

Merle Hallett's Sailing Adventures

A Compilation of Stories by Geoffrey Emanuel



Between 1940 and 2020, Merle Hallett, who passed away at the end of 2022 at age 94, established and maintained a legendary reputation along the Maine Coast and throughout the U.S.. He was an extraordinary sailor, personality, and contributor to the betterment of sailors, the sport and humanity, including his decades long commitment as founder and Chair of the MS Regatta, Portland Yacht Club officer and Founder and President of the Gulf of Maine Ocean Racing Association (GMORA).

This article is a compilation of sea stories and sailing memories of Merle in action. This article's contributors are all fellow competitors, family, and friends here in Maine, many of whom crewed with and learned to be great sailors from Merle. Many thanks to all who contributed to this piece.

I raced against Merle for over 40 years. I don't recall the first time I met Merle, but it was sometime in the early 1970s. My family raced a series of boats called *Kolibri* against Merle's various yachts called *Scaramouche* throughout the 1970s. The rivalry was competitive but more importantly was a blast!

For the first half of the 1970s, Merle raced a Pearson 36 while my family sailed a Swan 44. The two boats clashed repeatedly in an 8-race circuit called the Gulf of Maine Ocean Racing Circuit. Back then, 6 of the 8 races were overnight courses. This included Pilot, Harraseeket, Boon Island, the Whaleback out of Kittery Maine and the Blue Hill Race sponsored by the Kolledgeiwedgewock YC in Blue Hill. The two-day races were the weekend long Boothbay Regatta and Camden-Castine.

The two boats were cruiser/racers with full interiors and heavy displacements by modern standards. The crews slept aboard the boats and helped deliver them to the various racing venues. The two crews got to know each other quite well. My father Albert and Merle became good friends. That friendship endured until my father's passing in 2007.

I got the first opportunity to race with Merle on his new, Handy Boat-built 42-foot Tanton-designed sloop in the 1978 Stamford-Vineyard Race. The race was memorable primarily for the light air marathon it became. Not long after the start, we are beating in light air. Merle was on the helm and called for an adjustment to the jib halyard. He whispered his request, but no one heard him. After attempting to get someone to respond, he gave up, walked forward from the helm, made the adjustment himself and returned to steering the boat. Little was said by anyone! I do not recall the boat varying much from its course during this episode!

