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## Still Sailing: Classic Yacht Races Revive Interest in Historic Boats

By WILLIAM R. SNYDER  
Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
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When the Olympic sailing events get under way Saturday at the Qingdao Olympic Sailing Center, sailors will compete in a variety of uniform fiberglass vessels called one-designs -- which are meant to eliminate variation and test contestants solely on speed and tactics.

But last month, an earlier form of racing took place that featured the yachts themselves as unique competitors. Forty-five classic boats raced near the Isle of Wight in the British Classic Yacht Regatta in a competition of speed, but also in a celebration of natural materials, individual design and sheer beauty. In one race, the yachts followed the same course used 100 years ago for the first fully sanctioned Olympic sailing races, in the 1908 London Olympics.



Nichola Aigner  
The yacht Ilderim racing in the British Classic Yacht Regatta last month.

"Seeing classic yachts is like watching a painting move on the water," says David Orton, director of the British Classic Yacht Club.

The regatta is part of a growing circuit of classic yacht races in the English Channel, North Sea, West Indies and the Mediterranean. Roughly five regattas are held in each body of water annually, and almost all have started in the past seven years.

Until a few years ago a small cadre of sailing enthusiasts mostly showed off 100-year-old yachts in port like car collectors at an auto show. Today, off the south coast of England alone there are five weeklong races for classic yachts taking place in June and July. Next week, 24 antique boats are setting sail for the first trans-Atlantic race limited only to classics.

A classic yacht is defined as any built before 1970 with no changes to the rigging and minimal modifications to the overall appearance. That year is also when plastics and fiberglass widely replaced wood as the favored material for yacht construction.

Though modern boats are usually faster, what attracts people to classic yachts is something more than speed: personality. "Wooden boats have a soul," says John Lammerts van Beuren, executive secretary of the International Eight-Metre Association, a highly competitive racing class that features many older boats alongside new ones.

These days, modern boats are mass produced, and nearly all components are made of composite plastic, lightweight metal or fiberglass. Sails are made of Kevlar, nylon and carbon fiber blends, and rigging lines use synthetic fibers. Classic yachts, however, were built (and are restored) with natural materials: wood for the hull, mast and blocks, and canvas or cotton for sails. Each boat was unique and handcrafted. Because of the variation in size and materials, yachts were handicapped in races. A 1907 rule known as the Metre Rule set out parameters for each class, but it allowed for wide variation. Today's one-designs, by contrast, are built to exact measurements.

Old gaff rigs, sloops, 12-Metres, Eight-Metres and yawls were the choice yachts for Europe's aristocracy a century ago. (The names 12-Metre and Eight-Metre don't refer to the length of the boat but rather to a figure reached by calculating factors including draft, length and width.)

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Nichola Aigner  
The yacht Lady Ann racing in the British Classic Yacht Regatta.

The yachts are still toys for the rich. "Restoring or owning a vintage yacht is the hot scene around the Isle of Wight and France," says Mr. Orton. "There's an element of fashion to it."

The same can be said for the Mediterranean, according to Loïc Blanken, who is organizing next week's Trans-Atlantic Classique regatta. "The classics are in style now because they are breathtaking to watch under sail, but also because they're a part of history," says Mr. Blanken. For example, in July at the Eight-Metre World Championships, King Harald of Norway beat modern competitors sailing a boat given to his father in 1938.

Owners of these classic yachts see themselves as mixtures of historians and art collectors. On the British Classic Yacht Club Web site, biographies for 81 member yachts are meticulously detailed.

The Ilderim, for example, was built by Tore Holm for Swedish banker Marcus Wallenberg Jr. to sail for Sweden in the 1936 Olympics. The boat won the gold, but was stripped of the medal. Current owner Marc Besshofs, a Belgian businessman, says the disqualification was political. "There is no violation noted for disqualification," he says. When the Ilderim was eliminated, Italy then took the gold and Germany, silver, causing speculation that the disqualification was politically motivated by Hitler.

