

Tony Blachford – A tribute from the Folkboat Association UK

It was with much sadness that news of Tony Blachford's death just before Christmas reached the folkboat fleet.

This tribute remembers Tony as one of the best helmsman and skippers to have graced the Solent and international waters. In the folkboat fleet, *Smokey*, *Skjaere*, *Stralende* and *Skidpaws* were unbeatable, a record only matched by his contribution to the UK nordic folkboat fleet.

Tony developed legendary status over the decades, in the numerous dinghy and keelboat fleets he became the national and world champion in:

- International Moth UK nationals in 1966 and 1967
- Osprey UK nationals from 1974 to 1977 in three different Ospreys called *Infidel*, the stunning varnished *Infidel* making its debut at the Crystal Palace dinghy show
- Winner of the Osprey Travellers' Trophy 4 years consecutively, which was awarded to the traveller winning the most open meetings – the Blachford/ Strickland team did not drop one event throughout the 4 years in which they competed.
- Three quarter ton world champion in 1975 helming *Solent Saracen*
- Folkboat week and National champions in 1979 and 1982 in *Smokey*

As they say, “getting to the top is one thing, staying there takes real genius” Tony was a real genius in every boat he raced and every race he started.



From L-R: Tony Blachford age 17 becomes UK International Moth Champion in 1966, Osprey national champion 1974-1977 and ¾ ton world champion in *Solent Saracen*, Hanko, Norway 1975.

For the first time, the offshore world was looking for talented helmsmen from the dinghy world and Tony was one of the first to be snapped up, by one of the top UK teams. He was also one of the first sailors to enter the world of sail making to successfully pursue his career in racing.

Tony won the three-quarter ton world championship in Hanko, Norway 1975, helming *Solent Saracen* K 4049, the first British level rating victory outside of home waters in these IOR class yachts.

As the Southern Evening Echo reported, 25 boats from 9 nations competed. Solent Saracen, the smallest entrant, had a handsome lead at the end of the world championships, finishing first in the fifth and final 300-mile race.



From L-R: Solent Saracen world $\frac{3}{4}$ ton cup champion 1975, King Olav of Norway congratulates Tony, and Solent Saracen stretching her legs upwind.

The team was presented the Jean Peytol trophy, which they received from King Olav of Norway, to a great reception from wives and families, and for at least three of the crew an unscheduled dip in the swimming pool.

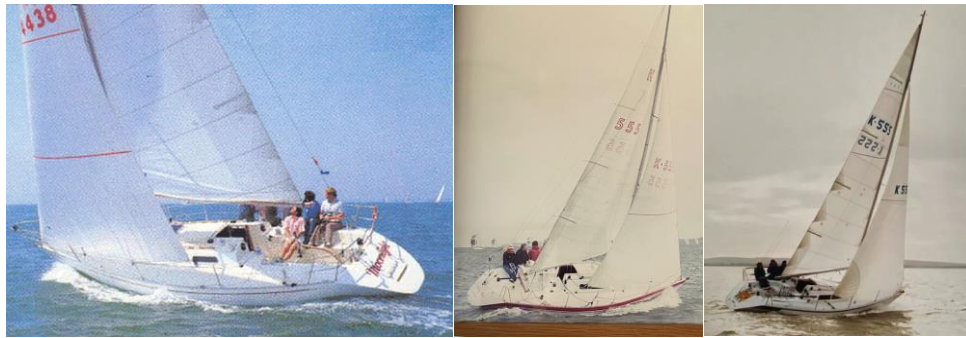
During the Fastnet in 1979, Tony rode the storm out on deck for 12 hours at the helm of an OOD 34, as the rest of the crew was suffering badly from the conditions. Tony's race included standing by another yacht in distress until the rescue services arrived, courage of the first order.

Tony then joined as the mainsail trimmer and tactician in Phil Crebbin's Soling campaign, along with Mark Dowland for the 1980 Olympic Regatta in Tallinn. They had the speed and collective talent to win the trials only to miss out on selection, when ultimately the RYA boycotted the event due to the Cold War.

