

Dinghy Sailing at RYC: Dyer Dinks, Penguins and Thistles

By Steve Wheeler

Small boats are important at most yacht clubs. Young sailors learn and train in them and, because a lot of races can be held in a relatively short time, racing skills and tactical knowledge are more easily honed. Small boats, or dinghies, have long been a part of yachting at the Racine Yacht Club and many of our sailors have made names for themselves while racing in them.

But what is a dinghy? One of the definitions is: "(n.) a small boat for recreation or racing, especially an open boat with a mast and sails". Different types of sailing dinghies, mostly one-design classes, have been around our yacht club, at one time or another, for many years. Here, we'll look at just a few...

The Dyer Dinghy (or Dyer Dink)

Designed by Phil Rhodes in 1934 and built by Dyer Boats, Dyer Dinks are centerboard boats, 10' long overall with a 4 1/2' beam. They carry a single 66 square-foot sail. They were originally of wooden lapstrake construction but that was changed to fiberglass in 1949, making it possibly the oldest continuously built fiberglass boat in existence. To date some 1400 have been made in both wood and glass. Dyer Dinks made their appearance in Racine about 1937 and, overall, probably eight to ten boats were sailed here. Records are sparse but we know of at least several of them: *Margo* was owned by the Gittings brothers and (according to Jim Rooney) was sailed by two ladies, Homer McNally had *Shamrock*, *Mystic* belonged to Mel Harbridge,



Launching Dyer Dinghies off the beach (ice, in this case), ca. 1939.
Courtesy of Winona Jansen



Frostbite sailing. *Courtesy of Winona Jansen*
and Henry (Hank) Smieding sailed *Carmen*, which was named after his wife. Dyer Dinks were sailed extensively in the late 30s through the 1940s and they were raced, even after summer had ended, right into some of the coldest winter weather. "Frostbite" sailing was not for the faint of heart, as the photos on this page will attest.

Sailing started early in the year, too.

Below is a photo of a trophy awarded for 3rd place in an April, 1940 frostbite series. It is signed by Charlie Brownell and Herman Jansen (the third place winners), Wally Kolberg, Mel Harbridge, Bill Richter, Dick Rossman, Les Long,



The 3rd place Frostbite series trophy from 1940, presently in the RYC trophy case.
Racine Heritage Museum photo

Frank Karls, and someone called "Sea Gull Sadie"-- all well-known Racine Yacht Club sailors at the time. The trophy, now on loan from the Racine Heritage Museum, is presently in our Yacht Club trophy case. Racing was highly competitive and the Dyer Dinghies had their day in Racine until the late 1940s when a new class made its appearance.



Penquins

The Penguin was created in 1938 by Phil Rhodes. It is an 11 ½ foot, cat rigged plywood sailboat designed to be built by amateurs. The class had its beginning in Racine during the winter of 1948-49 when, according to the Penguin yearbook for 1950, "...a group of 25 members in the Racine Yacht Club built an equal number of Penguins on a co-operative basis. All boats were constructed on a mass production basis and no one knew in advance which was to be his boat." They were built near the lake in a barn on English Street just east of Hook's Tavern, which is now Roger's Place. That barn still stands. The build was "on the cheap" with lumber and plywood that was definitely not of the best boatbuilding quality. Numbers were put in a hat and separate drawings were held for hulls (which were unfinished), sails (which were cotton), and rigging—the latter including masts and booms. This proved to be, possibly, one of the largest group builds in the country. After construction was over, three more Penguins were built by others and added to the fleet. A few more appeared later and some thirty-one boats were ready by the time the 1950 racing season began. This produced the largest fleet of one-design boats the Club has ever seen. Racing was spirited and upwards of twenty boats could be seen, at times, on the race course—which was usually set up in the harbor. For the 1949 season, from July through December, some 108 races were held and sailing only ended when ice in the harbor was "getting too hard on the plywood hulls." Holding that many races in one season today would be astounding!

Hermann Jansen, who had won the Great Lakes Junior Championship in 1939, seems to have come out on top in his boat, *Sharkey*, winning four of



The 1948/49 Penguin group build. L-R Herman Jansen, Art Cherkinian, John ("Mousy") Thomasek, Ray Nerad, and Bill Rohan Jr. Many more folks were involved than are shown here. *Courtesy of Winona Jansen*

the main series held that first year. The fleet traveled too, going to a number of out-of-town regattas in Milwaukee, Chicago, Kenosha, and Waukegan. There were, however, two problems with them: their cotton sails and the low grade, heavy lumber they were built of. The boats were not world-beaters but that was not a problem because they were identical.

Enter Sid Young, who ran a small boat boat-building company ("Sid Young's Boat Shop") out of a Quonset hut near the beach just north of Barker Street. He built his own Penguin—of higher class, lighter wood—and equipped it with nylon sails. The light weight and faster, synthetic sails made it the boat to beat in Racine. The rest of the fleet just couldn't match Sid's speed. Jim Rooney observes that Sid, on occasion, had already crossed the finish line while the rest of the fleet hadn't yet made the last

mark; that seems to have ended serious Penguin racing at the Racine Yacht Club, although informal Sunday races were still held. A few boats competed in frostbite events, too, even though the ice was tough on their hulls. The Riccardo regatta, held on the river in Chicago, was a major annual event



Herman and Winona Jansen and *Sharkey* at Rush Street in Chicago readying their boat for the annual Riccardo Frostbite Regatta in the early 1950s. *Courtesy of Winona Jansen*



“Decky” Blish’s house at the rear of the RYC property.
Tom Owen photo, courtesy of Sharon Campbell

usually held around Thanksgiving, ice permitting, and Herman and Winona (Winnie) Jansen, among others, traveled there with *Sharkey* to compete. The original Penguin fleet finally dispersed in the mid to late 1950s.

