

PAUL ELVSTROM —

Who was your childhood hero? Williams? John F. Kennedy? Eleanor Roosevelt? Timothy Leary? Imagine having the chance today, 25 years after you thrilled to their words or deeds, to get a chance to be alone with him or her for an hour. Imagine having the license to ask any question you want; to share with them the role that they may have played in your development as a man or woman; to thank them, perhaps, for carrying the mantle of fame that inspired you to achieve your own goals, your own visions.

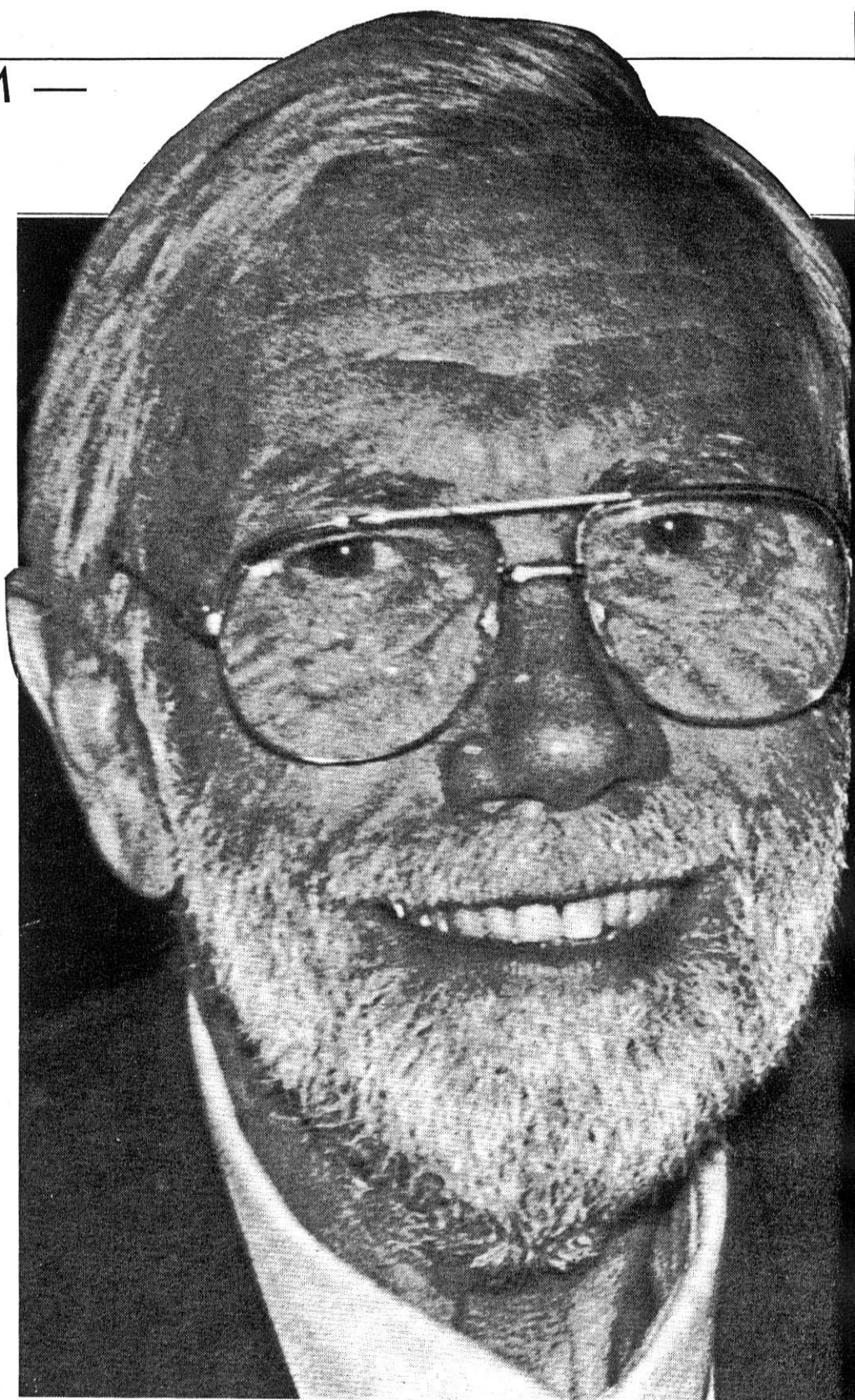
I had two such heroes. One was Willie Mays, the greatest centerfielder who ever put on a glove. Nearly every American of our generation knew of him (although some were silly enough to think that Mickey Mantle might have been better).

