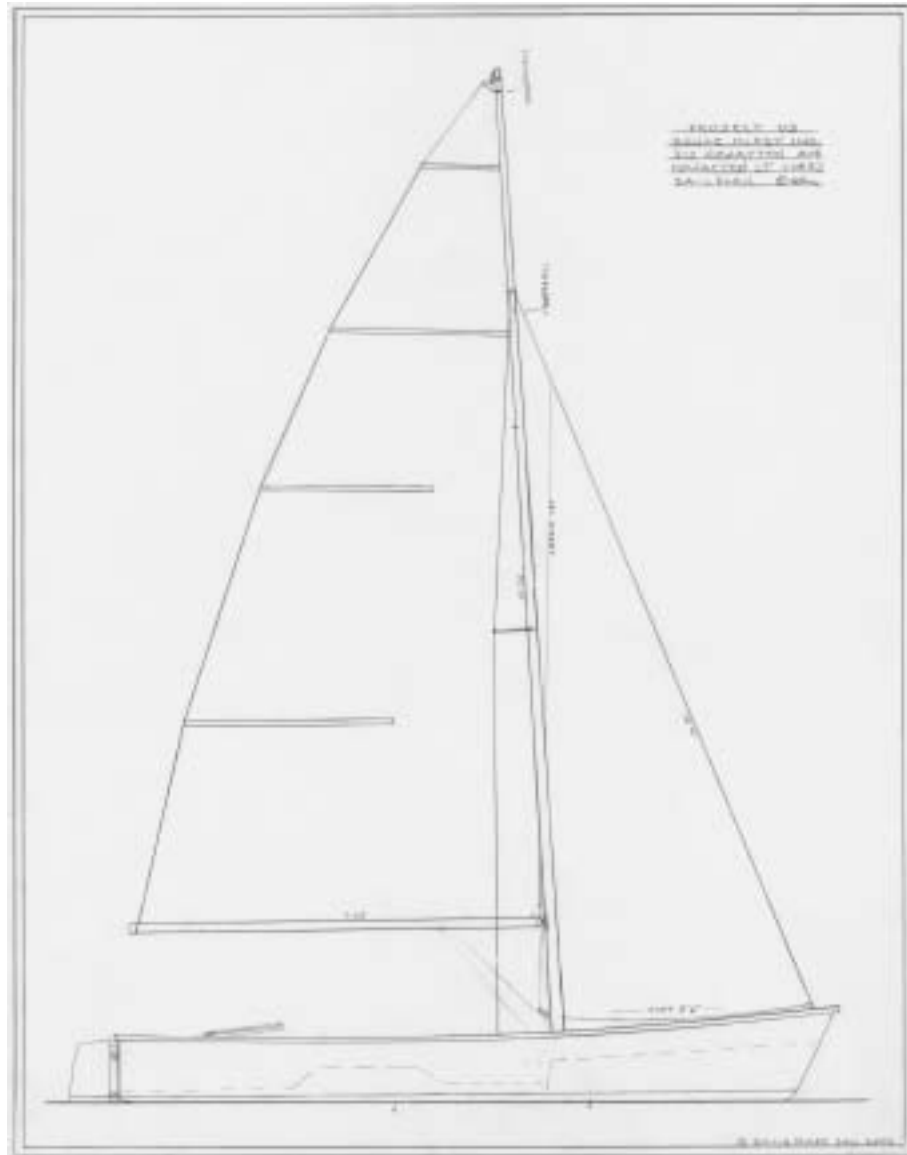
The new boat is roughly targeted at the twelve-to-fourteen-year-old age bracket, youngsters who are ready to move on from a beginner's sailboat but lack the skill for a high-performance craft. The Pixel should also appeal to those who prefer to sail with crew.

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The impetus behind the Pixel came several years ago, when the Junior Sailing Association of Long Island Sound began looking into replacing its longtime intermediate-level boat, the Blue Jay. (A move, it should be noted, that has Blue Jay devotees up in arms.) The association, which stages regattas for some 2,000 young sailors each summer and carries significant weight with similar groups around the country, had a number of problems with the boat. For one, it could not be easily righted after it capsized. And though the Blue Jay was stable, some considered it "tubby," lacking the sleek look and acceleration necessary to keep today's kids interested. Rowayton resident Wes Oliver, who was involved with JSA, approached Kirby about designing a better sailboat, and the pair ultimately became business partners.

