

Half a Century with the Dragons

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Summary. Poul Richard Høj-Jensen looks back on 50 years in the Dragon class, from breaking in sails for Danish champions as a teenager and sailing the last Olympic Dragon regatta in Kiel in 1972 to building Dragons at Petticrows from 1988. He describes how Børge Børresen's GRP Dragon saved the class after it lost Olympic status, and why wooden boats were not allowed to be faster than GRP ones. A 1989 demonstration in Ireland, where pulling the runners on two masted boats showed one mast bending evenly and the other inverting in the middle, illustrates why he made his own masts and sails. He lists his six principles for building a true one-design, including a standardised rig that allows a mast change in no more than 20 minutes and identical fitting positions on every boat.

Poul Richard Høj-Jensen shares his thoughts on half a century of involvement with the International Dragon.

I have won perhaps more than my fair share of races and do know a bit about how to make a boat go fast; however, in this article I should like to explore the past to try to help inspire younger Dragon sailors.

One way or the other, much of my sailing life has revolved around the Dragon Class. In 2018, it will be 50 years since I took part (and won) my first International Dragon Race. Before that time, in my early teens, I used to be allowed by the great Danish Dragon sailors of the time, Ole Berntsen, Aage Birch and Axel Holm, from time to time to break their new sails in. I would sail backwards and forwards for hours, until I was told to come in. To sail in a Dragon was a big privilege in those days.

It took a very long time to get a new Dragon up to speed then, and the top sailors rarely changed boats and for sure guarded their trim details very closely; Aage Birch even built his own Dragon (to get ahead of the competition perhaps!). In 1968, I was working for Paul Elvstrom/Hans Fogh in both sail making and boat/mast building and got to know many top sailors. It goes without saying, in that environment, we only had one goal; how to make boats go faster but most importantly better. No aluminium mast, no spinnaker chute and poor-quality Dacron was what we had to contend with in the Dragon Class. Before putting up the spinnaker, the crew had to run up the foredeck to clip on the container; some of the older Dragon sailors will remember this.

I represented Denmark in 1972, in what turned out to be the last Dragon Olympics in Kiel, with my brother Frank and friend Gunner Dalgaard crewing. The Pedersen & Thuesen Dragon was lent to me by a Spanish gentleman. Lots of Olympic sailors, myself included, left and for some years the Dragon Class stood still, when it was no longer an Olympic Class. It could have died altogether had it not been for Borge Borresen, the Danish builder. His steadfast work and introduction of the GRP Dragon

encountered quite some opposition from those Dragon Owners who did not approve of this 'development' in the Class. Scared their wooden boats were faster than the new GRP or vice versa, the owners had many heated discussions at that time. And today at least ten wooden Dragons from around 1963 still compete very successfully in Worlds, Europeans and Gold Cups. The running/maintenance costs of these boats are many times that of a GRP Dragon, and we might wonder if there is another reason other than the love of antique/wood boat, for these owners to make their choice!

It could well be, had the Dragon had been built in GRP in 1972, it would have continued as an Olympic Class a lot longer. I helped BB with his development/tapering of the aluminium mast and there is a picture of him and me sailing the first GRP Dragon. Borge also received support from the "old" Dragon sailors; Ken Gumley from Scotland bought the first GRP Dragon to enter the UK. Eventually the GRP Dragons became the norm, and once established, the Dragon Class started to recover. I very much shared and supported Borge's view that the wooden Dragon should not be faster than the GRP boats. We agreed if that should be allowed to happen, it would be the death of the Class.

When I started building Dragons in 1988 in Petticrows, my mission was to convince the International Dragon Association (IDA)/Technical Committee (TC) to be allowed to make the GRP Dragon better and turn it into a true One Design. It was not always an easy job persuading the somewhat conservative executive group at the IDA. Some quarters were supportive though; ISAF (then the IYRU) who know that there is a direct correlation between a successful builder and number of Class boats built; TC members Oscar Weber, Yves Leglise and Peter Duce who understood that boat builders need help and positive support to successfully translate the rules.

In 1988, Dragon Builders would buy their mast and sails from their suppliers. And usually nothing matched, so the Dragon sailors needed to find out themselves how to get speed. To give an example:

I was invited to Ireland in 1989 (by Mick Cotter/Tim Pearson of course) to do some tuning of the local boats. To explain to the sailors the importance of rig set up, we arranged two Dragons on their trailers with the masts up in the car park; one a Petticrow, the other not. I first pulled the runners on the P and everyone could see the mast bending in an even curve. Not so when I did the same on the other Dragon; the mast went backwards in the middle. If you bought the same sails for those two boats, you would have completely different results!

The reason I have had success on the race course and as a Dragon builder was that I always worked very hard on the mast and rig. When buying in a mast from a supplier, you could never be sure the spreader angle was correct, mast foot straight etc. etc. To get things to work, I soon discovered we had to make our own masts and sails. It took a lot of effort, but to my great pleasure, this hard work was rewarded, as many Dragon sailors got very good results in their Petticrows, and the fleets came closer and closer together. My six points to success as a Dragon builder were:

- Mast in the correct position for everyone.

- Standardise the rig, so it takes no more than 20 minutes to change a mast.
- All fittings (main traveller, sheeting points etc.) in the exact same position.
- Clear tuning/rig/sail trim guide.
- Supply a product ready to race and win races straight out of the box.
- Tell all my customers how to trim and be always ready to help if necessary.

Most of the above have become normal standards, but for sure this was not the case before 1988.

Young sailors today have many choices as to which Class of boat to race; I am the first to admit there are more exciting boats to sail than a Dragon. However, looking back at my long life in Dragons, the professionals and cheque book sailors come and go, but the backbone of the Class are all those 'normal' Dragon sailors; they stay the course and become lifelong friends all over the World. You only need to stop at traffic lights or drive along motorways anywhere in Europe with your Dragon in tow, for people to signal their approval at the sight of this beautiful boat. Yes, she is not easy to sail, but the skills this boat teaches can help you to become the World's best.

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