Other entries describing when owners first sighted their yachts read like love stories. "I was wind bound in the East of England in a plastic boat, when I looked out of the harbor and saw a beautiful wooden boat handling the high winds with ease," Mr. Orton recounts. He bought the boat, Saint David's Light, and now refers to it as his "high-priced mistress."

Sailor David Murrin was the overall winner of the British Classic Yacht Regatta with Cetewayo, a restored 1955 yacht designed by John Laurent Giles that was found rotting on a dry dock in 1989.

Some owners re-enact races in Edwardian costume. Women don large-brimmed hats and skirts while working the winches and men sport double-breasted blazers and white trousers at the helm.

The master of design from this era was William Fife Jr., a Scotsman who built many of the most famous racers during the early 20th century, including two America's Cup challengers, Shamrock I and Shamrock III. His philosophy that a boat should be "fast and bonnie" became a creed inspiring others to design with both form and function in mind. He made yachts narrower and changed the angle of the waterline, both of which reduced drag. As a result his boats seem to glide in the water.



Nichola Aigner  
The yacht Ierne on Ladies Day at the regatta

Fabrication procedures, materials and design evolved rapidly in the middle of last century, spurring the creation of newer and faster racing classes. Owners who wanted to remain competitive left behind their wooden yachts. Though some of the golden age yachts remained active, most were mothballed or scrapped entirely for their valuable wood.



Corbis  
Shamrock sails in the Atlantic off New England around 1899.

By the 1980s sailors uncovered yachts in dry docks, marshes and junkyards and started restoring them. But designs by masters like Messrs. Fife and Holm are in short supply. "There isn't a reserve of old boats anymore," Mr. Orton says. Prices are high for classics that come on the market. For example, Saskia, a 1931 Fife Eight-Metre, was listed this year with a starting price at €160,000 (the sale price wasn't disclosed); in comparison, the Yquem, a modern Eight-Metre built in 1985, is for sale for €10,000.

Restoration projects can be difficult: Builders like Mr. Fife used African mahogany for decks and rock elm, oak and exotic woods for the framework. Wood grains must be carefully matched, and finding woods such as rock elm in bulk is hard.

Another challenge is finding expert labor. "The time between original construction and restoration skips two generations, so it's astounding the skill sets remain to do the detailed work," says Mr. Besshofs. Few craftspeople have the required expertise to frame the support ribbing, fabricate the hull and do the detailed wood working for the cabins. To satisfy demand, a half-dozen shipyards in the U.K. now run apprenticeship programs for boat builders interested in antique yacht restoration.

Because of the limited supply in restoration projects, the future is in creating new vessels and replicas of classics, says Duncan Walker, owner of Fairlie Restorations in Hamble, England, which builds yachts from classic designs from the early 1900s.

One of the biggest classic yacht replica projects under way is the re-creation of the 210-foot schooner Atlantic, a legendary ocean racer from the early 1900s. The boat took the trophy at the 1905 Kaiser's Cup, a trans-Atlantic regatta, and also set a 24-hour speed record that stood for 93 years. But after World War II, the ship was left in mothballs and later scrapped in the harbor at Newport News, Va., in 1982.

In 2005, Dutch yachtsman Ed Kastelein decided that for sheer spectacle alone, another Atlantic should sail. He spent the past three years researching every detail of the original design, from sail rigging to the total displacement to varieties of wood used in order to ensure an exact replica. He's directing the rebuild near Rotterdam, and the boat is expected to be finished next year.

#### The Big Five: Classic Designers

Five designers who made major advances in the speed and beauty of classic yachts, and their signature vessels.

**Nathanael Herreshoff**



Corbis  
Wreckers dismantle Shamrock for scrap in Southampton, around 1924.

(1848-1938)



Nathaneal Herreshoff

Widely considered the early master of America's Cup yachts, Mr. Herreshoff's five designs dominated the races from 1893-1920, defending the trophy six times. Along with successful racing boats, Mr. Herreshoff supplied yachts for many of America's wealthy industrialists from his shipyard in Bristol, Rhode Island.