By the end of the summer, JSA is expected to decide which sailboat it will add to its regattas — several boats are under consideration — and most likely will begin phasing out the Blue Jay. If the organization chooses the Pixel, the payoff for Kirby and Oliver could be substantial. Yacht clubs and families around Long Island Sound would immediately begin ordering the boat and would continue to do so for years to come. Such an endorsement would no doubt also spark sales from other sailing hot spots nationwide. Indeed, there have already been smatterings of interest from Marblehead, Cape Cod, New Jersey and around Chesapeake Bay.

Oliver, who formerly worked in production for *Reader's Digest*, runs the business side of the Pixel. Kirby, for his part, brings to the table not only his design skills but also a sterling reputation and a lifetime of industry contacts and goodwill. He has also dipped into his own wallet — for trips to China, for example, where the boat is being manufactured — to make sure the final product is just right. "For the first time in my life, I sort



An early sail plan for the recently introduced Pixel. *Opposite page:* The Pixel will make its debut on Long Island Sound waters this summer.

of stuck my neck out," Bruce says. "There was no direct prospect of income from it. I just went ahead and designed the boat. I'm actually in the hole on this, which is something designers really shouldn't do. But I'm so keen on the project. I have a great deal of confidence in it."

Bruce and his wife, Margo, have called Rowayton home for thirty-six years. The couple's four-bedroom colonial looks out on the Five Mile River. Over the years Kirby has had a hand in everything from crewing for Ted Turner to helping educate esteemed author Robert Stone about sailing for his novel *Outerbridge Reach*. He looks the part of a sailor, but not in the clean-cut way of a corporate executive who only ventures out on the water come weekends or vacation. Bruce has more of a weather-worn, tousled look, from his closely trimmed gray beard to his casual, gray-and-black striped sweater. At first glance one would think he'd just blown in from an afternoon sail, which, depending on the season, might not be a bad bet.▷



Bruce Kirby sailing a 72-foot ketch called *Memory* off the coast of England near Cowes in 1952

Sailing has always been at the center of Kirby's life. Born and raised in Ottawa, he is the second of three children. His father, who sold building supplies, was a competitive sailor and the family belonged to a yacht club on the Ottawa River. "I was born in January, but didn't get sailing until June," Kirby says dryly.

As a kid Bruce all but lived on the water. By the time he was six or eight, he could handle practically any sailboat. In short, he had sailing on the brain. "I couldn't get enough of it," he says. "I used to carve models out of balsa wood, put keels on them and sail them. I read more yachting magazines than I did schoolbooks. My mother used to say that if they cut my head open they'd find a sailboat."

Bruce, along with brother David, began making a name for himself as a teenager, proving his skill against top sailors from Canada and, soon, the world. Bruce competed for Canada in the Olympics in 1956 (Melbourne), 1964 (Tokyo) and 1968 (Acapulco).

And though he won no medals, he came away with enough tales of

fellow athletes, sights he saw and races to last his lifetime. "At the '56 games in Melbourne we had a car," Bruce remembers. "There were about five of us from five different countries who shared this vehicle. We'd go tearing off after our events to watch the other sports."

For years Kirby made his living as a journalist. While working as a copy editor for the *Montreal Star*, he talked his bosses into sending him to Newport, Rhode Island, to cover the America's Cup competition. One thing led to another, and in 1965 he took over as editor of the Chicago-based sailing magazine *One-Design Yachtsman*, which eventually moved to Rowayton. He held that job for a decade. (After a number of name changes, the publication today is known as *Sailing World*. It is based in Newport.)

"I was born in January, but didn't get sailing until June." — Bruce Kirby

Kirby had already been working as a boat designer on the side. In 1958 he competed in England as part of the Canadian squad at the World Team Racing Championship in International 14s. And though the Canadians won, he was taken by how well the New Zealand team's boats performed in heavy wind. With no formal training, and armed with little more than a borrowed yacht-design book, Kirby set out to create a vessel that would beat the Kiwis at their own game.

The resulting International 14 that he designed and had built was painted flame red. Kirby dubbed it "Torch," though it ended up the Kirby Mark 1. "I won the first race I ever sailed in my



Don Burwash and Bruce Kirby in Hamilton, Ontario, following their win of the 1964 North American Championship in the International 14 class

new boat,” Bruce remembers. “I won by a fair amount in exactly the conditions the boat was aimed at. The wind was blowing fifteen to twenty knots, and there was a nice short chop. And the boat just went so well, I can’t tell you how happy I was.”

