

Chapter 8 - Towards a National Class

The Thistle Midwinters moved to the St. Petersburg Yacht Club in 1956, and again tragedy struck the Class, on the eve of the Championships when President Jack O'Shea suffered a fatal heart attack. With this note of sadness overshadowing the regatta, Jack Beachem assumed the Presidency and then proved himself no armchair executive by winning the Mid-Winter title. He was trailed in the standings by Dave Minton and future America's Cup contender Charlie Morgan, who tied Dave in points. A DNS for Minton, and a costly foul for Morgan offset an otherwise sparkling performance in the remaining four races of the series and deprived them of almost certain victory.

With Association expenses increasing, the sail royalty fee was invoked in 1956, and boat numbers were running in the 900s, highlighting the need for a permanent paid secretary for the Association. Accordingly, the services of Pollye Norton from Atlanta were engaged and Pollye held the post until succeeded by Honey Abramson, who is still doing such an outstanding job in that capacity.

Fiberglass was beginning to rear its head in the Thistle Class, with a request from Patzer Boat Works that it be authorized to build some trial glass hulls. This, of course, caused quite a stir, with supporters on both sides.

At the Atlantic Coasts in Galesville, Md., Dennis Posey in *Menace* (#705) came into his own, sailing *Menace* to victory, by one point, over Dave Minton and Bill Nexsen to start a long reign in this event. Sandy took the Ohio Inter Club Y.A. Regatta at Mansfield, Oh., and Halstead Wheeler won the Michiana Championships. Minton, Hendricksen and Busch were one-two-three in the Lake Erie Districts held in Sandusky. Gene Kissinger won the Lake Michigan Districts. Neal Allen wound up top man in the California Districts. At the L.I. Sound Districts in Southport, Conn., Wally Lineburgh topped a 28-boat field, beating out Doug Westin *Old Smuggler*, #777, with Dennis Posey a very close third. Jack Westerbeke triumphed in the New England Districts, and in the Niagara Frontier Districts, Bill Allen emerged ahead of 30 other entries. Not a bad season for the Mintons and the Allens...

New fleets formed that year were #75 in Maine and #76 in Hawaii - the far-flung Thistle Empire was expanding.

Sandy brought the Nationals back to Mentor: this was, as it turned out, his swan song in Thistles, and he went out a champ, chalking up his fifth title in setting a record which has not since been touched in the annuals of the Class, although later Peter Bordes came close with four National titles. It was a very windy series mostly, with 44 entries from 10 states. The first race was light and fluky, with Sam Merrick notching a first, Jim Hendricksen second, and Dave Minton third. Sandy was content with fifth place in this one.

The second race found plenty of wind and waves around the course, a situation much to the liking of Britisher Brigadier Ralph Farrant (#736), who roared into first, while Hendricksen got another second and Beachem took third. Sandy was only ninth and didn't look like too sure a bet at this point. The third race was even wilder and woolier. Art Arms in *Grand Mac Nish* (#865) led in the early going, but Howard Robins overcame various handicaps losing and retrieving a crew who had gone overboard, and came up with an exciting win, with Douglass second and Arms third. Hendricksen lost this one when he bent nice stretchy nylon sails onto his spars and finished 19th, and suddenly Sandy was in the driver's seat.

The final two races were sailed in more moderate airs. Hendricksen shot right back into the picture by winning both, beating Butts and Beachem across the line in the 4th race, and Sandy and Minton in the finale. But Sandy's fourth place in the fourth race, along with his last race runner-up spot, preserved the victory for him. Ed Walsh bombed in this series, but don't take your eye off him, and a DSQ dropped Posey to 14th in the final standings. Sailing his first of many, many Nationals, Elmer Richards, #724, finished in 38 place.

"While we are discussing people, perhaps it is an appropriate time to mention the **other** half of the Douglass and McLeod firm. We quote here some excerpts from the September-October 1959 *Bagpipe* on the subject: "During the last ten years Sandy Douglass has been in the forefront for Douglass and McLeod, Inc., on the promotion and sale of Thistle sailboats. In this capacity and as an outstanding sailor in any company, Sandy has received much deserved publicity throughout the

land. Ray McLeod has remained in the background to a large extent and is relatively unknown to many Thistlers for the swell guy he really is. He and Ray, Jr. are now doing the full job at D & M... When they started producing Highlanders he went into that Class and did well as has Ray, Jr....the string of winning pennants from that Class that bedeck the McLeod cruiser officiating at our own Nationals is ample evidence that his modesty was too great.

