

Planing On – Sessions

Welcome to the Sessions... All things International 14 related.

Article 2 – November 5, 2021 By Paul Galvez

THE STORY OF **BOZO** BOATWORKS

The Rise of the first New Rules 14 Foot “Skiffs” in the USA



It was 1996. The Big News was that a Sheep was cloned, and President Bill Clinton was re-elected (we know what happened after that). Most importantly, the International Fourteen Class had approved amalgamation with the Australian Fourteen Footers, the rest shall we say is history. New Rules were drawn up, voted, and approved by the World Council.

In a nutshell, *we are adopting the Aussie way* - the beam had widened from 5'6" to 6', a taller rig by about 2 feet more, and a proper weight reduction. Still not as light as the Aussie version, but it was a move in the right direction. **The World's most technologically advanced Dinghy had now become something new called a Skiff!**

It all started the exciting 1989 Worlds in San Francisco. Our brothers from Down Under were invited and this event proved overwhelmingly that the Aussie 14' Skiffs were far superior in every way as they trounced the rest of the International 14 fleet into a tizzy. Aussie boats were lighter, wider, stiffer, had flatter hulls, and were much faster. The Aussies literally bitch slapped the rest of the 14 fleet into the next phase of development. It was almost embarrassing to watch as I was there. As a proverbial starving college student, I just bought my first 14, a total beater. I was in no way ready to sail in a World Championship at my level, but we were still motivated to watch the action unfold and see how it's done so my girlfriend Yvonne, along with my new crew Craig and I drove from LA to SF overnight. Upon arrival at St Francis YC, we were able to catch a ride on the RC Trawler to see the racing. It was cold, wet and windy and it was clear - Aussie Skiffs planed easily away from the rest of the fleet upwind and down with the crew sheeting the main directly off the boom - so weird! These guys were ripping up and down the course like nothing I've ever seen before. The skiffs would launch past the waves while others plowed into them. They were in another league. We had just seen the future.

The '89 Worlds did not go unnoticed as the fleet from Down Under gave everyone a lesson in Skiff Sailing 101. It took a few more years but the World Council finally agreed that the class needed a booster shot and adopting the features of our Southern Hemisphere mates would allow the 14's to compete on a level basis worldwide. Although this new rule change would make all existing I14's obsolete overnight, it was a move I'm sure most have grown to appreciate. It was a big pill to swallow - in 1996, we lost a few long-time fleet members while gaining a whole new batch of enthusiastic sailors ready to try this new type of boat.

The 1996 New Rules began a pivotal moment in the class, igniting a strong movement to design and build the fastest 14' creations imaginable at the time. Skiff Sailing in the US was brand new, and unknown. It would be another 3-4 years for the 49er to arrive on the scene. The I14 was it if you wanted the juice and had the cajones to try it. New teams assembled and existing teams were already going into a frenzy modifying their existing boats as they were chopped and widened, racks or wings installed along with new rigs strung up which were taller, lighter and stiffer. Out with aluminum spars, in with carbon. Those who performed the various mods were usually faster than the Penultimate 14's however good boat handling and strong tactics kept the old boats in the mix. It was fun.

A lot of effort, time and money went into these mods. Some were just downright gorgeous while others were left unpainted, sharp, and jagged rush jobs. A bit rough for some tastes. Ultimately the modifications were in fact faster and better overall but were they fast enough to pace against the tried and true Australian Designs? Remember- the teams from Black Rock, Perth, Adelaide, and Sydney had been doing this awhile making it look easy while the rest of the 14 world was on a steep learning curve.

On the US West Coast, the Seattle Fleet was looking closely at the new rules and pushing the parameters to the max as they were planning an entirely new design specific to the new rules. A young Naval Architecture student was sent Down Under with his measuring tape to study the Skiffs and bring back intel. Longtime 14 legendary sailor Baird Bardarson, along with others spearheaded this effort and saw an opportunity to develop something special. A mix of higher engineering, aerospace surplus, and a young brainiac named Paul Bieker.

(Look for his interview coming to Sessions soon).

Farther South, the San Francisco Fleet were taking matters into their own hands. It was a race to launch the new rules boats and they had a plan of their own. It may not have been as sophisticated, but it's definitely a good story...

The '89 Worlds had left quite an impression on the SF Locals. Aussie boats were bought on site or brand-new boats were imported from Oz soon thereafter. Several SF Sailors including Eric Arens, Andy Bates and Julio Magri saw the light early on about how special these Aussie boats were, but more teams now wanted in on the action. The Next Worlds would be at Richmond in '97 and the clock was ticking. Something had to be done to speed up the fleet building process.

