

# Dick Stearns – Lake Michigan's Legendary Star Champion

In a white house along the back streets of Winnetka a man and his son work on radio-controlled model airplanes in the basement while the family dog watches. Upstairs in the family room the bookshelves are lined with silver trophies and photographs from the glory days of the past. The man? One of the Star Class' most distinguished champions – Dick Stearns.

Born on Sept. 4, 1927, Dick was a first generation sailor. He became involved in sailing when a fraternity brother of his father's suggested it would be a good way to keep young Dick out of trouble. Mr. Stearns paid \$1200 in 1942 for his son's very first sailboat – Star #1308 "Shrew" owned by Bert Williams. Since the Stearns lived on the south side of Chicago near the lake, it was decided that Jackson Park would be the new home for "Shrew."

Dick remembers the maiden voyage from Monroe Street to Jackson Park as a rather harrowing experience. He knew nothing about sailing and tried to get ahold of his mooring at Jackson Park while pointed downwind. Result – one broken broom. That taught the young skipper one of his first lessons, that you need to turn the boat into the wind to slow it down. "Shrew" routinely finished 30 minutes behind the last boat in the fleet that season and the other Stars were usually put away by the time they returned to the harbor. In 1944 it was time for a newer boat, Star #1941 "Glider" purchased from Joe Dowrie. Dick continued to sail out of Jackson Park until his father's death in 1947. He then lived with Malcolm Vail (the fraternity brother mentioned earlier) and began sailing at Wilmette.

But even early in his sailing career he began showing signs of the greatness yet to come. This account appeared in a Lakeland Boating article:

"Having a few regattas under his belt by 1945, he floated 'Glider' over a rickety four-wheel trailer, pulled boat and trailer up on the Jackson Park Harbor beach by block and tackle, and headed for Vermilion, Ohio, site of the Great Lakes Championship. No one had ever heard of him before and even after the first race, in which he placed second, no one seemed to mind his being there. But at the end of the second race, a howling wester on shallow Lake Erie so

violent it disabled about 85% of the fleet, they did notice that Stearns was winning the series by a dozen or so points. He went on to win by a comfortable 16 points. The next year, to show it wasn't an accident, he won it again.

This made Dick something of a sage among the fellows who had been trying to win races around Chicago. One of them asked how he managed to avoid being entangled in protests. 'Get ahead and stay ahead' was his laconic advice. And this is just about what he did himself.

One remarkable trait of Dick's that appeared early in his career was an intense desire to win balanced by a good natured resignation to losing. He never brooded, and never appeared to be upset when he really went into the tubes."

Dick sailed that 1946 District 4 championship with crew Gary Comer who had to sit on the boom off the wind to act as a human boom vang. They bailed out the boat with their hats and shoes.

In 1949 Stearns and Comer hoped to win the fleet eliminations but could not best Woody Pirie. They then travelled to Cleveland for the Great Lakes Championship. The regatta had been relocated to



Dick and Lynn relaxing along the south side of Wilmette Harbor.



Cleveland as a result of a “double play” by Star skippers at Sheridan Shore Yacht Club. Buzz Van Arsdale had been District 4 champion in 1948 and according to custom SSYC would be entitled to host the event in 1949. But another Sheridan Shore skipper Woody Pirie had cleaned up in the Star World’s at Portugal in 1948 with the result that SSYC automatically became the host for that contest and relinquished hosting the Great Lakes affair. (The 1949 Star World’s was won by Harry Nye. The racing was held off Chicago since low water levels had made sailing out of Wilmette Harbor impossible.)

Stearns won his third Blue Star in five years with a win at Cleveland. He modestly said “Around Chicago we have a couple of world champs. I couldn’t help but pick up pointers sailing against them.” The team of Stearns and Comer won yet another Blue Star in 1950 at St. Joseph, MI.