Merle's Pearson 36 *Scaramouche*





Merle's Handy Boat Built Tanton 42 *Scaramouche*

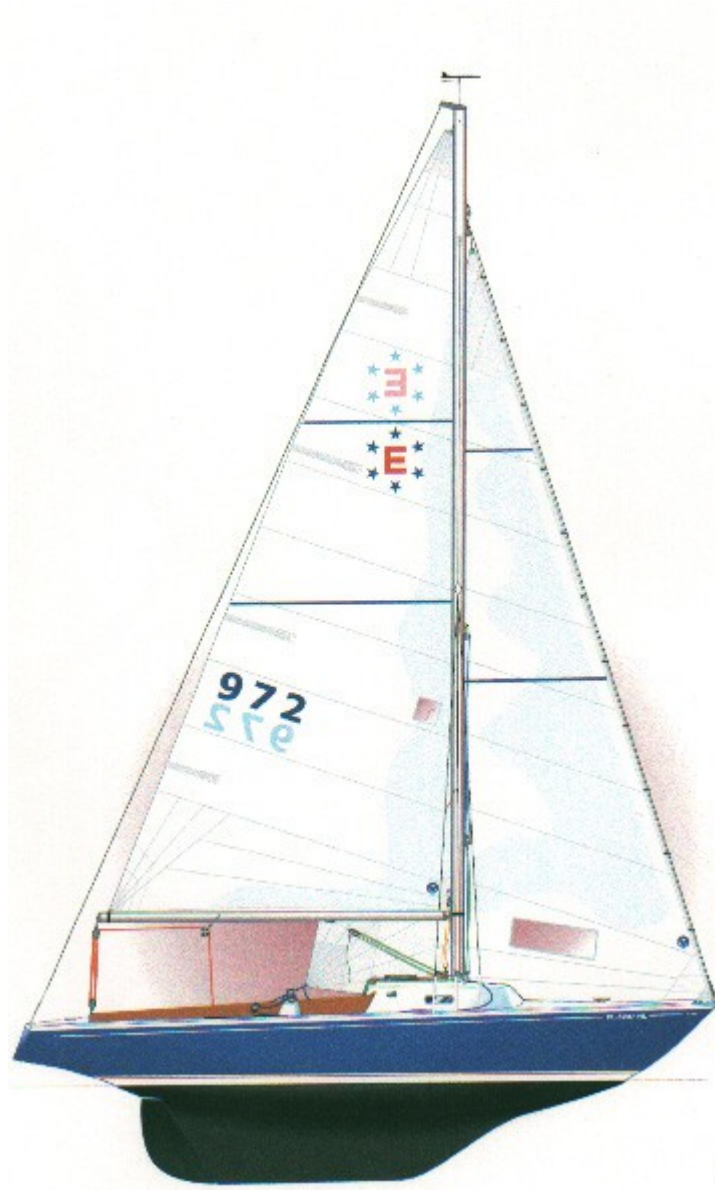
During a Blue Hill race, the fleet became compressed in the middle of Blue Hill Bay where there was no wind. *Scaramouche*, *Kolibri* and Bill Reynolds' *Matriarch* ended up side by side drifting into each other in no wind and a brisk current. We ended up rafting the three boats together for a few minutes to avoid damaging each other's boats. Friendly and humorous words were exchanged between the crews. The raft up ended when the wind increased, with Merle disconnecting *Kolibri* and giving a discreet and minor push off that propelled ever so slightly *Scaramouche* forward. My dad immediately noticed and cried out "Merle! "Now look what you've done!"

Merle won his first sailing trophy in 1944 at age 16, sailing a 16-foot catboat named *Duck* he borrowed from a friend. He had finished second place in a Centerboard Yacht Club race.



Merle sailed his first Monhegan Island Race in 1952 in *Rowdy*, a 40-foot schooner. After selling *Rowdy*, Merle started racing one designs, first on an 18-footer built of scrap aluminum named *Can-Can* and then racing Ensigns at the Portland Yacht Club. The 22-foot Ensign Class had a fleet of 25 boats at PYC in the late 1960s through most of the 1970s. He began to establish himself as a force to be reckoned with on the race course, culminating with winning the Ensign Class National Championship in 1972. His daughter Cindy was part of his winning crew.

The Ensign



Jon Knowles reminisces:

“Early on working for Merle on the docks I learned very quickly not to snub Merle’s bowline as he approached a landing on the dock. Now many of our customers would crash if you didn’t snub the bowline to prevent the boat from crashing into a vessel on the dock, but Merle knew how to dock a boat. He almost always nailed it, maybe always. I can hear him now, “DON’T SNUB MY BOWLINE”. After hearing that a couple times I never snub his bow and I find myself saying that but with less intensity.”

Merle never walked down the dock from his office, he always jogged. Most of the time you knew he was coming because he literally had about a dozen keys on a shackle clipped to his belt loop and they made a lot of noise, or warning, for us working on the dock.

Jon Knowles continues:

Merle would listen to us down by the dock house through his intercom speaker, but I don't think he realized the speaker made a buzz sound, so we knew he was listening. We were very careful about what we said, and many times embellished our love of Handy's and Merle. I think he caught on very quickly.

Merle had a hard time getting and keeping good dishwashers at the Galley Restaurant but realized he had a captive audience for working on the dock. He incorporated a policy that you had to work a summer washing dishes at the Galley to become a dock boy the next season. It worked.

