

Below is an interview with Peter Commette, one of the great Laser sailors from the early days of Laser sailing. Anthony Kotoun forwarded it to me (Steve Kirkpatrick Newport Laser Fleet Captain) to pass along to the fleet. It is an interesting read and mentions a few of our local rock stars.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST SEE A LASER? (WHEN, WHERE) AND YOUR INITIAL THOUGHTS?

I first saw a Laser in the early Summer of 1971. One of the top local sailmakers, Skip Moorehouse, was demonstrating it in front of my yacht club, Mantoloking Yacht Club on Barnegat Bay in New Jersey. I had just turned 17, and my dad had been looking for a Sunfish type boat for my mother to learn sailing. We were just about to buy something that I believe was called a Chrysler Scorpion, a Sunfish type knock off. Instead, my dad bought the Laser, Laser #246. Mom never got near it. To me, the Laser was the coolest boat I had ever sailed. My mom never did learn to sail.

WHAT BOAT HAD YOU BEEN SAILING PRIOR TO THE LASER'S INTRODUCTION?

Prior to the Laser, I had been sailing M16 scows and duckboats.

WAS THERE A GROUP OF YOU THAT DECIDED TO SAIL THIS BOAT?

The first bunch of us at Mantoloking Yacht Club who bought Lasers just played around with them that first Summer and did some night racing in them.

Those first sailors were Skip Moorehouse, Willie DeCamp, Doug Love, Bob Broege, Tom Barton, Dick and Bill Wight, Ed O'Malley and Runnie Colie. Mostly though, that first Summer all I used the Laser for was to reach back and forth across Barnegat Bay in our prevailing Southeasterlies. Later in the Summer, we heard that there was going to be a North American Championship in Baltimore somewhere, so I can remember Willie DeCamp and I going out in a big breeze one day to see what these boats were like upwind. I distinctly remember saying to Willie after a few minutes of upwind sailing that these boats were too hard, and they would never catch on. Willie and I went back to reaching back and forth.

Eventually, we did go to that first North American Championships in 1971. I think I finished 9th, but I can't remember. What I do remember from my first few regattas is guys like Dick Tillman, Euan Swan, Hans Fogh and Everett Bastet just blowing people away in a breeze. So strong. Such great technique. There was a huge difference between the front of the fleet and where I was. I went back to my senior year in high school committed to learning the Laser. I played football that Fall but dropped out of the rest of the sports in which I had been involved (indoor track and tennis) to practice with a friend of mine, Bob Broege, and to frostbite on the Cooper River near Philadelphia with John McCausland, Sr., Skip Moorehouse, Dave Ingram, Charlie Horter, and a few others. By the Summer of '72, most of the good college sailors had jumped into the Laser including Skip Whyte, Gary Jobson, and Henry Bossett. Some of the good Finn sailors, Carl Van Duyne and Danny Hurley, also were sailing Lasers on Barnegat Bay.

WHAT KIND OF LEARNING CURVES DID YOU AND THE EQUIPMENT GO THROUGH LEADING UP TO THE FIRST WORLDS?

Techniques: With the addition of the college sailors and the Finn sailors, we started rocking, rolling and ooching. Carl Buchan introduced torquing two years later. Roll jibing, at least as we know it now, didn't come about until Mark Mueller developed the technique as a freshman at Tufts in 1974 or 1975. More basic than the above was the day that first Summer of 1971 when I saw Ed O'Malley tying the clew of his sail to the boom. That's something we take so much for granted now, but it seemed like such an awesome idea at the time. In the mid 1970's, Mike Loeb experimented with the novel idea of

sailing with a loose vang by the lee down wind. Fast, but he kept flipping, and so did we when we tried to, so we gave it up as slow; no one thought to put the board down. An idea before its time, I guess.

For the first couple years, all we did with the Lasers was weigh them and push on the hulls to see which boats were light and stiff. However, mysteriously, there were some fast boats that this method could not explain.

It was not until 1976 that we started measuring rake, and all of a sudden the mystery disappeared. Later, we even started weighing the bows and the sterns, and started putting ports in the boat so we could put a mirror inside and read the weights of the decks or hulls (they would match heavy decks with light hulls and heavy hulls with light decks). I still remember the batch of boats the Kemptons, Alex Smigelski, Gary Knapp, Mike Loeb, and I found in the Summer of 1977. They fit every single criteria we wanted and were awesome Lasers. Light, stiff, great rake, mast plumb in boat side-to-side, light decks, heavy hulls. Unbelievable. Alex still has his stored with loving care in a garage!

