

Buddy Melges, Renowned American Sailor, Passes Away at 93



Harry Clemons “Buddy” Melges Jr., considered to be one of the greatest competitive sailors in the sport of sailing, passed away on May 18, 2023. He leaves behind a remarkable legacy as one of the most accomplished and revered sailors in American history.

Born on January 26, 1930, in Elkhorn, Wisconsin, Buddy dedicated his life to the pursuit of excellence on the water. Growing up on Delavan Lake, he honed his skills sailing the boats crafted by his father, Harry Melges Sr., at Melges Boat Works. From its humble origins as a wooden rowboat builder, the family business evolved into a trailblazer in sailing innovation, providing top-quality performance hulls and sails while fostering a passionate sailing community over the last 78 years.

Over his eight-decade career, Buddy advanced the sport and etched his name into the annals of sailing history, showcasing unmatched skill, strategic brilliance, and an unwavering passion for the sport. While being a fierce competitor, Buddy made lifelong friendships both on and off the water. His triumphs in international competitions solidified his status as a sailing icon.

Buddy soared to Olympic glory, earning a gold medal in the Soling class in 1972 and a bronze medal in the Flying Dutchman class in 1964. His expertise extended beyond the Olympics, as he claimed a gold medal in the Flying Dutchman Class at the Pan American Games in 1967, the title of two-time Star world champion in 1978 and 1979, and a remarkable three-time 5.5 Meter world champion in 1967, 1973, and 1983.

On the national stage, Buddy captured the E-Scow national championship five times, triumphing in 1965, 1969, 1978, 1979, and 1983. He achieved the seemingly impossible when he won the North American Men's Sailing Championships and the Clifford D. Mallory Trophy in 1959, 1960, and 1961. His talent on the ice was also unrivaled, as evidenced by his seven-time skeeter ice boat world champion titles in 1955, 1957, 1970, 1972, 1974, 1980, and 1981.

Buddy also made his mark on the America's Cup. As a challenger in 1987 with Heart of America, he competed against Dennis Conner's Stars & Stripes and earned high praise from Conner, himself. In 1992, Buddy achieved the ultimate success, helming America3 to victory alongside Bill Koch, securing the America's Cup and marking one of his greatest accomplishments during his storied career.

His list of sailing accolades goes on, including three-time US Sailing's Rolex Yachtsman of the Year (1961, 1972, and 1983) and two-time One Design Sailor of the Year (1978 and 1979). In 1972, the national authority for the sport, now called US Sailing, presented Buddy with its most esteemed award, the Nathanael G. Herreshoff Trophy for Outstanding Contributions to the Sport. In 1986, he was the first recipient of the W. Van Alan Clark Jr. Trophy, the National Sportsmanship Award.

In 2001, Buddy was inducted into the America's Cup Hall of Fame, recognizing his significant contributions to the prestigious event. Additionally, in 2002, he was inducted into the Inland Lake Yachting Association Hall of Fame, a testament to his impact on inland lake sailing.

Beyond his own accomplishments, Buddy generously shared his knowledge and served as a mentor to aspiring sailors, leaving an indelible mark on the sport. His captivating lectures and teaching abilities inspired countless individuals across the world. As a member of numerous clubs, including the ILYA Bilge Pullers (Oldest surviving member), Lake Geneva Yacht Club (Member #1), Chicago Yacht Club, Columbia Yacht Club, Milwaukee Yacht Club, Texas Corinthian Yacht Club, and Little Traverse Bay Yacht Club, Buddy exemplified his commitment to the sailing community and his dedication to fostering camaraderie among fellow sailors.

Often referred to as the "Grand Master" of competitive yachting and affectionately known as "The Wizard of Zenda," Buddy was a beacon of inspiration and a true legend in the sailing world. He was the recipient of the Vince Lombardi Award for Distinction in Sports from the Wisconsin Historical Society History Makers in 2009. His induction into the National Sailing Hall of Fame in 2011, the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame in 2007, and the World Sailing Hall of Fame in 2007 solidified his enduring legacy and celebrated his remarkable contributions to the sport.

In addition to Buddy's sailing career, it is worth noting his distinguished military service and his love for duck hunting.

During his younger years, Buddy served his country with honor and valor as a member of the United States Army. His exceptional service during the Korean War earned him the prestigious Bronze Star.

Beyond the waters, Buddy found even more joy in the great outdoors with his passion for duck hunting. A devoted outdoorsman, environmentalist, and conservationist, he served as Chairman of the Delta Marsh Rehabilitation Committee for the Delta Waterfowl Foundation. His longtime favorite place to hunt ringneck ducks and mallards was at his cabin on Lake of the Woods in Nestor Falls, Ontario.

For all of his remarkable achievements, Buddy remained humble and approachable. Known for his colorful personality and infectious love for the sport, Buddy was always willing to lend a helping hand and offer words of encouragement to fellow sailors, inspiring them to always start first and increase their lead.

Buddy leaves an enduring impact on the sailing community, a legacy that will resonate for generations to come. His contributions will continue to shape the future of sailing, inspiring sailors of all ages to pursue their dreams with unwavering determination.

Survived by his loving wife of 69 years, Gloria, and their children, Laura Melges, Hans Melges, and Harry C. Melges III (Suzanne), Buddy is also remembered by his grandchildren, Olivia Arbaugh, Hunter Arbaugh, Harry C. Melges IV, Monroe Melges, Hans Melges, Maxx Melges, and Maverik Melges. He is preceded in death by his sister, Marilyn Snudden, and by his parents, Louise and Harry C. Melges Sr.

If you would like to honor Buddy's memory, donations can be made to the Geneva Lake Sailing School in the name of the Buddy Melges Sailing Center.

A Celebration of Life will be held at a later date.