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Thomas David Blackaller Jr.



January 6, 1940 – September 7, 1989
Birthplace: Seattle, Washington

“Everyone chooses to be a color in life – I choose not to be gray.”

Star Power

It's not just that Tom Blackaller was twice Star World Champion, that he won the Australian-American Challenge and was World Champion in 6-Metres, or that he raced in three America's Cup campaigns – two as skipper – and won enough other races to collapse a trophy case; it's how he did it. It was pedal to the metal, caution to the winds with his mane of silver hair flying – yachting's version of a god from Olympus — and he always left them laughing. He finished last in a race off Florida in 1981. When asked how come, he replied, “We stopped in Cuba for cigars.” It could have happened.

As a young sailor, Blackaller lived on his Star boat (*Good Grief!*) at the Newport Harbor Yacht Club in California. He loved equipment, had one of the first ratchet blocks on his mainsheet, and pre-dated the Elvstrom bailer by sticking a beveled aluminum tube through the boat's bottom to bail it underway. He was competitive to the max. One blustery day with gusts to 40, all but Blackaller and one other Star had run for cover. The two boats rounded the weather mark and were promptly dismasted. The skippers continued racing downwind under their mast stumps.

Blackaller was known among sailors for his magic trick of making someone's date (and himself) suddenly disappear from a bar. Once during a race, he asked a young crewman what was the most important thing to know about racing. Before the flustered sailor could answer, Blackaller barked, "The guys with the trophies get the women!"

After watching Blackaller drop from first to last because of a bad wind shift during a light-air half-ton race on Lake Michigan one night, then back to first by morning, designer Scott Kauffman said he had never sailed with anyone who had such a feel for a boat.

Blackaller's pitched Star rivalry with Dennis Conner carried over into their 12-Metre campaigns. Blackaller snuck into Conner's syndicate house one night and triggered the fire alarm. Crewmen ran to alert their skipper. Conner mumbled, "It's Blackaller," rolled over and went back to sleep.

Blackaller also raced sports cars. He was practicing on a California track in 1989 when he suffered the heart attack that killed him at age 49. It was like him that he brought the car to a stop on the infield without incident. He knew about his condition, but living at less than full speed was not a consideration for Tom Blackaller.

- *Roger Vaughan*

Links of Interest:

[VIDEO: 1987 America's Cup: Blackaller's Bet](#)

[VIDEO: Tom Blackaller talking about catamarans for America's Cup](#)

[Remembering Tom Blackaller: Star Class website](#)

["A Lesson In Sailing: With Tom Blackaller" by Paul Cayard](#)

[Designation of racing mark 16 as the "Thomas David Blackaller, Jr. Memorial Buoy" by Yacht Racing Association of San Francisco Bay](#)

[Tom Blackaller wikipedia page](#)

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