In 1950 “Glider” with crew Bob Rodgers travelled to New Orleans for the Western Hemisphere Spring Championship and emerged victorious. A regatta report noted “Not to overlook the traditional side of yacht racing, Dick Stearns and Bob Rodgers, the

winning skipper and crew, were grabbed by the other contestants and bodily tossed into the harbor. This provided a fitting climax to an enjoyable week of racing.”

The 50’s also saw changes in Dick’s professional life. In 1950 he became a partner with Harry Nye in the sailmaking business. In 1951 he bought out Nye and became sole owner of Murphy & Nye. The business took off after Dick discovered the sails could be made of orlon. At that time almost all racing sails were cut from long-staple Egyptian cotton. Cotton sails had to be broken in by reaching them for up to eight hours. If the sails got too big you would have to get them wet to shrink them again.

Stearns and Rodgers sailed Star #2525 “Magic” in the 1951 Star World championship at Gibson Island, MD. However the third race of the regatta proved to be Dick’s undoing. He was 31st at the first windward mark and came back to 15th by the finish. Skip and Mary Etchells won the regatta by one point with a new boat, Star #3125.

The Stearns legend continued to grow as the decade of the 60’s began. In 1960 Dick and crew Lynn



“Glider” #4241 sailing in a fresh breeze off Nassau in the 1963 Spring Championship.





Skipper Dick Stearns and crew Lynn Williams, a team that knew what it took to win.

Williams won the Jahncke Open series in New Orleans as rival Don Bever of Vermilion broke his boom on the final jibe to the finish in the last race. Dick followed this up with a win at the Spring's also in New Orleans. Buzzy Killeen finished second. The May 1960 issue of "Starlights" reported "The wind conditions were everything, including vertical and circular. Stearns won by brilliant sailing and average to good speed. No one could say that it was only because he was moving faster: he won by superior sailing with superb gear and equipment. Everybody hit the tank sooner or later – except Richard. The sailing was strange and the weather often wretched."

The Star North American Championship was won by Stearns and Williams in 1960 at Milford, CT. They never won a race but finished consistently near the front of the fleet. During the regatta the boats had to be trailed up the hill to Washington Field when hurricane Donna arrived. The duo repeated winning the title in 1961 at Toronto. "Glider" showed no signs of slowing down with a win at the 1962 Spring's in New Orleans on route to what would become Dick's

ultimate thrill in the Star Class.

The 1962 Star World Championship was held in Cascais, Portugal with a fleet comprised of internationally renowned sailors. Russian skipper Timir Pinegin came with his own support team complete with doctor. The weather provided a test for sailors and equipment. One day a big ship could be heard passing near the fleet which was becalmed in a dense fog. Another race was sailed in storm conditions with large waves. Dick recalls it was really a struggle to get to windward and sailors were blinded by the driving salt water. Off the wind it was so far down into the trough of the waves that you didn't want to go down there in case the wave collapsed on you. The Stars took off on violent planes and there was so much spray that you could only see the crew's feet. They couldn't come about at the leeward end of the course so they jibed and heard a big "SNAP!" Fortunately the rig was still intact, the snap had been made by the jibing sail. Though they never won a race, Stearns and Williams went on to win the regatta and the coveted Gold Star. Finishing



second was Duarte Bello of Portugal.

The new world champions were greeted at O'Hare airport by Sheridan Shore Yacht Club members and the Windjammer Dixieland Band. They then returned to the yacht club where a champagne party was held in their honor and bubbly was gulped from the "big mug."

For Dick Stearns, winning the 1962 World's "was the biggest thrill of my life." He adds "you never lose the excitement of competition. It offers you a challenge with Mother Nature and your fellow patriots. There's just that sheer exhilaration of doing something thrilling."

But the story does not end there. Stearns and Williams went on to win the 1963 Spring's in Nassau and won again in 1965. In 1964 Star #4241 was replaced by #4841. Back in those days the Spring's alternated between New Orleans and Nassau. It was said that Stearns knew more about Lake Pontchartrain than the locals. A newspaper clipping notes "Winning races on Lake Pontchartrain has been a habit for Dick Stearns for the past 14 years and the 1964 Star Class Spring Championship series turned out to be another occasion for the Chicago skipper to leave New Orleans with almost every trophy in sight. Stearns and crew Lynn Williams took advantage of everything the lake had to offer and posted a 1-1-1-4-1 for the Silver Star series.