At the first Worlds all we were able to bring was our board, rudder, tiller and control lines. At that time, the blades were wood, and the board could weigh anywhere from 9 lbs. to 12 lbs. I once had an 8 lb. board which I purchased from the factory in England, but it turned out that the board was 5 inches too short. Hoisted by my own petard! The Laser manufacturing people got a big kick out of that.

WERE THERE MANY FLEETS AND/OR HOW DID YOU GATHER TO PRACTICE?

I have told you how we practiced the first year. By the second year, 1972, there were numerous fleets. I taught sailing at Bay Head Yacht Club that Summer, sailed the Laser almost every evening, and raced it on Barnegat Bay on Saturday mornings. After the Summer, it was off to Tufts for my freshman year, where Joe Duplin and Manton Scott took my sailing to another level almost immediately. Tufts sailed Larks, but every once in awhile Joe would have me put my Laser together, and he would get behind me in the coach boat, screaming at me until he was blue in the face. We frostbit Lasers that Winter in Wickford, Rhode Island with Skip Whyte, Manton Scott, Mike Loeb, Barry Kuehl, and a number of others.

WAS THE WORLDS A CONSCIOUS DECISION OR GOAL OR DID IT JUST "HAPPEN"?

With Joe Duplin at Tufts, a Star world champion, the Laser World Championships were very definitely a conscious goal from the beginning. Joe put me through a Winter workout routine. Two friends, Tom Diamond and Chuck Wilkinson, worked out with me. By the time that the 1973 Midwinters and then the Summer regattas rolled around, I was ready to put the second part of Joe's plan in action and get some more big fleet experience. I sailed the 470 that Summer in the Worlds in 116 boat fleet (we were second), and the major Laser regattas were starting to get big crowds now, so I made every one and did a lot less college sailing, except for practices during the week. By the time the Worlds came around in the Fall of '74, I was popping incredible amounts of vitamins per day, running up to four miles per day, lifting six days a week (upper body one day, lower body the next), sailing the Laser on weekends and in some practices during the week, and sailing the Tufts' Larks in practice. Joe and I had made a list of what to bring, and my blades were perfect. Joe and I also had made a list of what to do every day at the regatta site prior to sailing, on the water, and when I got off the water. We had studied Bermuda's Great Sound, and I was confident that at the time of year we were going, late Fall, we would get a good mix of conditions, perfect for someone 6 ft. and 170 lbs. (we could

wear 22 lbs. of weight then). Yes, I would say it was a conscious decision or goal, and it did not just "happen." You don't win by over 30 points and have it just "happen."

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER FROM THE 1974 WORLDS IN BERMUDA (there were 108 boats from 24 countries)?

Since I wrote down every race and I still have my notes, I would say that I can remember a fair amount. Normally, even without my notes, I can remember most legs of most major races I have sailed, the good and the bad.

Obviously, I have a very cluttered and uni-dimensional mind. There is not much room for anything else, and I am not much in conversation in anything else. The highlights of what I remember from that regatta are:

1. Practice Race: Very heavy air. Buchan, Hahn and someone else fighting it out for first. I cruised in at 4th.
2. First Race: Waiving Jim Hahn across when he was on port and then hooking a big one out on the left.
3. Moped Gangs.
4. Staying with the Donald Story family in Southhampton. Mr. Story gave my girlfriend and me a private cottage set into a very high hill, overlooking a private beach. Pretty cool.
5. Girlfriend's mom dying on day of last race and her family not knowing where to find her, until one of her roommates broke down and told them where she was.
6. 72nd in my throw out race. Ouch.
7. Dick Tillman secretly telling (he thought) Norm Freeman how to get into my head before the last race by getting to the regatta site before me and being the first one in the water. This was the first of two times Dick did that to me; the second was at the Olympic trials in '76 before the last race in the Finns when I was carrying an OCS as my throwout. Back to the morning of the last race, unfortunately for Norm and Dick, someone overheard them and told me. Norm was up and out at 6:00 a.m., but so was I. Norm's moped ran out of gas on the way in; I almost ran him over in the dark. I ended up towing him to the Yacht Club behind my moped.
8. Crushing the pin at the last start, jibing around and finding a lane out on port, Joe Yacoe clearing out for me, getting over to the favored left, sailing over the top of Norm on a long port, rounding in the top 10, planing through Hugo Schmidt to leeward with the judges watching, rounding the jibe mark first, and putting it on cruise control the rest of the race.
9. After the race, messing up all of my controls for the photo boat. Now, whenever I see any photos from the old days, most embarrass me, because I purposely was sailing the boat wrong. The one of me from the Worlds that surfaces most often is just such a photo. Hoisted by my own petard, again!

