



## **Elmer Millenbach**

**1912 - 1994**

### **Renegade Iceboat #1**

In the world of iceboating, where courage meets craftsmanship and nature tests the limits of human ingenuity, few names shine as brightly as Elmer Millenbach. For over four decades, Elmer was the heartbeat of the Renegade class, a pioneer who not only helped design and perfect the boat itself but who also raised the standard of sailing to heights few could match. To speak of Elmer is to speak of a man utterly devoted to his craft, an athlete, engineer, and competitor whose legacy endures on every frozen lake where the wind carries a sailboat across the ice.

Elmer was, first and foremost, the father of the Renegade one-design iceboat. Where others saw tradition, Elmer saw potential. He refined, perfected, and promoted this remarkable craft until it became the vessel of choice for serious competitors. His contributions went far beyond simply shaping wood or riveting steel—he created a boat that balanced speed, power, and grace in ways never before imagined. He was not just a sailor but a visionary, and the Renegade stands as one of his enduring gifts to the sport.

From 1950 to 1985, the Renegade class belonged to Elmer. Race after race, regatta after regatta, his dominance was nearly absolute. Competitors—talented sailors like Loren, Roger, Jack, Jerry, and Bob—nipped at his heels, but rarely did they succeed in displacing him. His name on the starting line was enough to strike equal parts admiration and trepidation among his peers. The question was never if Elmer would be fast, but only how far ahead he would finish.

Part of his edge came from his astonishing physical strength. Where most skippers rigged their boats with six blocks, Elmer only used five, relying on his own power to manage the loads. His forearms were legendary, strengthened not in a gym but by hours of methodical training—squeezing tennis balls in his spare moments until his grip became unyielding. This strength, paired with his keen intellect, allowed him to handle his Renegade with precision even in the heaviest air, where others struggled just to keep upright.

Elmer was a perfectionist. Every component of his boat reflected his standards of excellence. His craftsmanship was astounding; he hand-riveted his runner webs and his mast hound, leaving nothing to chance. He hand-sharpened his runners, refusing to let a machine or another man dictate the feel of the steel against the ice. In fact, his very first set of runners he sharpened not with specialized equipment but on a sidewalk, a testament to both his resourcefulness and his determination. Over the years, this attention to detail became his hallmark. For Elmer, there was no such thing as “good enough.” There was only the pursuit of perfection.

Methodical to the core, Elmer studied everything that could affect performance. He knew that the difference between victory and defeat often lay in the smallest adjustments: a subtle flattening of the sail, a fine edge on the runner, a perfectly timed maneuver at the start. His sail, tuned with unmatched skill, could shift seamlessly from full to flat, responding to conditions with a grace that mirrored his own intuitive understanding of the wind. At the start of a race, Elmer employed a tactic that became almost as legendary as the man himself: he would bear way off, building speed with patience and precision, only rounding up when top speed was fully attained. By the time others were finding their pace, Elmer was already gone.

But Elmer was more than just a sailor—he was a man who believed in fairness and integrity within competition. He held firm to the principle that a true champion could only be crowned after at least five races, across varying ice and wind conditions. To him, mastery meant consistency in all environments, not just excelling when conditions were favorable. This philosophy not only raised the standard for his competitors but also cemented the credibility and stature of the Renegade class itself.

Elmer's connection with his boat went beyond mechanics and muscle. He was at one with the Renegade, the lines of the craft and the lines of his body moving as though guided by a single will. Watching him sail was to witness harmony between man, machine, and nature. He seemed to know instinctively what the boat needed, responding with an elegance and decisiveness that defied explanation. In heavy air, where chaos often reigned, his calm command made the impossible seem effortless.

Behind Elmer, always, was his wife Cora. She was his partner in every sense of the word—at his side through triumphs and challenges, offering steady encouragement and quiet strength. Where Elmer pushed the limits on the ice, Cora anchored him on shore, her support as vital as the wind in his sail. Those who knew them understood that his success was not his alone, but theirs together.

Even as the years advanced, Elmer remained a fierce competitor. Well into his later life, he was still racing, still sharpening runners by hand, still studying the ice with the same keen eye that had guided him for decades. Only when mini-strokes began to take their toll did he finally step back, and even then it was not from lack of desire but from the unyielding limits of the body. His spirit, however, never diminished.

When Elmer suffered his final stroke, the iceboating world felt an irreplaceable loss. For those who had raced against him, his absence was disorienting. It seemed impossible that Elmer's mission could truly be complete—that the man who had defined an era, who had set the standard for excellence, was no longer out there, bearing away at the start, runners hissing, sail straining, eyes fixed on the horizon.

And yet, though Elmer himself has passed, his influence remains alive. Every Renegade that takes to the ice, every skipper who sharpens a runner with care, every sailor who seeks not just speed but mastery, carries forward a piece of his legacy. Elmer Millenbach was more than a champion; he was a craftsman, a pioneer, a perfectionist, and above all, a man who lived fully in pursuit of his passion. His story is not only one of victories but of dedication, integrity, and love—for the boat, for the sport, and for the partner who stood by his side through it all.

The ice may shift, the wind may change, but the name Elmer Millenbach endures—etched into the history of sailing, carried on in the Renegade's whistle across the ice, and remembered by all who had the privilege to race with him, against him, or simply to watch him sail.