

## 20 Years of J/24

After racing in the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Midwinters, the president of J/Boats looks back over two decades of sailing J/24s the boat that "started it all" for his family's company. (*reprinted from Sailing World Magazine*)

During the summer of 1975, we had an oft-repeated conversation around the dinner table at our house in Stonington, Conn.. Our dad, Rod Johnstone, would try to convince the boys (myself, Phil and Al, teenagers at the time) to help him sand the bottom of the 24-footer in the garage. "Look boys:" he said, "whoever helps me more on the boat will get a larger share when I sell it." As it turned out, brother Phil was very good at sanding and applied himself diligently to the task, logging at least double the hours of his two brothers. The 24-footer became Ragtime, then later the master plug for J/24 production, suddenly turning what had been a family hobby into a family business.

Things really took off with the first J/24 Midwinters in 1978. Twenty J/24s came to Key West, Fla., for the event that would unofficially rocket the J/24 into its 20-year orbit. It was the first time the boat had been put under the microscope of such prominent dinghy, big boat and Olympic sailors as Scott Allen, Bob Barton, Gordy Bowers, Vince Brun, Augie Diaz, Neal Fowler, Rick Grajirena, John Kolius, Larry Leonard, Mark Ploch, Jim and Charlie Scott, Dave Ullman and Gary Weismann.

"We didn't know how these guys would react to a boat with no adjustable jib leads, a fixed headstay length and very few other things to fiddle around with " said J/24 designer Rod, recalling the first Midwinters. "But when the week was over, everyone told us, 'don't mess around with the boat, you've got a great thing going here.'" This good advice was followed, and J/24 racing today remains the same battle of skill it was in 1978, only now with another 5,000 boats to sail against worldwide.

The challenge in 1978 was getting to Key West. Trailering was adventurous, as the old bridges connecting the Keys were 6 feet skinnier than they are today. You needed a co-pilot just to call "inches from the curb," and more urgently, to warn of oncoming Winnebagos. J/24s also came to Key West by water via the Ft \* Lauderdale-Key West Race. Times were different then. People didn't think twice about sailing 170-mile overnight races in J/24s, figuring since they were already sleeping on the boat, they might as well sail, too.

As for that first Midwinters, each race was won by a different team, and mid-regatta the fleet was sent on a 40-mile distance race around the tower at American Shoals. A large breaking wave at the tower sent some boats airborne. The series was capped off with a final race shoot-out with Ploch out-gunning Kolius and Brun.

"I remember good sailing, beautiful skies, good friends, and what a great idea it was to go to Key West for a week of sailing" said Brun, when I saw him this year at Yachting's Key West Race Week. The idea was popular enough that the J/24 Midwinters returned three more times to Key West on the heels of the Lauderdale Key West Race, a tradition now upheld by Yachting's Key West Race Week.

This past January, the J/24 class returned to Key West to celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> Midwinter Championship. In what has become true J/24 spirit, 98 boats and 500 sailors converged for a week of memorable racing. It was both a reunion and a renaissance. Nearly half the participants were first-time attendees of the Midwinters, and while many of the best J/24 stories were retold by class veterans, everyone came away from Midwinters XX with new hair-raising tales. The promise of Key West wind was delivered twice-fold, with only one day producing moderate enough winds for the No. 1 genoa. The rest of the week offered up rip-roaring easterlies with big waves, resulting in two days of canceled racing during the five-day event.

The reunion of sailors had everyone recalling their earliest J/24 experiences. It was tough to pre-date John Gjerde of Lake Minnetonka, Minn. On March 13, 1977, before the first

production boat was off the line at Tillotson-Pearson, Gjerde and four fellow Minnesota sailors formed J/24 Fleet No. 1, buying five of the first 20 boats built. "Now I'm here 20 years later, and I feel like I've discovered J/24 sailing all over again; and yes, this March we're having our own reunion party of that first-ever J/24 meeting." (As if wanting to prove that their trend-setting ways were no fluke, the same Lake Minnetonka crowd also started J/22 fleet No. 1 in 1983.)

Tony Parker of Annapolis (Bangor Packet) recalled first seeing J/24s off Newport in 1978. "One day there was a beautiful southwest breeze of 15 knots. We saw a huge fleet of boats looking like they were doing starting drills. It was the first J/24 North Americans on that famous day where they had nine general recalls and no racing. When I came ashore, I said, 'I'm going to buy one of those boats.'" One word of -that day spread throughout the race committee grapevine, the reputation of J/24s for pushing the starting line was forever cemented.

**Changes through the years**  
When asked about the biggest change he'd seen after 20 years in the class, Brun said, "That's the beauty of it, there's been very little change. You don't have to change for sailing to be fun. It's the people involved, and the evenness of the boats. If the speed difference between the top five and bottom five is small, that's the key."