Being a sailor, my second luminary was not a household name. In fact, most Americans wouldn't know him if they were stranded one-on-one with him in a broken elevator all afternoon. He is Paul Elvstrom, sailing's one and only 'Great Dane', who between 1948 and 1960 brought home to Denmark no fewer than four Olympic gold medals in the singlehanded class and more than a dozen world championships in the Finn and other one design classes. Ask anyone who's anyone in sailing to name the world's greatest racing sailor and — with all due respect to Lowell North, Buddy Melges, Dennis Conner and others — 9 out of 10 will say Paul Elvstrom.

Twenty years ago, it would have been 10 out of 10. Back then, no one else even came close. Elvstrom was the Dalai Lama, head guru, crowned king and lifelong potentate of international sailing competition. He changed one design sailing from a gentleman's sport into an athletic event, pioneering training and boathandling techniques that have endured to the present. He devoted his life to sailing and making boats go faster by better use of sails and equipment. Today, he remains the sailor against which all others are still judged, but which few can hope to match.

During the seven years that I campaigned a Finn myself, I constantly held myself up to his shadow. I poured over his books and pictures of him sailing the Finn, looking for clues. I bought a Finn made by his company. I tried to emulate his commitment, but always found myself coming up short. After attending two Olympic trials and three world championships with less than encouraging results, I came to the regretful conclusion that I was not another Paul Elvstrom. Yet somehow, because of him, I felt stronger — it was his inspiration that made me strive higher for my goal than I ever might have on my own.

Elvstrom has visited San Francisco



twice. The first time was in 1975, when Don Trask invited him to attend a Laser regatta. In fact the event, still going, is named after Elvstrom. During his stay, he gave a talk at a junior high school auditorium in the Marina. I remember attending that night and going up to shake his hand afterwards, thrilled to have actually seen him in the flesh.

The Great Dane returned this year, again at the request of Trask, who first met Elvstrom

The Great Dane, Paul Elvstrom.

at the 1966 Star Worlds in Kiel, Germany. For the past 12 years, Trask has hosted a Masters Regatta for older skippers and crew. He offered Paul a boat and the sailing legend agreed to come.

Now 62, Elvstrom no longer cuts the imposing figure he once did. The shoulders

A CONVERSATION WITH THE MASTER

are still broad, but his once-robust body has thinned out and begun to stoop with age. His hands, however, are still strong and calloused.

In his book *Elvstrom Speaks on Yacht Racing*, published in 1969, Paul wrote that as

"I was born to the sea," he says.
"I saw people racing and felt I could
do it better."

He wears his snow-white hair and beard short. Once a wearer of glasses not unlike Malcolm X's, his thick spectacles now have the tear-drip aviator look.

Much more compelling than his looks, however, is Elvstrom's demeanor. He is shy, almost painfully so at times. He hates cocktail talk, yet suffers it politely. His face masks most emotions and he talks sparingly to strangers. Yet he has a smile that bursts forth like sun breaking through the clouds, bringing his face to life for a second before he retreats back into his shell.

So it was with more than a little trepidation that I approached Elvstrom at the post-race cocktail party and asked if we could talk. Trask had warned me that he might not want to. Elvstrom was most cordial, however, and we adjourned to an empty meeting room at the St. Francis YC. For those who think dreams never come true, take heart.

