

At the bridge table sometimes we notice the dazzling diamond rings alongside the aces, the amazingly manicured nails or the watches. Most of us do not sport a Rolex. But the very unassuming Tom Stephenson has a beauty : 1976 vintage, engraved “*Australian Yachtsman of the Year*” and presented on behalf of Australian Sailing by famed yachtsman and winemaker Jim Hardy.

Young Tom was a Balwyn boy, went to Camberwell Grammar (Distinction in English Literature) and following in his builder/developer father’s footsteps did a Bachelor of Building degree at Melbourne University. (While there, he discovered he had been born with a hole in the heart, the size of a golf ball; and became an early candidate for open heart surgery. He now has a pacemaker, vintage 1998.)

Back to young Tom : aged eight he started sailing at the Sandringham Yacht Club and absolutely adored it. The feeling was mutual. In his last year at Uni he built a 30’ half ton racing yacht. Finishing Uni with a flourish (three years as stage manager of the hilarious *Architecture Revue*), he promptly went to Sydney to compete in the *Australian Half Ton Championship*. Of course he won.



That qualified him to attend the *World Half Ton Cup* in Chicago the same year. To get there without forking out an airfare Tom sailed over as part of the crew on a big 73’ racing yacht owned by poker machine maestro Jack Rooklyn. With a crew of five, Tom was organiser, helmsman and aged 25 when they won.

With the new Rolex on his wrist (now in its 44th year of daily duty) he gave up plans for a building career and spent ten years or so sailing in every big race around the world. Crewmen in those days had expenses covered and were paid a few hundred dollars a day. Tom was a trail blazer in helping to change the rules so keen young sailors could make a living. From an amateur sport enjoyed by the very rich, it was transformed into a professional sport funded by sponsorships. At the same time he was building boats for the recreational market : about 160 of them, from 23’ to 50’.

His first full-time job offer was from quixotic broadcaster Rod Muir of MMM fame, who had decided to branch out into yachting and try for the *Admiral’s Cup*. Working out of the MMM tower in Sydney, Tom organised an overseas buying trip, suggesting they find an old maxi racing yacht. After searching the UK and Holland, in Florida they settled on the illustrious *Windward Passage*. Their great mutual friend the late Ian Kiernan was keen on competing in the *BOC Solo Around the World Race*. Becoming tired and emotional one evening, Ian and Rod decided the latter would fund a boat for the former to sail; Tom would build it. The highlight of Ian’s single-handed career was making it first into Sydney.

Tom also started to make meticulously crafted models of famous yachts, initially inspired by the 50th Anniversary of the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia’s famous *Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race* in 1995. Over a couple of years he completed models of the 50 winners. The Club was delighted, bought the lot and gave him a lifetime contract to do one every year. To date he has crafted about 1025 models of various vessels, ranging in price from around \$1200 to \$30,000.

In his role as *Clean-up Australia* founder Ian Kiernan wrote his book ‘*Coming Clean*’. It was launched for him by then Prime Minister Paul Keating. In appreciation, Kiernan presented Keating



at Admiralty House with a Stephenson model of Vim, the first boat Paul Keating had ever sailed on (also Sir Frank Packer's first 12 metro prior to Dame Pattie and Gretel's onslaught on the *America's Cup*).

That same evening, a telephone call came to the Stephenson household : "Paul Keating here." He liked the Vim model so much he wondered if Tom had one of the classic yacht Cambria. Tom had; the Prime Minister bought it. Keating then ordered a third : a famous old international J Class yacht called Ranger, saying he would 'swing past' some time to collect it. Swing he did : Paul and Annita Keating popped in to the house the evening before the 1995 election. "How do you think you'll go tomorrow Paul?" asked Tom. "We're

gone, we're gone," exclaimed Keating, proceeding to say what he thought of the Opposition. (But we don't talk politics at the bridge table.) On his last evening in office, the Prime Minister took his boat and jetted back to Canberra and lost the election. We all know about his antique clocks, his Italian suits, but not about Paul Keating's love of boats and his beautiful old Halvorsen cruiser.

When Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett decided to stage the *1999 World Sailing Championships* on Port Phillip Bay prior to the 2000 Olympics, Tom was headhunted as Event Director, hosting sailors from around the world. After that two-year project, he returned to Brisbane.

In between all the boat building and racing Tom married his first wife Penny, producing two keen sailors. Tom's son has a degree in Environmental Management; his daughter has just completed her PhD in Constitutional Law. All was going well with life in Scarborough where Penny had a yacht brokerage business, then the worst of times descended upon them. Penny was undergoing tests for possible cancer and suffered a devastating stroke. A couple of days later the family was told she also had inoperable cancer. After six terrible weeks she died.

However, Cupid was rather fond of Tom. At University he had struck up a warm friendship with a girl whose parents had named Elizabeth. Her baby brother found the word unpronounceable and settled on Likky. And that's how she made it through life, to the horror of her Headmistress who thought it a highly unsuitable name for a young lady at Lauriston. Likky eventually married a surgeon and lived in the United States, working in medicine before returning to Australia. She and Tom bumped into each other again and Cupid let out a long sigh of relief.

Another great mate was brilliant local architect John Mainwaring. Tom and Likky came to Noosa to visit 'Mainboat' when his art collection was donated to the Sunshine Coast University in 2012. It was Likky's first visit to Noosa. When Tom turned the wheels home towards Brisbane his wife asked why. They returned to spend a longer holiday at Little Cove, found an apartment for sale and now walk down to the beach for a swim, every morning of the year.

Tom retired, took up the ukulele, painted watercolours, became involved with the Men's Shed, but was called back to making models by demanding clients. And he also took up Bridge. Why? In

Newport, Rhode Island the yachties frequent a restaurant with sayings engraved into beams, on the walls, etc. One of them reads : *“No activity, except perhaps lovemaking or playing Bridge repays concentration with greater dividends than steering a sailboat.”* Tom figured he had mastered two of them, it was time to try the third. And if you espy a lady wandering around from Lizzie’s latest class with the name badge ‘Likky’, you will find it is now a family affair.



by Susie Osmaston