



Still Sexy at 75

A leading-edge
race boat designer
falls in love with a
sleek classic
6-Meter and
breathes new life
into her slender hull

By Jon Schmid with
photography by Bob Grieser





Greg Stewart makes his living designing some of the fastest racing sailboats on the water and serving as a “speed consultant” in competitive regattas around the world.

Successful boats, such as *Rush*, *Ptarmigan* and *Yassou*, are the progeny of Nelson/Marek Yacht Design’s drafting tables, where Greg Stewart is the only employee, other than Bruce Nelson himself (Bruce Marek left the company years ago). And the One Design 35, a class best described as dinghies on steroids, was their brainchild, with Stewart serving as project designer on the venture.

But when Stewart races on his own boat at home in San Diego, he doesn’t climb aboard a high-tech carbon fiber contraption. Rather, he settles into the wooden 6-Meter named *Sprig* that he has lovingly restored to like-new condition. This year *Sprig* celebrates her 75th birthday and Stewart, a reserved man of 45, is as close to being prideful as he gets.

All summer long, Stewart worked replacing the decks on *Sprig*, finishing the restoration project he began several years earlier and finally completed in stages. The deck, originally cedar strip planked, was fastened with steel nails that started rusting and caused rot in the deck and deck beams.

To fix the problem Stewart, with the help of the Kochler Kraft boatyard, replaced half the deck beams with new spruce, sawn members, then laid a new deck of plywood with a light fiberglass surface.

With the deck off, Stewart had access to parts of the interior hull that were otherwise inaccessible. He took advantage of this rare opportunity to clean and coat the exposed areas in the far front and stern, as well as the rest of the interior, in epoxy and varnish. It was a tight fit for Stewart, but well worth the trouble.

“I knew I would never get to those areas again. It was therapeutic sanding and var-

nishing and tinkering on the boat,” Stewart said. “I got a little sick of it midsummer. I wanted to go out sailing, but I knew if I sanded harder now, it would be good later.”

And the finished product is good, very good. *Sprig* isn’t a jewelbox, like Dennis Conner’s recently restored Q-boat *Cotton Blossom*. Rather, *Sprig* is a stripped down, lean, mean racing machine. There’s no fancy cabin or fine furnishings below. But just sitting at the dock she looks like she’s straining at the mooring lines, eager to go.

Built to the 6-Meter rule in 1930, *Sprig* exhibits the characteristics of her class: very narrow beam, long overhangs, deep hull. Overall length is 36 feet, with 22 feet at the waterline, six feet of beam and a five-

a St. Louis syndicate for the 1932 British-American Challenge. While *Sprig* was recognized for her speed, her crew was considered too inexperienced. The owners of *Sprig* didn’t allow her to be sailed by a better crew and the boat was eliminated.

Six-Meter boats, very popular boats in the 1920s and 1930s, are experiencing something of a comeback these days, both in the United States and Europe. A classics section has been added to regattas for the wooden hulled Sixes. And rumor has it that several big name sailors are now searching for their own 6-Meter hulls to restore and race in the upcoming worlds in Newport, Rhode Island, in 2009.

Stewart sails *Sprig* hard, pushing her to her limits to win races. Aided by modern

sails, Stewart has compiled a respectable race record. Last year he won first in his class and fifth overall in San Diego Yacht Club’s Hot Rum Series. And this year he won first overall in the San Diego Y.C. New Year’s Day race. In 2002, he placed second in the 6-Meter Lipton Cup and fourth in the 6-Meter Nationals.

Stewart is also known for sailing *Sprig* around like a dinghy, in close proximity to other boats, docks and buoys. He says it’s a habit left over from his early days sailing Sunfish on Lake Macatawa, in Holland, Michigan. Since she has been completely rebuilt, *Sprig* has held up well to Stewart’s demanding sailing style. But that wasn’t always the case.

Keith McKinnon, who owned *Sprig* from 1967 until 1998, before selling her to Stewart, originally found the boat in Monterey, California, through a yacht broker. When he bought her in 1967 she was already an old boat. McKinnon paid \$2,500 for her. But at the time there was an active 6-Meter one design fleet of five or six boats at San Diego Y.C. and McKinnon wanted to get in on the fun and competitive racing without making a huge investment.



Sprig’s retrofit took years of work, top. Greg Stewart keeps the competition to leeward during a race.

foot draft. Sixes are heavy boats, displacing 9,200 pounds, when you consider they have no interior furnishings.

But 70 percent of their weight is in the keel, making for a very stiff ride. Add to the equation 450 square feet of sail area and a large spinnaker and you have tremendous loads on the mast and boat.

Sprig was designed by famed 6-Meter designer Clinton Crane and built by the Nevins yard on City Island, New York, for





Rail down and pointing high, Stewart steers Sprig onto victory.

But the trouble began when McKinnon replaced Sprig's old sails with modern Dacron. The strain was just too much.

"I put the first set of Dacron sails on her and that's when the work started," McKinnon said. "She started cracking frames and butt blocks were popping out. I sistered probably 30 frames and I was hauling her out twice a year."

Even so, McKinnon described sailing her as a "dream."

"It spoils you for every other boat," he said. "She just has a feather-touch helm. You really

sense the motion through the water because you are so close down to it. Even in a 10,000-pound hoat you feel the boat is alive."