Ray took on the job of local Regatta Chairman at the Nationals. A friend has since written to us: 'Certainly had it not been for the tremendous effort put forth by Ray McLeod, it never would have come off as it did. We all are forever in his debt. A real lovely guy in my book.' That is the way we feel about Ray too, and here is the way he stated it about himself:

'...my only claim to fame is having enjoyed life and the many friends and acquaintances I have had the pleasure of making through the years of sailing in both the Thistle and the Highlander.

I can only comment, it sure has been a real pleasure knowing and associating with all of you.' "

On the administrative end, Art Arms of Geneva, NY, was elected President; Will Frissell of Willoughby, OH, First Vice-President; Art Were, then of Springfield, PA, Second Vice-President; George Devlin from Detroit Chief Measurer; and Pollye Norton was established as Secretary-Treasurer.

In January, 1957 at St. Petersburg, that young whipper-snapper, Sinny Sinclair, the Pride of Georgia, took the Winter Championships by a tidy margin over Dick Shepherd and Ed Walsh in a 26 boat turnout.

At the New York Boat Show, Ray exhibited Thistle #1000, and another milestone of sorts had been achieved.

Larchmont YC hosted the Atlantic Coasts that year, and put up the venerable Gould Challenge Trophy as a perpetual prize for this event. There was very little air for the series, but it didn't bother Dennis Posey even mildly in his defense of the title;

he triumphed over a 42 boat fleet, with Bob Duff of New Jersey and Dick Gallagher of Boston trailing him in the standings. Posey also stayed for all of Race Week and won that as well, while Gallagher returned to Marblehead to win the New England District Championships. Howard Mead took the honors in the South Atlantic Districts; Hendricksen, Butts and Lovett grabbed the top three spots in the Lake Erie Districts at Cleveland, and Norm Freeman beat out Tim Rice, who's still winning them today, in the Niagara Frontier Districts at Fairhaven, New York. At the southern end of the state, in Nyack, local skipper Bruno Markeliunas took the L.I. Sound Districts, beating out Doug Westin and club mate John Shedd in light airs.

The Great Lakes Championship resumed at Sandusky, and Jim Hendricksen won this one with a bit to spare over Dick Durfee, who nosed out Harvey Busch. George Butts won at Put-In-Bay, and Dale Zimmer beat out Roger Brett in the Lake Michigan Districts.

In the May, 1957 *Bagpipe* Sandy advertised *Paukie* for sale. He did not wish to sell her to just anybody who might look upon her as merely "another Thistle". His ad came to the attention of Harold Klotz, then the owner of #172, and a gentleman with a keen appreciation of the implications inherent in *Paukie's* background. Here was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become the owner of a rare gem of a boat, and Harold did not pass it by. After checking signals with his wife, he called up Sandy, and the purchase was made.

It is of interest to note that *Paukie* had not deviated from Sandy's original concept of how a Thistle should be rigged. She still had the old centerboard rig, the old jib sheet leads, and everything else set up as she had been from the outset. The only concession made to advanced rigging which Sandy had made was in the addition of a boom vang, but that was it: nothing more! Sandy had won all those regattas without any of what the rest of us considered necessities, and that included hiking straps. On top of that, she weighed 557 lbs at the time of her sale. Harold spent quite a bit of time on her thereafter getting weight out of her and, with the removal of the bow seat, lockers, etc, revision of fittings, use of styrofoam flotation and a number of miscellaneous improvements got her down to about 515. She was in beautiful shape at the time of purchase, having been dry-sailed; then, after several years of wet sailing at Cowan Lake, Harold fibreglassed the bottom.

Sandy can relax happily secure in the knowledge that *Paukie* is in the best of hands. And, while the Klotz family has not thus far found the winning combination at the Nationals with *Paukie*, who is to say that the day will not arrive when they do? If it does, surely many Thistlers, old and new, will rejoice with the Klotzes in their accomplishment. Certainly they have worked hard enough to have earned a reward of this nature, although it is equally obvious that they consider the simple fact of ownership of this historic craft to be reward enough. In any event, *Paukie* sails proudly on as the great grandmother of all the sprightly Thistles which grace the waterfront today, and it is devoutly to be hoped that she will have many, many more years of good sailing before her in the hands of the senior Klotzes and their descendants.

The 1957 Nationals were held by the Seneca Yacht Club, Geneva, NY, with 57 entries. The regatta got off to a good start in a 15 knot northwester and, without Sandy on hand to bedevil him, Jim Hendricksen started off with a bang by getting away to a good initial lead and holding it all the way to beat Buffalo's Al Rush in *Safari* across the line. Art Were was third.

A nice breeze again prevailed in the second race. Harvey Busch got on the right track early in the race and led Sam Merrick to the finish, with Bill Ortman in *Sesame*, #15, third. Hendricksen picked up a sixth place in this race.