In May 1972, the legal drinking age went from 20 to 18 and many of our Falmouth High School friends gathered at the Galley Lounge including Cindy Hallett, for our first legal cocktail. It was a big deal to us. Merle came jogging into the lounge and said "Knowles, Reiche we need to go sail a boat back from Marblehead". Can you go and leave now? We jumped at the opportunity leaving our first legal cocktail unfinished.

In the spring of 1979, I got to race on the prototype of the new Pearson 40 with Merle and Bill Shaw, the designer, in the Stamford-Vineyard Race. Merle and Bill were extremely close friends, and I was thrilled to be racing with them. The boat was barely ready to go for a sail let alone race. Dinner time came around and there was no way to light the propane stove to heat up the frozen beef stroganoff Mrs. Shaw had made. No matches, no torch, no cigarette lighter. Bill and Merle spent two hours coming up with ways to create a spark. At one point they disconnected the batteries cables from the starter and tried to create a spark over the burner. We ended up eating half frozen stroganoff. I learned a lot from Merle.

For a few summers I navigated for Merle on Scaramouche which was a great experience and he forced me to be a better navigator. Those were really foggy days bouncing off the shore to stay out of the tidal current in a Harraseeket Regatta, Boothbay Regatta or Camden/Castine Race. Merle had me on the edge of the nav seat always. There was no GPS, we used time/distance/speed with two stop watches and charts. Merle would yell below to me "when do we tack?" I'd say soon. Merle would say "how soon". What's your depth? When do we tack? Keep going. TACK NOW, THERE'S THE LEDGE! I had more fun but was usually exhausted after those dense foggy races."

Merle had an uncanny ability to make every boat he sailed go fast! I have many distinct memories of Merle driving his boats simultaneously higher to the wind and faster through the water than anybody else. He did this with all the different *Scaramouches*, which included the aforementioned Pearson 36 and Tanton 42, Mr. Jumpa, a Farr designed custom 37-foot "one tonner" originally built in New Zealand, a Pearson 33 and 37, and custom built Dobroth 42 and a Nelson Marek 39.

Merle was always modest, soft spoken and a true gentleman. After winning a given race, he'd have to be coaxed into discussion and usually passed on compliments about your own performance. He was always interested in what you'd have to say.

A near sistership to Merle's Dobroth 41, which he raced in the mid-late 1980s



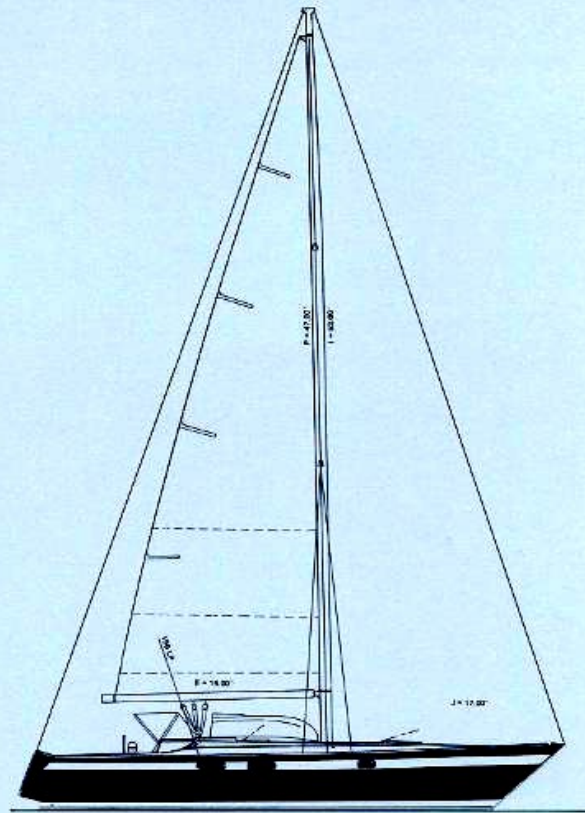
the **PEARSON 40**

Come Sail
With Us...