Penguins had a second round of popularity beginning in the early 1960s. Tom Owen, who was RYC’s Junior advisor and mentor at the time, decided that Penguins were ideal

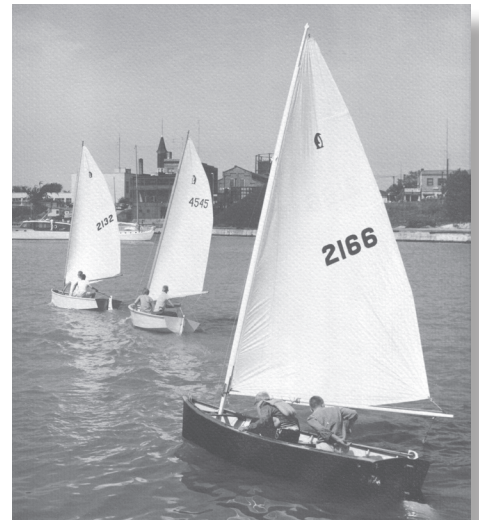


The 1959/60 Penguin build in “Decky” Blish’s house. L-R Bill Richter, Bill Rohan Jr., and Art (“Frenchy”) Langlois, with George Rohan tightening the “C” clamp. *Tom Owen photo, courtesy of Sharon Campbell*

training boats. Behind the old yacht club was the oar shed, and behind that—at the back of the property—was Decard (“Decky”) Blish’s house. That building had been bought by the Club around 1950 and was intended to be a clubhouse for Junior members (Jim Rooney comments that the real purpose was to keep kids out of the Senior member’s hair and away from the main Club

building). There, over the course of two winters, Tom built four Penguins. He was helped along by a lot of kids (including me, Steve Wheeler) and a fair number of adult members. Several of us—Walter (“Skipper”) Knapp, Wayne (“Sandy”) Rapp, and I had boats of our own and Tom hauled the Junior Penguins and all of us, too, to Milwaukee and Kenosha to race. Along with the sailing that took place in the harbor, summers were busy times. Penguins were ideal for teaching,

too, and sailing schools using them were held for the Juniors (and others) well into the 1960s. Eventually, as the club Juniors aged and went different directions, that second Penguin fleet dispersed, too. Overall some 8,000 Penguins have been built in wood, and, later, fiberglass.



Penguin racing in Kenosha. My boat, *Beetle Bomb*, #2166, (here trailing the fleet) was named after a luckless nag in an old Spike Jones record. Bob (“Butch”) Gorsiski is crewing for me. *Tom Owen photo, courtesy of Steve Wheeler*



“Skipper” Knapp at the helm of his Penguin, with Ken Luedtke crewing. *Courtesy of Barb Gorsiski*



Sailing school in the early 1960s. The kids are unidentified but that might be Don Dally (who taught) with the bucket. *Courtesy of Barb Gorsiski*



After more than 75 years the class is still strong.

The Racine Yacht Club Penguin sailing program produced many top-notch sailors over the years. Sandy Rapp came out of RYC's sailing school and the Yacht Club Juniors and won three international Penguin class championships (1968, 1993, and 1998) and achieved many top-10 finishes in national events. Bruce Goldsmith, an RYC member from Michigan, won the Penguin nationals in 1965 and scored top-10 finishes in other years. Racine's Ron Meissner scored consistently high in Penguin championship events through the 1980s.

Thistles

The Thistle was designed by Gordon K. "Sandy" Douglas in 1945. A planing centerboarder, the Thistle is a 17-foot open boat with a 6 foot beam, carrying 191 square feet of sail in a large main



Stickers, Thistle #32, owned by Tony Herrmann Sr. Tom Owen photo courtesy of Sharon Campbell

and a jib; a symmetrical spinnaker is also carried. Douglas made no bones about the fact that his design was influenced by the International 14 class sailboats, particularly *Alarm*, designed by Uffa Fox about 1935. Hulls were originally molded plywood but the class modernized and also allows fiberglass construction. Interestingly, both types compete on an equal basis. Some 4000 boats have been built to date and the class is still vibrant. Tony Herrmann Sr. brought the class to Racine about 1946 after seeing the boats at a Chicago boat show and was elected class Vice President in 1948. He then brought the Thistle nationals to Racine in 1953 (and placed second in that series). The nationals would be here twice more, in 1961 and 1998. The class in Racine eventually numbered upwards of ten or so boats and some of the principal owners were Bob Backus, Dr. Gene Peters, Ron Meissner, Bruce Goldsmith, Howard Greene, Ed Zimmers, and Bill Rohan. Many changed hands over the years. By the time the nationals were held here in 1998 the Racine Thistle fleet had disbanded; owners had gotten older or moved into different boats and interest had waned. Racine sailors have done extremely well in Thistles...



Just part of the fleet at the 1961 Thistle nationals. Tom Owen photo courtesy of Tony Herrmann Jr.

Bruce Goldsmith was national champion in 1960 and placed second in 1961 (he won the Mid-winter championship in 1978, too); Ron Meissner won the nationals in 1971 and Sandy Rapp won the Thistle Great Lakes championship in 1982.



Bruce Goldsmith's *Pearshape*, Thistle #632, at the 1961 Nationals. Crewing for Bruce are his wife Pam and Herb Zimmers (holding the boom). Tom Owen photo courtesy of Tony Herrmann Jr.



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