Stewart describes her similarly. The fact that the driver and crew are inside the boat, rather than on top of her, seems to contribute significantly to the unique feel on the water. Standing on the floorboards, your feet are probably a foot below the waterline.

When Stewart offered to buy the boat, McKinnon was encouraged. He knew what Stewart did for a day job and found the dichotomy "interesting." McKinnon was

especially hopeful that Stewart's interest meant he would do a conscientious restoration of her — his instincts proved right.

Stewart is well known in San Diego sailing circles by his nickname, "The admiral." He earned the name because he takes charge once he steps on board, but not in the way you might think. He's not like those professional sailors or weekend-warrior-boat-owners who scream and swear, tongue lashing the crew, veins and eyeballs popping. Stewart is soft spoken, offering advice in an almost fatherly way. Friends say he is actually very shy.

Stewart is also notable as an extremely devoted boat owner. Hailing from Holland, Michigan, Stewart moved to San Diego in 1986 and owned a boat in his new home long before he ever bought a car. For years, he shuttled around with friends and in taxis before finally purchasing a 1968 Mustang from Jack Sutphen, the America's Cup sparring helmsman, in 2000.

After Stewart bought *Sprig* in 1998, he sailed her for a couple of seasons. In 1999, based on the advice of local restoration expert and good friend C.F. Koehler, he hauled her out for major work.

"C.F. was saying, 'If you are going to keep racing the boat hard you should restore it.' It leaked quite badly at that time" Stewart explained.

Koehler's recollection is a bit more vivid. "Within a week or two of buying the boat, he was swimming and wiping the hull down below the waterline," Koehler said. "He called me and said he could stick his hand between the lead of the keel and the bottom of the boat."

That was the first indication of things to come.

Koehler was able to replace the broken keel bolts, slap on some paint and put her back in the water.

"It kind of held together. But within the next year and a half I was doing the Hot Rum race series with him and I said, 'You have to back off or we are swimming home,'" Koehler recalled.

During the race, Koehler was in the forward cockpit when he saw water gushing through one of the seams in the hull. He planted his foot over the leak, but water just squirted out from under the sole of his shoe.

"At that point the writing was on the wall," Koehler said. "I told him, 'Cut this thing up or give it away or do the right thing.'"

Stewart did the right thing. During phase one of the rebuild, in 1999 and 2000, shipwrights (the author among them) replaced most of the frames with laminated oak ribs, planked over an engine well, splined the planks with fiberglass rope, and encased the entire hull in epoxy.

The result is an exterior hull that is fair, stable and looks flawless. If you didn't know better, it could be a fiberglass hull. Because of the way she was restored, *Sprig* is also incredibly strong.



Stewart gets comfortable in the bowels of the 6-Meter during her restoration. Sprig's ring frames show off her slender hull, below left. Stewart stands with two classics, below right.



"When we rebuilt that boat I had a good idea the admiral would sail that boat just about as hard as you could sail a boat," Koehler said. "It was pretty bulletproof. But he has taken it to a new level."

Not only has Stewart sailed the boat in heavy air and big seas, he has trucked her to Seattle twice for regattas. Putting an old wooden boat on a trailer and hauling it over 1,200 miles of road each way would make any reasonable owner shudder.

"What this boat has been through is a testament to the restoration process," Koehler said. "I thought it might open up a seam or two, or that there would be some evidence, even if it was just cosmetic, that something was going to let go. Bouncing on a truck like that and the changes in temperature, especially given how lightly she's built. She's like a feather canoe. She has planks like a toy boat and little toy frames, and a giant hunk of lead hanging off the bottom."

But *Sprig* isn't just strong and fast, she's beautiful. Standing at the dock, one can peer in through the boat's hatches and view the exposed frames and the varnished inside face of the planking. The result is warm and quite pleasing to the eye. Stewart also replaced the hodgepodge of deck hardware with all bronze

winches, blocks and fairleads, which adds significantly to the visual appeal.

"That boat is him," Koehler said. "He has sort of become one with that boat. He is sort of sick with that boat."

So, here you have Stewart, working all day designing and fine-tuning the bleeding-edge

well-known America's Cup yacht designer, owns several wooden boats and seems to have made it his personal mission to save old derelicts from the dumpster, even if it means shipping them off to Italy, where they are painstakingly restored. And, of course, the latest well-known victim of the malady is

Dennis Conner, with his well-publicized, rumored million-dollar-restoration of *Cotton Blossom II*.

For many people, owning a wooden boat means spending more time working on the boat than sailing her. Of course, as a trained engineer, Stewart can rationalize quite logically about why he owns a 75-year-old racing boat. In an e-mail, after thinking about the question for a day, Stewart listed the reasons, numbered methodically as one through five. These included: his exposure to a 6-Meter as a boy of 13 (those lines got stuck on his brain); friends had wooden boats; she's of a manageable size to sail and maintain; her performance ("points

very well and slips along nicely downwind"); her historical value.

But in person, and unprepared for the question, Stewart was a little more candid about his reason for owning *Sprig*: "The biggest draw for me was just that she's a sexy race boat."



A smiling crew proves sailing a classic with "The admiral" is a good time.

of racing sailboats, and spending his free time fulfilling his love for an old wooden boat. Some might say he is suffering from a split personality.

Actually, this nautical schizophrenia isn't unique to Stewart. And it looks like the affliction might be spreading. Doug Peterson, the

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