While the spirit of camaraderie and competition remains, few would argue that the J/24 is sailed the same. After winning the first two midwinter championships, Ploch penned these tips in the first "From the Experts" article on the J/24: "For total crew weight, I think the lighter the better." "The whole rig should be very tight." "We set the spinnaker from the lifelines just forward of the cockpit." Today, the top boats sail with maximum permitted crew weight, relatively loose rigs, and spinnakers hoisted out of the companionway.

Art Dufresne (U.S. J/24 president in the early '80s) points to the changing role of the crew as the most significant improvement in J/24 sailing. "The early J/24s had all the sail controls led back into the cockpit. There was nothing for the two forward crew members to do, except jibe the pole. Then in the early '80s, a wealth of information came into the class on how to better organize a team effort. The deck layout changed so that everyone had a job on the boat. This made the boat easier and more efficient to sail in much tougher conditions. Then as a class we started recognizing all the crew at the trophy ceremonies."

The early sail shapes were all over the place. Some advocated full mains and flat genoas, others flat mains and full genoas. Designs seemed to change with every regatta, often depending on the expected conditions. When the conditions were opposite of what was predicted, certain sailmakers could be seen bringing up the rear. The fastest I remember being in a J/24 was in 1978 when we sported a Horizon mainsail from Dave Curtis, an Ulmer genoa from John Kolius, and a Bill Shore spinnaker.

"Those days, nobody knew exactly how to trim the boat," commented Brun. "Today, it's much more sophisticated. People know how to set up the mast, how to set up the sails; it's more scientific. Probably the biggest change was in 1984 with Ken Read [working for Bill Shore at Shore Sails]. Ken was a little bit ahead of his time. He figured out that the boat sails a lot better with forestay sag. Shore was building sails to absorb the headstay sag. Before that, everyone was sailing with a tighter headstay."

While the experts continued to push the envelope, testing both the class rules and the resolve of the class to administer the rules, the class managed to avoid the common trap of "catering to the vocal minority." Important changes in the late '80s allowing Mylar in the genoa, a new crew weight of 400 kilos, and a dry weight to replace flotation marks, were thoroughly debated and voted on by class members. The Mylar issue alone took four years before passing unanimously. A three-person Technical Committee of Dennis Ellis, John Peck and Rod Johnstone was kept quite busy

Hank Killion was International J/24 Class chairman from 1986 to 1992, seeing the class through its most challenging years. When asked about his attraction to the class, Killion replied, "The J/24 class was more about people than anything else. The boat brought us together as a group with similar sailing interests. It was the camaraderie of the people at both the local and world level that made the class so much fun. This and the willingness of top people in the class like Curtis, Read and Dick Tillman to openly share their ideas with less experienced sailors. I felt we were part of a 'we' generation instead of a 'me' generation."

### **Into the future**

With a major evolution in rules and regatta management behind it, the J/24 class is rediscovering its roots. Midwinters XX kicked off a series of events resembling a Rolling Stones reunion tour. The great sailing venues that helped launch the class are again featured for the upcoming championships. San Francisco plays host for the 1997 North Americans and 1998 Worlds. The 1997 U.S. Nationals are going to Corpus Christi, Texas. Newport, R.I., will serve up the big homecoming at the 1998 North Americans and the 2000 Worlds.

With boats entering their 20<sup>th</sup> season, the class is coming to grips with how best to monitor the reconditioning of older boats to stay within class specs. The availability of competitive used boats in the \$8,000 to \$12,000 range has enabled the class to generate a steady influx of new sailors, who otherwise couldn't afford to compete.

"I've seen a big change in the class in the last year," said Chris Larson, winner of Midwinters XX "A lot of people are buying boats because it's cost effective, and a good organization. This regatta has 40 to 50 percent new faces. There's a whole new generation of J/24 sailors."

Brun concurs: "For about \$15,000 and a little bit of work, you can get into a J/24 and have a boat as good as Chris Larson's or Terry Hutchinson's. It's a very good return for your investment. The low cost gives you the variety of sailors and lets the younger people sail."

I'm often asked what happened to the original Ragtime. Before answering, I ask people not to tell brother Phil, who good naturedly still inquires about Ragtime and his elusive "share." In 1978, when TPI production hit a high of five boats a day, room had to be made in the back lot; and so Ragtime was unceremoniously chain-sawed to pieces and thrown into a dumpster.

Some 12 years later, when measuring local boats in Newport, I spotted a strange looking elliptical rudder on the transom of what turned out to be J/24 hull No. 2. A closer inspection revealed the rudder to be cored in mahogany. Knowing no TPI rudder had ever been made from mahogany, I called Rod. He immediately identified it as the original garage-built rudder from Ragtime, which he'd given away in 1977 as a spare. As you'd expect, the rudder was grandfathered for class racing. I'm now thinking it would make a perfect present for Phil.

-By Jeff Johnstone

**Plans**