SPECIFICATIONS*

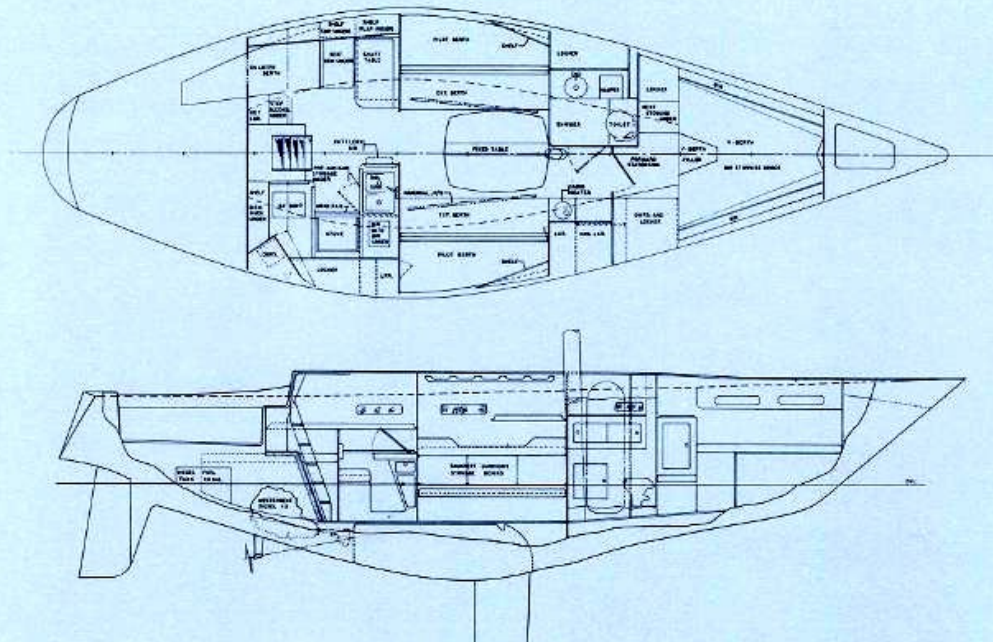
L.O.A.	39'11" (12.17m)
D.W.L.	31'3" (9.53m)
BEAM	12'6" (3.81m)
DRAFT (BOARD UP)	4'3" (1.30m)
DRAFT (BOARD DOWN)	9'5" (2.87m)
DISPLACEMENT	22,800 lbs. (10341 kg)
BALLAST	12,200 lbs. (5533 kg)
SAIL AREA	802 sq. ft. (74.51m ²)
MAST HEIGHT ABOVE D.W.L.	58'0" (17.68m)
HEADROOM	6'4" (1.93m)
FRESH WATER CAPACITY	90 gals. (340.69 l)
FUEL CAPACITY	46 gals. (174.13 l)
POWER	DIESEL

*Approximate



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Jane Wellehan remembers:

"I don't have one story. I have an overall story of Merle in my life. I started sailing with my dad quite regularly starting when I was 12 or 13. Merle was one of the people who always encouraged me and talked to me like a fellow sailor - not like a little kid. He was always gracious and warm to me, and even more happy when he saw me bringing my babies out sailing on the Go Dog Go with David and me. He would nod his approval and tell me how great it was that we were bringing another generation into the sport. He was always kind to me, greeting me with his big smile, particularly in early spring, when we all reconnected with each other and our love of Casco Bay after the long winter."

In the 1970s, Merle's sailing reputation grew beyond the local Maine waters. In 1972, he raced a Falmouth, Maine based C&C 35 named *Aesop*, owned by Sandy Fowler, in what turned out to be a storm-tossed 1972 Bermuda Race. They won their class on one of the smallest boats in the race. Merle began to get noticed by world famous sailors, including Lloyd Ecclestone, who invited Merle to crew aboard the 55-foot yacht *Runaway* in the Southern Ocean Racing Circuit, known as the SORC. During the 1960s-1980s, the SORC was considered the world championship of offshore sailing. Ecclestone made Merle a watch captain and, after the SORC, they raced all over the Caribbean for two months.