The wind vanished in the third race, and provided some tense moments for those who were trying to keep going in the soft stuff. After a long, suspenseful morning, Al Williams managed to squeeze his *June Bug*, #631, over ahead of the fleet. Howard Mead was very much at home in these Atlanta-like conditions, and got himself a second place, while Hendricksen stayed right up there with a third, to Merrick's sixth. This embellished Jim's series lead, and things were looking good for him. Then came the fourth race, in which the wind died altogether for awhile, making it as much a race against the time limit as anything. Merrick, noted for his light air ability, proved it here by sorting out the erratic wind changes and ghosted his *Whimsey* home just within the time limit. Chuck Winding from Ithaca, place second, and Ralph Heinzerling of Pt. Washington, L.I. took third, while Hendricksen skidded down to 8th, and all of a sudden the tables were turned, with Merrick in the

series lead. Quite a lot, it seemed, would depend on the wind conditions for the last race.

It blew hard, and with it the tides of fortune turned in Hendricksen's favor. This was his weather, and he immediately seized upon it to get the jump on Merrick and then covered him carefully, pushing him further and further back in the process. While these two were working on each other, Buffalo's Harry Jerge sailed his *Rock 'N' Roll* off unmolested and took the lead at the second mark, after which he went on to win the race. Rush came in for another second place and Dennis Posey, who up to that time had been having a miserable series, finally looked like himself with a third. *Black Jac* finished fourth, *Whimsey* sagged to 8th, and Hendricksen had won his second National Championship. Merrick finished second in the final standings, Williams was third, Ed Walsh looked good in fourth place, and Harvey Busch place fifth. And 'way down in 42nd place was Pete Bordes, new owner of Lineburgh's old *Maid of Pligh* (603), who was just learning the ropes - valuable lessons from which he was, in later years, to come back and haunt the competition.

New officers elected were: Will Frissell, President; Doug Westin, First Vice-President; and Evans Harrell Second Vice-President.

The other big event of the year was the Mallory (Men's) Championships of the NAYRU. The Thistle Class talked the NAYRU into using Thistles that year, and the series was held at Marblehead, the boats being loaned principally by the Boston fleet. Ray McLeod provided for new identical suits of sails for all the boats, and came down to help out with the fitting and tuning. This was another of those affairs where Ray more than proved his worth, as he was always there when needed, which was quite often! A sterling field, as may be expected, was on hand to vie for the title: Walter Lawson, former Thistle National Champ, and conqueror of Harry Sindle in the eliminations; Charlie Morgan, who had just crewed Jim Hendricksen to victory in the Nationals; International 14 ace Paul McLaughlin from Canada; Harry Melges, scow hotshot from the midlands; Leigh Brite, former Thistler from the west coast; another 14 champ, Don McVittie from Seattle; Bill Cox, LI Sound wizard; and George O'Day, a chap with a number of scalps hanging from his belt. Once Melges became better acquainted with the boat, he came on with a closing rush, but it was too late to save the day. O'Day's experience in dinghy work, on the

other hand, coupled with his downwind technique, got him away to an early start in the series, and he beat out Lawson by 3 1/4 points in the final standings. All the Thistles performed relatively well, with no breakdowns; interestingly, it was a breakdown in the eliminations which kept O'Day alive with breakdown points at a time when he was fairing very badly. This came in the form of a broken jib halyard, and led to considerable controversy at the time. Also, this was the first time the Mallories had been sailed in light-displacement boats; Thistles were used extensively in the eliminations as well, almost to Cox's undoing when Lineburgh, crewing for him in Region 2 semi-finals accidentally dumped the main instead of the jib during the spinnaker set. In the ensuing chaos the other crew member dropped the spinnaker halyard and dropped that sail too. Cox suffered through this, and went on to the finals.

Well, amigos, there it was for the first decade-plus of the Thistle. A lot of grand people, some wonderful racing, and tremendous quantities of fun. We're sorry that some of the folks with whom we crossed tacks are no longer with us, but at the same time we're delighted over those who are still around: the Walshes, the Tim Rices, the Jim Hendricksens, the Harvey Busches, the Bill Nexsens, the George Devlins, yes, and good old Sinny Sinclair, too. They put it all together, they made it tick, and they're still enjoying the whole thing, bless 'em all.

Ahead of us were still to come the Stubners, the Fontelieus, Wilsons, Hauptts, Richards, Glovers, and many others of talent following in some highly illustrious footsteps. Undoubtedly we can look forward to lots more of the same heady wine, but whatever the future may hold for the Thistle, she and those guys who have helmed her can look back with fondness over those early years.

They were simply great, every one of them.....

To be continued....