But where to start? His four Olympic gold medals, one in the Firefly and three in Finns? His world titles in 505s, 5.5 Meters, Soling, Stars, Snipes, Flying Dutchmen and quarter tonners? His sailing inventions like the self bailer and racing lifejackets? His career as a sailmaker and designer? His most recent Olympic campaign in Korea sailing Toronado catamarans with daughter Trine? His bouts with depressions and nerves that forced him out of competitive sailing during the '60s? His current life?

We started at the end. Today, Elvstrom sails mostly by himself, cruising the waters near his home in Hellerup, Denmark in a recently-bought 25-ft trimaran. He enjoys the serenity of solo sailing, yet his hands still trim the boat for peak speed and his mind still strives for ways to make the boat just a little bit faster. Old habits die hard.

a child, "I was 'word blind'. I can't read and I can't write. I get a headache and then I can't think. In school I was the worst in the class. I was not lazy, but I just couldn't read. It was such a big handicap for me."

Perhaps in today's world, a young Paul Elvstrom would have been diagnosed as learning disabled or dyslexic. With modern teaching methods, he might have well have overcome the problem in a few years. Instead,

ended at the seawall and his mother, widowed when Paul was 8, preferred that he spend time on the water rather than the streets. It must have taken courage on her part: her firstborn son fell off the seawall at age 5 and drowned.

"I was born to the sea," Elvstrom told me. "I saw people racing and I felt I could do it better."

He started his career at age 9, and even his surviving brother, who was 12 years older, soon realized that little Paul had 'the touch' on the tiller.

"He always crewed for me," says Paul. "He knew I was better."

Ten years later, Elvstrom represented Denmark at the 1948 Olympics in Torbay, England. The only encouragement his countrymen offered before he left was, "Just don't come in last." He didn't. Sailing in the 12-ft Firefly, the shy youngster overcame his 'complexes' and won the final two races to capture the gold medal.

The major lesson Elvstrom learned at those games was that he and all his competitors were woefully deficient in terms of physical conditioning. He won that first gold medal by superior tactics. Four years later, in Finns, he demolished the competition with superior strength.



LATTUDEROB

In his first time ever aboard a J/24, Elvstrom's 'sixth sense' of what the wind's up to garnered him a 1st in race four and 3rd in the series.

he chose to excel outside the classroom. Naturally athletic, most sports came instinctively to him: running, soccer, skating, skiing — and especially sailing. His front yard

Like all great practitioners, Elvstrom often jumped to the next level of performance by analysis and hard work. Other times, he simply made fortuitous mistakes. During one windy race at the 1952 Helsinki Games, he missed his hiking strap and fell overboard. In

PAUL ELVSTROM —

those pre-polypro days, he was wearing quite a few sweaters to keep warm, and they were instantly soaked.

Paul scrambled back aboard. Hiking out again, he soon discovered that the extra weight of the water trapped in the wool was making him faster, and he went on to win the race. The concept of wearing extra weight was born.

Elvstrom regained his Olympic crown in 1956 and again in 1960. At the latter, however, the strain of being number one for so long finally took its toll.

"I felt a lot of pressure," he says. "I felt I could never really win anymore. I could only lose."

Englishman Richard Creagh-Osborne, a fellow Finn sailor and editor of some of Elvstrom's books, describes the ensuing episode at Naples, Italy, as a nervous breakdown. Elvstrom himself describes it as a combination of nerves and problems with the Italian food. Whatever it was, it prevented the Great Dane from starting the final race.

A three-year hiatus from competition brought his life back into balance. He worked on his sailmaking business. He watched others race and studied the sport with a more dispassionate eye. Finally, when he started to miss competing, he decided it was time to reenter yacht racing — but only by promising himself to do it for fun.

"Did you keep that promise?" I ask.

"Yes, almost" he replies.