The C&C 35 *Aesop*, Class winner of the 1972 Newport-Bermuda Race



He participated in SORC for about 15 years. In 1981, with sons Jay and Richard, he crewed for Ted Hood aboard *Robin*, a Hood designed 37-footer. Hallett rejoined Ecclestone to race *Volcano*, a 64-foot Frers in SORC. A few years later they won Antigua Race Week on *Ricochet*, a Canada's Cup yacht. Racing took him to the West Coast to sail in the Transpac Race from Los Angeles to Hawaii Race, which he sailed on his old Tanton 42. The condition for selling the boat to a West Coast buyer was he and his crew could race her in the Transpac.

A near sistership to *Robin*



Kialoa, S&S designed Maxi 80-footer owned by Jim Kilroy



Merle made lots of friends in the sailing and racing world. He crewed aboard the famous Jim Kilroy-owned 80-foot maxi called *Kialoa* in the 1970s and 1980s, bringing his sons and daughters with him when he could. In 1983, Merle raced aboard *Kialoa* in the Skaw Race, a long-distance event starting in Oslo, Norway with turning marks off Denmark and Sweden.

I met Mr. Kilroy through business in 1994 and he talked in glowing terms about Merle's sailing prowess and good companionship aboard *Kialoa*. Kilroy brought *Kialoa* to Falmouth in the late 1990s to visit Merle.

Max Fletcher reflects:

"About fifteen years ago I was getting ready to help deliver Derek Ratteray's Alden 53 "Alida" from Portland to Bermuda. Merle was making the same journey on a friend's boat. We shared weather forecasts by group email and waited for a favorable departure window in the unsettled November weather pattern. After a couple weeks of lousy forecasts Merle's friend wrote "screw the weather" (using somewhat more colorful language) "I'm leaving next Wednesday!." I decided the forecast looked too dicey to leave, but wondered if I would feel chagrined at my timidness if they ended up having a good trip. It was much to my relief when an email to the group popped up from Merle: "If you're leaving next Wednesday, you're leaving on your own." In the end both boats had a good voyage South - a week later."

Sailboat racing is a tough sport to master, especially on long distance races before the 1990s when navigation and weather forecasting lacked the accuracy and technology of today.

Bob Twinem recalls:

"Merle did teach me a few things about good performance on the racing sailboat. The main one that has stuck with me is when handing the skipper, a can of beer, always open it and have the opening facing the skipper so that they are not distracted when receiving and drinking from the can."

A memorable story was when we sailed the Tanton 42 in the Harraseeket race when it was an overnight race. We were the scratch boat. It was foggy with light air, and we kept heading further offshore looking for wind on the way back from Monhegan. As we came back to shore and emerged out of the fog, we found that it had been blowing hard all night closer to the shore. We were the last to finish as the RC boat pulled the anchor."

Peter Garcia remembers:

"Merle resisted age and continued to make a difference on the racecourse, in business, and in whatever he chose to do long past the time most of his contemporaries moved to assisted living communities. About 15 years ago I was serving with Merle on the board of GMORA. He had been a board member, and consistent contributor to the organization's success for decades. We all looked to him for guidance.

When it came my turn to be president I suggested and the GMORA board approved creating the position of director emeritus, to honor extraordinary contributors to our sport.

Peter Garcia (continued):

I nominated the first two honorees, Merle Hallett and Olin Stephens. Merle was pushing 80 and Olin was over 90. I thought Merle would be pleased to be honored in company with the legendary designer of famous racing boats. Was I surprised when Merle told me in no uncertain terms of his displeasure; he wasn't ready to be memorialized. It was obvious he thought he wasn't done yet. He was right. That was Merle."

Mr. Jumpa, a Farr 37 built out of wood in New Zealand that Merle owned and raced in the early 1980s.