Late one night, another Fourteen Sailor named Ernie Bertram out of RYC developed a diabolical plan to help grow the fleet almost instantly. The way Ernie says it went down was an invitation for a glass of wine and short chat with Julio, the new owner of a recently imported, shiny and new Aussie Ice Design. After more than a few bottles later that evening, Ernie was able to convince Julio that it would be a great idea to pull a mold off Julio's brand-new boat so they could start building more boats locally ASAP. We are still unsure if it was Julio's graciousness to the fleet or perhaps, he did not completely understand what was happening but Julio reluctantly agreed and Ernie got the ball rolling for an effort to build boats locally on Ernie's farm. The only problem was nobody new how to build the boats. In Ernie's words, ***"We had no idea what the hell we were doing but we were having fun learning. We were just a bunch of BOZO's hence the name BOZO Boatworks"***.

I recently called Ernie to ask more about this endeavor. I knew quite a few people were building and/or rebuilding 14's on this old farm in Palo Alto but I wanted the whole story since it's worth sharing. Turns out Ernie's dad was a Chief Engineer on the battleship Pennsylvania during the war. The apple didn't fall far from the tree as Ernie became an engineer specializing in a form of microwave tech for the US Military. His career had aligned him with a good network and supply chain for support and composite materials through his contacts at NASA. On the farm, Ernie was no slouch about building his own tools for the job. They developed their own autoclaves and vacuum bagging systems. It was crude but it worked. The first boats were quite heavy, but they kept getting lighter and stronger after each

build. Guys from Richmond YC would drive in and setup camp for the weekend, pitching tents on Ernie's farm. They'd start their builds working late into the wee hours, often going to bed at 2AM after a long carbon layup. There was good progress but imagine if a professional boatbuilder was on site...

Enter Andrew Cuddihy. He was a pro sailor, designer and boatbuilder from Sydney. He was also one of the Aussie crews at the 1989 Worlds. He was young and poor, having spent most of his budget on building his new boat for the 89 event. He didn't have a place to sleep so he planned on sleeping in the container however that is when he bumped into a local sailor named Dave Berntsen aka "Davo" and was invited to his apartment in the city to crash after the days racing. It was much better option than a cold, dark, and wet container. They became good mates over the next couple of years. Andrew went on to crew in the AC trials for Australia in San Diego, sailed the 12, 14, and 18 Footers in Sydney, then designed the Ovington 1- I14 in the UK for Dave Ovington. After that, Davo asked him to come back to SF to help him build his 14 for an upcoming Worlds, again in SF.

Andrew's story below.

"The first bunch of photos are of a 14 that I built from scratch in 14 days and sailed it in the US Nationals at Santa Cruz. I built it for David Berntsen who crewed with me. It was built on a rural property on Pagemill Road in Palo Alto that was owned by a crazy guy called Ernie Bertram. His farm was a dump but underneath his house was a cleanroom that he built Microwave Transponders for the US military. We called it Bozo Boatworks. Living with Ernie was his wife Betsy who was a former Dallas Cowboys cheerleader from the 70s. Also living there was a guy called Walt. He was an ex Hells Angels biker guy from New Jersey with a bad temper. He and Ernie were trying to build a 14 as well as others. They had absolutely no idea at all. There is a pic of their boat in the yard. And there was Ernie's daughter Leila who was about 25 and had moved back home and was living in a trailer in the paddock between the house and the work shed. I was living in a caravan in the same paddock. Leila would go out on game fishing boats with groups of men and come home drunk and chase me around the shed. I had a girlfriend so used to lock myself in the caravan when I wasn't working on the boat. And Betsy fed Dave and I every meal. It was such a weird time.

Anyway, I hope you like the pics. We didn't win the Nationals as we were still building the boat in the carpark but a few weeks later we won the 96 North American Champs at the Gorge by winning every race. I saw the boat again in the boat yard at the yacht club in Hawaii when I did the Moth Worlds in 2013."

Thanks Andrew!

There were about 6 or 8 boats built or modified on that property during early 1996 to mid-1997, perhaps a few more. There were at least two BOZO boats (Davo's ICE and the Red Boat) that won both a Nationals and/or North Americans with some dominance in that era.

Imagine - The idea of rolling up your sleeves, getting your hands dirty, and getting shit done by making a few 14s with friends. Putting in the hours and learning the process along the way. All this effort resulted in what is most likely the very first Sailing Skiffs made on US soil. Bozo Boatworks sounds like it was a pretty cool place.













Bonus Footage: Here's a great video of the first New Rules 14 Worlds in SF hosted by Richmond YC in 1997. Enjoy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynSriYywhg0>