Using the expertise and knowledge he had gained in the Finn class, Elvstrom branched out into other boats. In 1966, he made a bet with his friend John Albrechtson that he could

win three world championships in one year. He narrowly missed the first in 505s, coming in second while steering the boat from the trapeze — a first in that class. From there he jumped to the 5.5 Meter and won handily. Finally, he moved to the highly competitive

Star class and won there, too. Just to prove it wasn't a fluke, he won the Star Worlds again in 1967. His reputation as a master helmsman was solidified.

With new wins, however, came old pressures. In 1972, he competed in the Soling



MASTERS REGATTA

With entries from 19 countries, the 12th International Masters Regatta — for skippers over 55 and crew over 45 — was the biggest yet. But the actual results (see *The Racing Sheet*) paled in comparison to the presence of Elvstrom, as evidenced by the prolonged standing ovation he received at the Saturday night dinner.

"It's a thrill to sail against him," said Malin Burnham of San Diego, who competed against the Dane back in 1968 at the Star Worlds in Copenhagen. "It was one of the main reasons I decided to come."

Burnham showed that age hasn't slowed his abilities, either, taking second in the series to Don Trask. Elvstrom was a threat, but made a bad start in the last race and dropped from second to third overall at the finish.

The Great Dane's failure to win the series didn't daunt the praise of others in the least. For example, New York's Carlos Echeverria

(who crewed for Hawaii's Charlie Dole) recalled the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia.

"He was our hero," says Carlos. "I was sailing Dragons at the Games and I remember watching Elvstrom win a Finn race in about 50 knots of wind. He really brought physical endurance to sailing. Four years later, I watched him sail at Naples. This time it was in light air, and he still won. He has an uncanny ability to figure the winds."

Elvstrom's crew was also impressed. Dave Miller of Vancouver, who won a bronze medal

Masters action with skippers (l to r) Tom O'Brien, Will Anderson, Jack Noble and Paul Elvstrom.

in Solings at the '72 Olympics, served as his tactician.

"He's a master, you can tell," says Miller. "This was the first time he'd ever stepped onto a J/24 and he steered the boat through waves as well as anyone I've ever seen. He's in tune with the wind and very aware of the lifts and headers. Our crew work wasn't perfect, but he still managed to do very well at the mark

A CONVERSATION WITH THE MASTER

class at the Kiel Olympics, but dropped out midway through the series. It was time for another, longer break.

He didn't resume racing until 1981, when he started sailing the Toronado catamaran with his daughter. With Trine on the wire, he

helped Toronados in both the 1984 and 1988 Olympics. Though there were no new medals this time around, he enjoyed the fast sailing and seeing Trine develop as a fine sailor in her own right.

The Masters Regatta was his first race since the 1988 Olympics, he says. It may also be his last.

"I don't miss racing like I used to," he says.

He's hardly idle, though. Elvstrom Sails still runs a worldwide network of lofts in 12 countries, with Paul acting as advisor in all aspects of the business. He also designs fashionable sailing wear, including action clothing for racing. Elvstrom Italy produces the line, which includes foul weather gear and boots. And, as he always has, he pursues other sports — skiing, skating, ice boating, bicycling, canoeing and rowing. Between his four daughters, there are four grandchildren to look after, as well.

"Are you still famous?" I ask.

"That is for others to say," he says with a smile. In Europe, he admits, he still gets a fair amount of attention. He reminds me, though, that he now prefers to sail alone, away from the limelight.

"It was very hard work, mentally and physically, to stay on top," he says. "I didn't like that about racing. I liked sailing. Now I can go out and sail for 12 hours at a time and really enjoy it. I trim for maximum speed, but I do it naturally and in a relaxing way."

He also uses the time to test new ideas for his clothing line, and for trying out new rigging tricks. Recently, he designed a series

that a Japanese sailor trained in Optimists went on to win the 470 dinghy world title last year, as well.

For winner Trask, there was the double thrill of topping the talented field at the Masters and competing against the Great Dane.