Doyle Marchant recalls:

“True story. It’s 1976. Greenhorn Me buys [37 foot] 1 tonner, surrounds myself with people who knew what they were doing and trounced the Gulf of Maine Ocean Racing Circuit. Merle calls me into his office to give me the trophy. He said: “You are great at putting a crew together!” Thanks Merle! Anticipating in advance, I handed him a box of Cheerios and said he should consider eating what the Big Boys Eat. Silence then Laughter. “

Jonathan Hussey laughs:

“In 1979, I was sailing my dad’s Sabre 34 Seabiscuit in Newport, RI doing a race week there. We approach Scaramouche broadside and attack Merle and family with water balloons. Merle was caught off-guard, because he was understandably more worried about Kolibri, who had a reputation for on-the-water shenanigans. Seabiscuit’s crew unloaded on Merle, his family and the owner of Pearson Yachts, Bill Shaw. They were on the flush deck Pearson 40. “

Bruce Hamlin recalls:

Merle had what I would call an expanded closet in which all his trophies were stored. Remember he hardly ever would look in on the collection, but it was huge. And there were stories about each one..... would be fun to get bunch former crew members, mostly family, together in that room... bet you would get some outrageous stories.”

Merle’s last Scaramouche, a Nelson Marek 39



Article and picture of Screech, Merle's prototype 32-foot Bill Shaw design, shown in a later life

Screech Update:

When last seen, SCREECH, Bill Shaw's one-off 32-footer was raising eyelids on Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. She managed a FIRST and a SECOND in the Mardi Gras Regatta, giving her a FIRST for the series. These were light air races (0-8 knots) and the competition included a Ranger 32, Chance 30/30, Cal 2-30, Cal 3-30, and others. Our biggest complaint (besides a shortage of beer) was the fact that we had trouble sailing through a C & C 38 and a Heritage one ton sailing in Class A!

Next were a couple of around-the-buoys races. Competition included a Carter 1/2 ton, Pearson 10M, C & C 33, and Ranger 32's, among others. The first effort netted a third. In the second race a very common problem befell the SCREECH crew. They sailed to the wrong side of the course and lost a few boats, finishing seventh.

Back up north for the summer, SCREECH raced for a SECOND in the EDLU race and THIRD for the series during spring OFF SOUNDINGS. Most recently she got a FIRST in the 120-mile Pilot Race (Portland Yacht Club) and a SECOND in the Harraseeket Yacht Club 100-mile overnight race.

There will certainly be more to hear about SCREECH. If she should continue her winning ways, she may have some sisters following her down the production line. We'll let you know.



SCREECH running in light air on Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans.

Dan Wellehan remembers:

“Merle, Dodge Morgan and I brought Dodge Morgan’s boat back from Tortola. We stopped in Bermuda. Dodge took ill and was hospitalized in Bermuda. For 4 days stayed on Wings of Time and fixed the boat’s refrigeration. Dodge recovered and they sailed back to Handy Boat. Late 1990s. Beyond that just had a lot of fun. Merle came aboard Shamrock for a couple of Boon Island Races. Had breakfast in Handy’s restaurant after one race. Always a lot of fun things said. Dan Wakeman and he learned the joke about poison with the Labrador. On the racecourse, he was a pretty serious guy. But things he did on shore was always festive.”

Kitt Watson recalls:

“Sure, do miss my buddy. The most fun we ever had was racing the Monhegan Island Race and Merle was my navigator. He was up all night long. My son Ali was feeding Merle coffee with a touch of rum. My son just loved that race. That’s one race I’ll never forget!

For wisdom, Merle always told me patience Kitt. The wind will come!”

Jay Hallett recollects:

Merle was extremely competitive in anything he did. Self-taught sailor at a young age while living on Munjoy Hill in Portland. He was extremely proud to be from “the Hill”.