HOW MANY YEARS AFTER THAT DID YOU CONTINUE TO SAIL THE LASER?

I continued to sail the Laser, off and on, through 1980. My last major regatta was the 1980 Midwinters. Recently, in the last ten months, I have picked the Laser back up again, but I have only sailed two regattas, and I am one incredible road block downwind.

HOW HAS THE LASER HELPED YOUR SAILING CAREER?

Until recently, I have always been one of the fastest in any boat I have sailed reaching and downwind. Recently, though, the Laser has just become so far in my past that I have lost a lot of the skill and feel that the Laser fostered. The Laser also taught me how to sail in big fleets, another skill I have lost. That is why I recently decided to start sailing Lasers again.

DID YOU EVER DO THE SAN FRAN SLOLAMS?

Yes, I did the Slaloms in 1975. I went out to San Francisco to cover the regatta for Sail Magazine and to teach a clinic at the St. Francis Yacht Club, but I loved San Francisco so much that I stayed for the Summer. I was supposed to be training for the Olympics. Most of the time I hung out with a Laser sailor named Bob Sutton. We had a blast and sailed Lasers or taught clinics every day that Summer. At the Slolams, it blew like stink. Three local sailors, John Bertrand, Steve Jeppeson and Chris Boome, along with a number of others absolutely waxed me. Afterwards, I did a lot of training with Steve, Chris and Bob, and they were able to show me a number of heavy air jibing flaws in my technique. The flaws were never apparent when I had all day to prepare for a jibe and pick my time in heavy air but in the Slaloms, there was no luxury like that. What a blast! I remember tipping over and being launched into the mast and having my breath knocked out of me. I remember watching Carl Van Duyne fly out of his boat when the bow buried in a wave; the boat stopped and he kept going. I remember going out the next day with Chris Boome and the photographer losing control of the motorboat in the waves and running him over. One of the photos from that shoot became a Laser poster for a number of years.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANT TO ADD?

So many stories and most of them are unfit to print! Even though most of them are unfit to print, there still are hundreds that are printable. I remember Dave Perry being passed upwind by a girl doing the old Star hike! I remember barking spiders (sorry, I cannot explain). I remember Laser jousting; climbing the mast (trying to anyway); sailing on my head in front of the mast (I can still do that); Carl Buchan running up to the bow of his boat, grabbing the mast and doing the perfect pitch pole; Tom Barton riding waves on the beach at high tide...a little too far and turning turtle in about five inches of water. I remember sailing and practicing with friends who were also kick ass competition: Carl Buchan, John Bertrand, Gary Knapp, Ed Adams, Moose McClintock, Dave Perry, Augie Diaz, Mike Loeb, Alex Smigelski, the Kemptons (Terry, Shawn & Kevin) and Bob Sutton. I remember for fun sailing under the lowest span of the Mantoloking Bridge, having to sail the boat with the mast almost skimming the water. I remember hand over hand pulling my Laser through the Mantoloking Bridge in light wind with the current against us. For a great memory, you just can't beat ten Lasers lined up behind my house and a bunch of us college kids staying there dorm room style with my mother cooking for us, and sailing all day on the Wannamaker course on Barnegat Bay. I remember driving through the mountains in California with Bob Sutton, arriving at 5:00 a.m. at Huntington Lake, so tired we were afraid to go to sleep, so we rigged our boats and pushed them out on the water and went to sleep, waiting for everyone else to get up and come out; then all of us relaxed in the hot springs at night. I remember Black Sabbath and sailing on the Cooper River. I remember being so fast off the wind, I would come up to Dave Perry's stern and ask him whether he wanted me to pass him to leeward or windward. It was so much fun traveling around to various regattas and rooming with great buddies like Alex

Smigelski, Gary Knapp, Mike Loeb and the Kemptons. We would sneak up to people's boats at night, whip out the magic marker and name their boat; sometimes the names stuck forever, like a nickname for me that I still hear (Not telling!). Moped Gangs on the islands; tipping over in the Winter, and it being so cold that the centerboard became instant ice; frostbiting and staying at Skip Whyte's apartment where he taught us to put our wet clothes outside and let them freeze so they would dry quicker (no kidding); being asked by Stuart Neff how I could take a couple of months off and still win every heavy air race at the Midwinters, and answering him, "You just have to make up your mind to do it" (I believed it then; I wish it still were true); sailing in a big breeze in Cabo Frio, Brazil (Wow!); finding a beat up, used Laser to practice in, working on it all night, driving six hours to a regatta, falling asleep the whole way, getting there just before the first race, and having a great, great time; the great fun of a number of us traveling around the country and living out of the back of our vans. Believe me, I could go on forever, and if you give me a beer...