Dick has fond memories of those spring regattas. When they went to New Orleans they would put Ivory soap between the seams of the boat so that as it

swelled up it would "glue" itself back together. It would blow so hard in Nassau that sand blowing off the beach would hit you in the face a block away from shore.

Following the Gold Star came a gold medal in the 1963 Pan Am Games in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Stearns was sailing a chartered boat but shipped his mast to Brazil. The mast was broken in shipment and spent the first three races in a local repair shop. But no matter. Dick and crew Robert Halperin won the first six races and did not compete in the seventh.

Dick and Lynn Williams teamed up again to represent the United States in the Star for the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo. They received no support or coaching back then, had to pay to get the boat to Japan though did get housing and uniforms when they made the team. The Americans won the silver medal as Durward Knowles took the gold. Dick off-handedly remembers there was a guy with an unusual keel at the Olympics. However the fact is that Stearns would have won the gold medal if a protest lodged against a Swedish boat for an illegally constructed keel was upheld.

Tucked in the Stearn's family scrapbook is an invitation to a luncheon at the White House on Dec. 1, 1964. On the back of the invitation are the names of five other athletes who would dine with Stearns including Robert Hayes who ran the 100 meters at the Olympics.

Durward Knowles once was asked by the Miami News about what makes a good sailor? He replied



The new Gold Star winners hit the dock at the 1962 World championship.



“some just have it, a natural flair, others develop it. Where you’re born has nothing to do with it. The U.S. Midwest has produced some of our greatest sailors. How is this natural aptitude reflected? Well, for one thing in the touch a sailor has for the helm, the tiller.” (He obviously was thinking of Stearns, the newspaper reported.)

How did Star sailing then compare to Star sailing now? When they won the Olympic silver medal, Stearns weighed 165 lbs. and his crew weighed 225 lbs. Initially they had just one backstay but when the class went to lighter spars they needed a lower backstay to keep the mast up. Jumper struts in front of the mast kept the top from falling over. The small diameter rigging wire would stretch just enough to make the mast almost self-tuning. They had a heavy air sail that was 6-8 inches shorter on the leech allowing them to rake the mast a little more. The flexibility of the boom was just as important as the flexibility of the mast. The boom blocks could be moved and the boom could be flexed to match the sail. Stearns feels that sailing a Star is no real strain if you sail and tune it properly, but you can’t recover if things go wrong. Wife Kay attributes his success to his good eyesight, being tuned in to the wind and being very quiet in the boat. She also notes that Dick would have perfect sails and perfect finish on the hull.

Who were some of the other significant players of the time? Dick recalls Lowell North having the “key to the wood spar scene.” He had spruce from Alaska, had good light spars, and came up with the idea of tip weights. One year Stearns had to tape a half-dollar to the top of his spar at the Bacardi regatta. He describes Joe Duplin as a guy who liked to press the rules to the limit.

Dick has been involved with Pan Am and Olympic teams as a coach and manager and is still a fixture on the Chicago sailing scene. His wife Kay is best known as an E scow sailor in the Midwest; son Chris sails an MC scow at their summer home at Torch Lake, MI; son Rich sails a Soling at Wilmette; daughter Barbie lives in Minneapolis; and daughter Susie is married to 1972 Olympic gold medalist Soling crew and E scow champion Bill Allen of Lake Minnetonka, MN.

Some wisdom imparted by Dick Stearns in 1967 that is still applicable for the 1996 Star North Americans: “Being a good sailor is partly knowing the weather, which way the wind shifts, but you can never be sure. . . . And, on Lake Michigan in Chicago, the winds can be goofier than hell.” And on that note, good luck!!