Made friends in every port he visited. Surrounded himself with people that could help get the job done. When he bought HBS he looked to some businessmen customers to guide him through the process. When he and Dan Wellehan started the MS Regatta, he again looked for the best people to launch their idea to raise money for MS. The list goes on throughout his life. When Pearson Yachts was looking to expand to the overseas markets Merle was asked to travel with them to search out possible dealer sights. He was very proud of that. Two of his proudest sailboat racing accomplishments were winning the Ensign Nationals and receiving a Rolex watch at Block Island Race week while racing his Pearson 37 and having the lowest point score in the fleet of about 300 boats.”

Pearson 37 (sistership to *Scaramouche*)



Jay Hallett (continued)

“Throughout his racing career, he welcomed many people that had never been in a sailboat race to crew with him. Some became full time crewmembers. He was usually kind to these crewmembers until they reached the point he felt they had learned their position on the boat. At that point when they screwed something up they would become known as a “zipper head” (his favorite name for someone that made a mistake) just like the rest of us.

While his sailing career was winding down, he, like many, bought a powerboat. During his twilight years, he owned three different powerboats that he and Barbara would spend much of the summer on here in Maine. When the days grew shorter, they would make the trip south to Florida where they would spend the winter.

Merle always had an artistic talent whether it was with charcoal or pencil he could draw most anything. While in his 80’s he took painting lessons. Again, he asked help from accomplished painters to help him perfect the craft. Below is one of his paintings he did of his beloved Endurance. I keep thinking about all the lives he influenced through his life. He may have been an influencer before it became a thing on social media.”

Endurance, painted by Merle



Betsy Stivers remembers: [Betsy crewed aboard Kolibri]

"The only time I sailed with Merle was the Ft. Lauderdale to Key West Race in 1979 and you were there. I don't remember much, but he didn't say much until it would make a difference."

Dan Rugg recalls: [Dan was coach of the U.S. Naval Academy Offshore Racing Team] [the 60-foot boat *American Promise* mentioned by Dan Rugg below was commissioned by Merle's friend Dodge Morgan, who in 1985 sailed her singlehanded around the world nonstop in a little over 150 days, breaking the record time to do so. Morgan was the fourth person and the first American to sail solo around the globe nonstop.]

"I had the distinct pleasure of sailing with Merle on a couple of occasions. After American Promise was re-configured to be used by US Naval Academy Midshipmen in 1996, I used to bring her to Maine and would make Falmouth Foreside a consistent destination. Merle would let us take his mooring at the end of the Handy Boat dock. I recall there were a couple of occasions when he would come aboard and have a day sail w/ the Mids. The most memorable cruise we had together was in '99. We picked him up in Northeast Harbor, proceeded across to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia and spent a couple of days there. As expected, Merle was friends with multiple people; there was a couple that invited us to stay with them for the nights we were there. We departed and went west for an overnight sail to Handy Boat... Over the years when we were in Maine I would stop and have a visit. More recently in the last few years, we would visit my aunt and uncle, Humphrey and Posie Simson in Stuart and on our way back north we would stop to have lunch or spend the night in Vero Beach. Hump was a long-time member of the CCA and knew Merle from sailing against him in his boat KITTIWAKE. These are my fond memories of Merle..."

Jim Stanley recollects:

Merle Hallett: A Friendship going back more than sixty years; also, my sailing mentor.

I have been asked to write an article of a memorable sailing experience involving Merle. There were so many times that we sailed together (Bermuda Races, Inaugural Yarmouth Cup, New York Yacht Club Regattas, American Yacht Club Fall Series, Key West Race Weeks, to name a few). It is hard to choose a particular regatta; all were challenging, and all were fun.

A regatta which stands out, though, was the 1990 Key West Race Week. Capella VII was new to me in the fall of 1989. Key West was our first BIG regatta; over 100 boats. The J44's had a one design class, with 14 boats. The week was competitive, and it was fun.