#### Reliance, 1902-03

With a crew of 64 and a length of 27 meters, Reliance was one of the greatest and last of the large-scale ocean racers, and it won the 1903 America's Cup. Its success came from advanced engineering that replaced pulleys with winches and allowed for a 199-foot mast on only a 90-foot hull.



Reliance

Corbis

#### William Fife Jr. (1857-1944)

Born into a yacht-building family, Mr. Fife was the third generation to work at their shop on the River Clyde in Fairlie, Scotland. Mr. Fife helped transition the racing yachts from the large cutters and gaff-rigs of the late 1800s, which used several sails at once and needed a large crew, to lighter and faster Metre boats, becoming a prolific designer of the latter. He also worked to simplify lines and used understated design cues, such as rounded overhangs for the stern and inlaid decking patterns. Because of his signature refinement, the Fife designs are highly sought.

#### Moonbeam of Fife, 1902



Getty Images

Christened Moonbeam III, it was Mr. Fife's third design for London lawyer Charles Plumtree Johnson, who had been dissatisfied with the racing abilities of the previous two Moonbeams. The 25-meter yawl is an exceptional example of an early 20th-century yacht with massive sail area. Even at more than 100 years old, the yacht races in the Mediterranean circuit and is available for charter from its port in Saint-Tropez.

#### Alfred Mylne (1872-1951)

Moonbeam

A Scotsman, who began his career at the famous design firm G.L. Watson, Mr. Mylne's first notable commission was the racing cutter Britannia, built for King Edward VII. After such early successes, Mr. Mylne started his own office and became a pioneer of Metre boats.



Alfred Mylene

#### Edit, 1911

Only four years after the establishment of the Metre Rule, which set out basic parameters for each class, designers were still tampering with the formula to maximize speed and beauty. Mr. Mylne made his contribution with the yacht Edit, an Eight-Metre whose hull rested low in the water with long bow and stern overhangs. It helped create the now-ubiquitous look of the racing class. Edit still races in Lake Constance, Germany.

#### Tore Holm (1896-1977)

Along with designing some of the world's best racing Metre boats, Mr. Holm was a successful sailor in his own right. Competing for Sweden in the Olympics in five Games during the period 1920-1948, he medaled four times including two golds. During his first Olympic race in 1920 he sailed to gold in a boat he designed and built at only 23. Mr. Holm's signature was speed, which he achieved through perfecting the balance between keel weight, hull length and sail area.

#### Athena, 1939



To shake the sting of disqualification at the 1936 Olympics, Marcus Wallenberg Jr. commissioned this second incarnation of his Eight-Metre Ilderim, built almost identically. The yacht won several trophies in 1939 but its early career was cut short by the beginning of World War II. As a testament to Mr. Holm's mastery, Athena races today at the highest level of regattas and placed 4th against 50 modern boats at the 2007 Cowes Week Regatta at the Isle of Wight, which was founded in 1826 and is the longest-running regatta in the world.

**John Laurent Giles**  
(1901-1969)

Mr. Giles straddles the gap between classic and modern yacht builders. He ushered a new era of yacht design by detaching the rudder from the keel and using developments in aeronautics to reduce displacement, which increased speed. Despite these breakthroughs, Mr. Giles is best known for introducing the Vertue class of boats. Though small, measuring only 25 feet, Vertues are considered exceptionally seaworthy classics, completing long oceanic passages.

**Andrillot, 1936**

Mr. Giles's first Vertue was the yacht Andrillot. Launched to little fanfare in 1936, Mr. Giles had successfully simplified the sail plan of a gaff-rig, which was previously thought to be too complicated a rigging system for a small boat because of the numerous lines -- and therefore crew -- required to raise the sails. The popularity of the Vertue class increased in the 1950s as buyers sought smaller boats for cruising and racing.

--William R. Snyder

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