

The day Rosemary tipped over.

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The 1992 NWIYA race was called on for Oshkosh. We had beautiful hard ice, except for the typical crack in the bay. Nubs Salzsieder and I were discussing the upcoming weekend, who was coming, etc. The usual plan for hard ice was that I would sail the Timber Boat and he would sail Rosemary IV. We talked more about the boats, how Don Ward had built so many, including the Rosemary boats, and how Don was always interested in what was going on in Oshkosh, his home town. So Nubs called Don Ward and told him to get on a plane and get back here from Washington State so he can sail on his home ice. We didn't really expect Don to do that, but a day or two later Nubs informed me that Don would be sailing his old boat, Rosemary IV, and Nubs would be sailing the Timber Boat. I was bummed because I had no other boat to race, so instead I would help wherever needed.

I had never met Don, though I had heard plenty of stories. He was a big man, well over 6' tall, and quite gruff. He no longer had any iceboating garb, so we found a pair of overalls, boots, and mittens. The overalls were about 6" too short. He wouldn't wear a helmet, just his old leather bomber cap. About the helmets he said, "The goddamn things gave me a headache. Buddy too, so we don't have to wear them." I think Don was over 70 years old and he walked like it – quite stiff. When he got to Milwaukee's airport he was given a ride in a wheelchair to the door. (The guy pushing asked where he was going, to which Don replied, "iceboating!" Oh?!) Don couldn't get into the cockpit himself, he couldn't bend his knees that far, so three of us picked him up as though he were on a stretcher and sort of slid him (crammed him, really) into the front cockpit. He was so stiff he hardly bent when we picked him up. He wasn't going to get out without help, much less run, push, and jump back in. I was elected to be the pusher for Don at the starting line. He planned to sail Rosemary by himself.

Don had checked up on Nubs to see how well the boat was kept up and to see what changes he had made. Nubs had installed a Harken cleat on the tiller for the mainsheet. Don flicked the sheet in and out a few times and said how he thought the cleat was a good idea since it worked so nicely. He had other comments about Nubs not having polished the Formica with Lemon Fresh Pledge.

Don sailed the boat to the pits and beyond for a short way, then pulled in with everyone else. It was nice wind for racing. As usual we got the boat into position a few minutes before the first stern steerer race. We were on the line waiting and talking, with me outside the boat and Don in the boat (he had been there at least an hour by now). As the flag was raised he told me to just get in the boat after pushing off.

"Want me to do anything?"

"No, just get in the goddamn boat."

Bang! Off we go, I jump in and settle back on the soft backrest, getting comfortable for the ride. After a couple tacks Don turns around, red-faced from the wind, and yells at me

to help him pull in the sheet. I grab the tail end and pull it around his chest, under his arm. After pulling with all I've got he placed the sheet in the cleat. We sailed the race like that, easing at the leeward mark, then hauling back in. We weren't the fastest on that race, so we ended up following a couple other boats around the course.

Race two was much the same except I discovered Don had trouble seeing the big bright orange marks. He was less than ¼ mile from the mark, going straight at it, when he turned around (red-faced) and yelled at me "Where the hell's the goddamn mark!?" I flipped around to a kneeling position in the cockpit so I could reach over his shoulder and point it out. This time we were first around. As we continued the race I had to keep pointing out the marks even though my 30-year-old eyes had no problem seeing them. I stayed hunched up on my knees behind Don so I could quickly respond to his queries.

One more windward rounding, then the final run to the finish line. I think Don might win this one! We have a good lead, and Rosemary is going fast on the hard ice! As we got closer to the last windward mark I could feel the boat going faster. I watched the windward runner and I could see light underneath it now and then. It was barely on the ice. Don was paying no attention, he was focused on the mark (probably a good thing for the bystanders). To him, Rosemary IV was never going to hike.

Don told me he built 42 iceboats. I don't know if that means from scratch, rebuilds, or what. Don was a good storyteller, so I just listened. He built numerous boats for himself. I think his own boats were all D skeeters until Rosemary IV was built as a D stern steerer. He built light boats that could go fast upwind and downwind on the race course. One time while day sailing he had a bad accident that sent him to the hospital with a punctured lung and broken bones. His skeeter had capsized. From then on he was determined to make a boat that would not hike, hence Rosemary IV was built heavy (1288 lb total) and had a flat sail. He kept telling Linc Foster "Make it flatter, make it flatter!" In 1965 the new boat would not hike. As years went by, the boat accumulated miles. Nubs put hundreds of miles on it. The sail stretched. The full sail could now make the boat hike though it had never been capsized. Nubs even claimed to have flown a runner over a shanty on Lake Mendota. He told Don all this, but Don said Nubs was full of hot air. "Ain't no way in hell that boat will ever hike!"

So we're starting the turn around the mark. I'm watching the runner slowly start to lift, just a few inches, then a foot, then two. I'm wondering when Don is going to put it down by steering tighter. I looked at him, but his head was turned to the left. I don't think he has a clue the runner is lifting! Here it comes, higher, now faster! It had to be at least 45 degrees up now, finally Don looks. I already had been pulling on the sheet to release it, but it was still in the cleat! And still under his arm! I'll never get it out! I gave a few hard pulls to no avail. He was finally trying to pull it out, but there was too much load for him to budge it. By now the runners were on the flat sides, not biting. Steering did nothing; we were along for the ride. The boat slid along, slowly turned upwind a little, then back downwind. At one point it felt like Rosemary might come down on her feet, then she finally went over. Oh no! The tip-over stays don't go to the mast top, they're about 4 feet short of it! The mast might break! Nubs and I talked about this potential,

but the boat doesn't hike anyway, no need for concern. Right! I don't want to end up with Rosemary on top of me, she's too heavy! I bailed out of the rear cockpit from a kneeling position just as the mast tip touched the ice. Thank God, the mast didn't break, it just flexed a lot!

"Hold on Don, I'll help you down!" I yelled as I slipped and stumbled upon landing.

Too late, he couldn't hold on in the partly inverted position. He fell out and landed on his head with a hollow sounding thunk. (Drop your helmet onto the ice from about 6 feet up for a very similar sound). There Don lay, spread eagled under Rosemary. Without moving he looked at me and barked "Get me out from under this goddamn boat!" I grabbed both feet and yanked him out. Good thing it was clear ice so he slid easily. Then I had to help the big guy stand up, stiff as ever, sort of like stepping a mast. I commented on the tip-over stays being short of the mast tip. Don laughed at me. "I knew the mast wouldn't break, I built the top solid."

Soon bystanders were there, a couple cars showed up, and Rosemary was righted. Don directed the operation. That evening we had the banquet. Don was there telling stories. He had a big red knob on his left temple from his close encounter with the ice. He kept blaming the young kid in the back cockpit for not letting go of the sheet, that's why he tipped over. I just laughed to myself.

The next day there were no races due to light wind. Don had somehow loosened up. He was now giving kids rides in Rosemary. I could hardly believe it when I saw him running, pushing the boat, then climbing in. Was this the same guy we stuffed into the cockpit? The same guy that was in a wheelchair on the way here? Iceboating sure is good therapy for the body!

I only sailed with Don that one day. It was quite entertaining. He never sailed an iceboat again. Don must have sailed hundreds of races in his life. It is ironic that on his last race, on his last mark rounding, while in first place, he tipped over Rosemary IV, the "boat that doesn't hike".

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