"It was really exciting to sail with the master," says Don. "He won the fourth race with about a 2-minute margin, which was the largest lead anyone had in the series. Downwind, he played the shifts amazingly well."

Perhaps he and others will also have the special knowledge that Elvstrom sailed his last race against them. Before leaving town, Paul said that was probably the case.

"That is my feeling at the moment," he remarked. "But perhaps there will be new life in the old body."

— shimon van collie



Elvstrom (in glasses) in the thick of battle — in our own backyard!

of battens that run parallel to the luff of the jib from the leech to the foot. When the sail is roller furled, the battens keep it in the proper shape. Elvstrom has authorized his sail loft to license the idea.

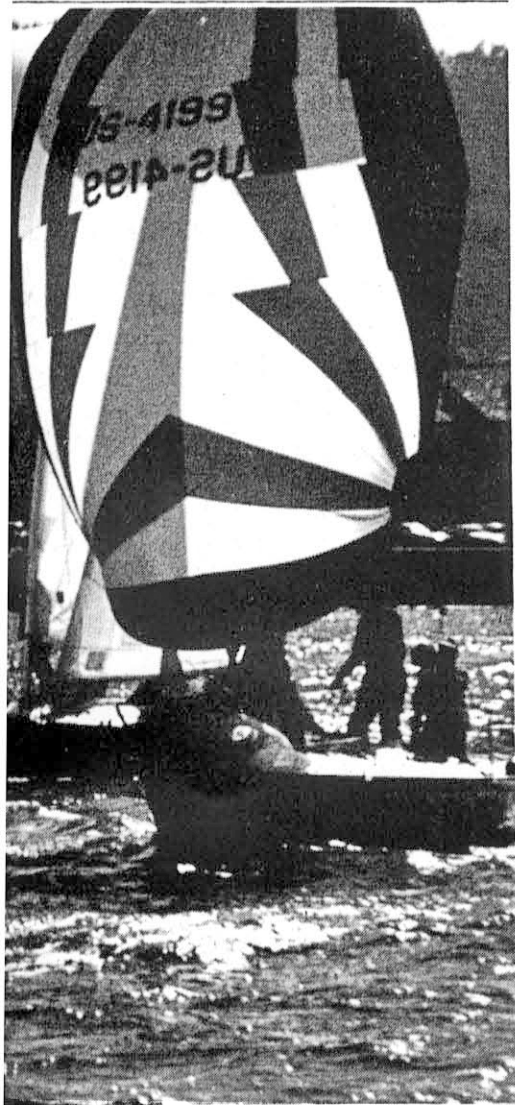
"I have no regrets," he says as our time together runs out. I didn't want the interview to end but Paul has people to thank before he boards a plane back to Denmark. "There was something inside of me that wanted to do everything perfectly. Sometimes that spoiled the enjoyment, so then I'd back off for a while." It took a long time, he says, to find the balance.

We stood up, shook hands and returned to the cocktail party. Seeing him, others crowded around and introduced themselves. I retreated, oddly jealous that others were now taking up his time.

Several times during our interview, I had struggled with the urge to tell him how much his sailing career had inspired mine. But for some reason I never did. Perhaps it's because that's one mystery I, like he, have to answer myself.

But I had captured my hero, at least for a moment. And now I watched him go, trying to visualize the world of competitive sailing without the Great Dane. It would be easier imagining Willie Mays had never worn the Giants' black and orange.

— shimon van collie



roundings. His timing is just impeccable."

Takashi Takamura of the Seabornia YC in Japan didn't see much of Elvstrom on the course (he finished 17th), so he harkens back the years to 1964 when Paul traveled to Tokyo to watch, but not compete, in the Olympics. With him came the first Optimist dinghy that the Far Eastern nation had ever seen. So well was it received that Elvstrom stayed on a while to help the class get going in Japan. In 1989, Japan hosted the Optimist Worlds, with Takamura serving on the organization's board of directors. He added