I mention above that the regatta was fun. Merle contributed much to that fun, both on and off the water. Key West was like no other place we had raced. The people-watching was amazing. The funky little bars were everywhere. I fondly remember Merle walking into a bar or two, sitting down for a drink, talking with the musicians, and picking up a bass, and playing along with the small bands. I recall going to Sunset Park each night – Merle interacting with the "cat man". He was just such a social person, always interreacting with people around him.

To the racing, preparation was paramount to Merle, down to the docks early, no excuses for too much fun the night before. Out on the water early, practice, practice, practice! Talk through strategy. We are sailing one design, in big boats, something I had not done much of since sailing J24's years earlier: quite different from 'around the buoys' racing.

Jim Stanley (continued):

Then it is time for that first race. I remember it was a beautiful day, blue water, gusty winds, and plenty of tension. Merle was our tactician. A perfect start. It was tacking duel upwind, with three boats swapping in and out of the lead. The leading boats came into the mark on port tack. Of the leading boat at the mark, Merle says, "Don't worry Jimmy, they will do a bare away", which would be customary for a windward leeward course, in close quarters (separation, no more than two boat lengths). The first to round, Blue Monster, having just tacked onto starboard, dove behind us and the third boat, and we locked masts with Blue Monster, buckling their mast above the spreaders.

Blue Monster, just after the J44 that locked masts with Jim Stanley's Capella in the 1990 Key West Race Week



*Key West Race Week
1990
1st Day - 1st Mark*

From left to right, Don Stanley, Jim's brother, Barbara Stanley, Merle and Arnold Potter



Jim Stanley (continued)

On the way back to the marina, Merle kept saying "they shouldn't have done that...., crazy thing to do!". I, of course, was in shock. Then a protest meeting. Merle went as my witness. He eloquently stated our case, but was told by the chairman of the committee, whom he knew well, "shut up sonny; speak when you are asked to...", or something like that. Blue Monster was sailed by a bunch of reckless professionals. In the protest meeting, they out gunned us, and we lost. Our argument essentially was that we didn't have ample opportunity to maneuver. Their argument was that they had pulled away from the mark, spinnaker full, and that we had ample opportunity to get out of their way. Interestingly, a photo came out the next day, in the Miami newspaper, which supported our position – not that it mattered, as we had withdrawn from the race, not sure whether our rig was compromised. Blue Monster had a new rig flown in, and they were back on the racecourse the following day.

Memories of sailing with Merle will always be a treasured."

I was aboard Capella that fateful day. I was trimming the mainsail, looking up the mast, when we tangled with Blue Monster's rig. Capella's mast bent backwards to the point I was sure it would break, when instead, Blue Monster's rig broke. The mast snapped back into position with such force, I'm pretty sure the Windex, formerly mounted atop Capella's mast, was launched into Earth orbit!

My last sailing memory of Merle was helping him enter the 2018 Monhegan Race. Barbara called me and asked if I could help him sign up on his computer. I went to his house, and we filled out the entry form. Merle was just as excited about doing the race as a newcomer! He was especially pleased that all three of his sons, Will, Richard and Jay, would be his crew. He was sailing Leola, a Pearson 10 Meter, a 1970s vintage boat that began its sailing career as *Leprechaun*, which actively raced in the GMORC in the 1970s. The boat is now owned by Jay Hallett.

Leola, a Pearson 10M, motoring out to start of 2018 Monhegan Island Race- Pictured left to right are Merle and his sons Will, Richard and Jay



My last visit was in 2021 at Merle and Barbara's house in Falmouth. He proudly showed me his absolutely stunning works of art. One of our friends, Cathy Robinson, attended art classes with Merle in 2010 and raved about his artistic talents. Those talents were on display in large numbers as I toured his art gallery.



Merle's Last Trophy

Merle was a man of many talents ranging from business, sailboat racing, to art. He had many friends and was, as his son Jay so aptly put, an Influencer before that was a thing.

Fair winds and following seas, Merle.