

Bruce Kirby



Bruce Kirby took the long way to tonight's Norwalk Old Timers dinner.

Kirby's journey began in Canada, where he was born 87 years ago, and the Hall of Fame sailor would represent his native country in three Olympics. His successful journalism career took him and his family to Chicago, and when the sailing magazine he was editor of moved to Connecticut, Kirby relocated to Rowayton in 1969. Bruce and Margo Kirby, who celebrated their 60th anniversary in June, have lived along the Five-Mile River ever since.

Then again, Bruce Kirby has always been around water and he's been involved with the sport of sailing almost his entire life. In fact, he likes to point out that he was just six-months old when his father first took him sailing on the Ottawa River.

His lifelong passion for sailing carried him all the way to the 1956 Summer Olympics in Australia, the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, and the '68 Games in Mexico City. In 1958, between his first and second Olympics, Kirby took his love for sailing to another level when he decided to try his hand at designing racing boats and came up with his first International 14. He would design five more of these racing dinghies over the next 12 years.

While sailing was Kirby's best sport, it certainly wasn't the only one he excelled in. While in high school from 1945-'49 at Lisgar Collegiate Institute, one of the country's best regarded public schools located in Ottawa, Kirby displayed his athletic versatility as a member of the football team, the ski team, and running the 220 and 400 on the school's track team. He was also involved with the Ottawa Ski Club and raced downhill and slalom for several years.

In 1950, Kirby began his newspaper career as a general reporter with the Ottawa Journal. He later worked with the Montreal Star where he talked his editors into sending him to Newport to cover the 1962 America's Cup. It was that kind of experience that helped land him a job as editor of One-Design Yachtsman Magazine — now known as Sailing World — in Chicago and eventually led to Kirby becoming a Norwalker.

Six months after he settled in Rowayton, a friend asked Kirby to design a sailboat and the result was the "Laser." It hit the market in 1971 and today there are more than 220,000 boats in three different rig configurations sailing in 140 countries.

Entirely self-taught, Kirby's one-man design office has come up with more than 60 designs since then, including the 12-meter Canada I and Canada II, challengers for America's Cup in 1983 and '87, respectively. He also designed boats that won World Cup championships as well as Lasers sailed by men and women in this year's Olympics.

Kirby didn't just cater to competitive sailors, however. He also designed a line of small cruising boats and sold hundreds of plans for the home builder or professional. In all, he produced five Norwalk Island Sharpie models, the same kind, he says, that were "used for oyster and clamming in the old days."

According to the magazine Professional BoatBuilder, Kirby "has more boats built to his designs than any designer in sailing history," and calls Kirby "one of North America's most talented helmsman." Kirby has been inducted into several of Hall of Fames, including the Sailing World Hall of Fame, the U.S. National Sailing Hall of Fame, and the Canadian Sailing Hall of Fame. He was also recently honored by the State of Connecticut for his contributions to the state's maritime industry.

The Kirbys are members of the Noroton Yacht Club in Darien and the New York Yacht Club. And although Bruce Kirby is nearing his 88th birthday, he still actively races on Long Island Sound and in championship regattas.