He kept his day job, but every year or two he would design another sailboat, becoming more proficient and building a reputation as a designer. Then in 1969 a friend from Montreal, Ian Bruce, who was designing equipment for the Hudson Bay Company, asked him to draw up an inexpensive sailboat that could easily go on the roof of a car. Kirby did some sketches, but the outdoor outfitting company decided to pass on adding a sailboat to its product line.

The plans for the boat ended up in his friend’s desk drawer. But the following June, Kirby’s magazine announced that it was putting on a regatta for boats priced under \$1,000. America’s Teacup, as the race was known, was someone else’s brainchild, Kirby says, but it was an opportunity to revive the thirteen-and-a-half-foot single-hander he designed the year before.

Ian Bruce managed to get one manufactured just in time for the event. “He took the boat from Montreal, drove through Toronto, picked up the sailmaker and the sail, drove to Lake Geneva in Wisconsin, where the event was taking place, and the three of us put the boat together on the beach,” says Kirby. “The mast had never been in the boat. The boat had never been in the water. And the sail had never been on the mast.”

The boat won its class, and sailors loved it. The partners probably could have taken orders on the spot, Kirby recalls. Instead they decided to make some adjustments, such as moving the mast forward to improve the boat’s balance.

Called the Laser, the finished version was ready by 1971. At the New York Boat Show that year, Kirby and company sold a record 144 boats off the floor. Today the Laser is the most popular racing sailboat in the world. During the seventies, it sold as many as 10,000 to 12,000 models in some years. More recently, annual sales have averaged about 3,000. The boat is

raced in 111 countries. And with two Laser classes in the Olympics, its popularity should continue for years to come.

This summer, a new generation is getting to know Kirby. Not in person, but by way of the Pixel.

The Laser provided Kirby with the means to quit his editor’s post and design sailboats full time. When asked what he saw with that boat that everyone else missed, he simply shrugs. “There seemed to be a hole in the market which even we didn’t know about,” he says. “It just steamrolled. The builder sometimes pretends that he had this vision. But that’s a lot of bull. The whole thing was happenstance.”

Perhaps. But the truth remains that his work is in large part an art, and sometimes even the artist is unaware of all he knows. These days, naval architecture schools turn out designers who are steeped in computers and modern materials. But most will never reach the level of Kirby, whose lifetime experience cannot be taught in a classroom or replicated by a machine. “There’s still a great deal of the art form left in it,” Bruce admits. “Experience produces the art form because in your mind you know what works.”

Kirby went on to design other sailboats, but none would become as popular as the Laser. The boat changed Kirby’s tax bracket and, in certain circles at least, made him famous. Business partner Wes Oliver tells of a recent flight to China during which he and Bruce were engaged in a discussion about the Pixel when a fellow passenger, a man in his late twenties, introduced himself. A sailor himself, he had overheard the men talking about the sport he loved and, given the long flight, he wanted in. “So we’re talking for a bit,” Oliver says, “and finally the guy says, ‘Well, who designed this boat?’ We said, ‘Here he is; this is Bruce Kirby.’ He said, ‘Bruce Kirby? Didn’t you design the Laser?’”



Mark Mendelblatt competing in the 2004 Olympics in Athens — Men’s Laser Division

This summer a new generation is getting to know Kirby. Not in person, of course, but by way of the Pixel. At yacht clubs all around Long Island Sound, youngsters are putting the boat to its ultimate test. And in the end, its success or failure rests with them.

The Junior Sailing Association has many questions and will be looking closely at the boat’s performance. Will kids be able to handle the Pixel? Will they enjoy it? Never mind the tried and true Blue Jay. Is the Pixel sailboat enough to draw kids away from video games, mountain bikes and skateboards and hook them into a lifetime of sailing? Would something else be more appropriate as the group’s new intermediate boat?

“We’re glad Wes Oliver and Bruce Kirby went out and did this,” says Frani MeVay of Old Greenwich, of the Junior Sailing Association’s board of trustees. “But they also understood from the get-go — they should have understood and I’m quite sure they did — that it wasn’t a slam dunk.”

Sounds like a challenge worthy of the wizard of Rowayton. Turn up the heat. ■