Tony's heart was always in the Solent and in one of the most successful partnerships - Blachford/Strickland - he raced three campaigns in family ownership under the *Smokey* banner, winning one silver gilt bowl as runner up for the Round the Island race, and as multiple winners over many years in the WSCRA series, Solent Circuit and numerous other Solent events.

Smokey 2 was an SJ30 designed by Stephen Jones, fitted out from a hull and deck bought in 1980; Smokey 3 was an HB31, a Van de Stadt design, that Tony worked closely with Kees van Tongeren to develop for Hunter Boats. Smokey 3 was the first to have an open transom and again fitted out at home from a hull and deck in 1983.

Tony also helmed the Humphreys' designed Contessa 33 *Moonlight* to many victories, including first in class for the Cowes-Deauville and Starlight Series 1984.



From L-R: Tony at the helm of the Humphreys' designed Contessa 33 *Moonlight* and racing on *Smokey 2* and *Smokey 3*.

Tony came back to folkboats in the late 1970's in an immaculate wooden carvel design, built by Brent Strickland and the trainee shipwrights in Southampton. She was called *Smokey* in line with the name from the Blachford / Strickland partnerships' racing stable. The name was apt because she had experienced a fire before completion, leaving the mahogany on oak timbers a darker shade than usual or *Smokey*.

Ed Donald can remember crewing on *Celia Mary* in 1979, when Tony with his long-time sailing partner and brother-in-law Brent Strickland, came to Folkboat week for the first time. He recalls this beautiful varnished folkboat with a blue cabin top and a super thin section Proctor mast, leaving the top boats of that era, *Tomic*, *Svane*, *Ziguener*, *Piassano*, literally for smoke! *Smokey* won Folkboat week (the de facto Nationals) in 1979 and 1982, each by some margin. You could only marvel and respect Tony's sailing prowess on the water and his generous spirit ashore.

Tony then moved to nordic GRP folkboats, including *Skjaere* and *Stralende*, before driving out to Kerteminde in Denmark in 2002 to bring his all conquering *Skidpaws*, back to the UK. In his first year with *Skidpaws*, Tony, his wife Debbie and Rob Reed won 27 out of the 28 races they entered. This combination proved unbeatable until Tony retired from competitive racing and *Skidpaws* became *Padfoot*.



Tony and Debbie racing their first Nordic GRP Folkboat, *Skjaere* FGBR 661,

As Jeremy Austin of *Tak* said: "Tony was always way out in front sailing deep and fast." Matthew Jones remembers Tony from when he first bought *Crackerjack* with Stuart and Caroline, learning the intricacies of folkboat sailing, with *Skidpaws* always at the front of the fleet and what a great sailor Tony was.

Rob Reed shared how enjoyable it was sailing with Tony and Debbie on board *Stralende* and then *Skidpaws*, always with good humour, amazing skill and the ability to make her go-fast in all directions, “even if on occasions Debbie and I were chatting and not about the race, much to Tony’s annoyance!”

Tony had many talents that the folkboat fleet benefitted from off the water. Sally Kallis from *Kingdom Come* has fond memories of Tony from her days working together on the Royal Lympington Cup Match Racing Committee (which Tony also chaired), the Admirals Cup inshore races on behalf of RORC and the Blind Sailing events, including the world championship his wife Debbie and he pioneered.

Sally remembers Tony being a master course setter, thoughtful, quick-witted and with that fantastic sense of humour. As PRO he was always glad to give help and advice to all on the race committee team, on the water and ashore “with his favourite tippie of red wine.” And despite his modest demeanour, he was the power behind race management at most of the top events.

Chris Baldwick ex *Bonnie* remembers being an ARO to Tony, describing him “as a great tutor.” He was also great fun, taking bets on when the fleet would get to the windward mark, whether they would split gybes downwind and when they would round the leeward mark. His mantra on course setting was always that “there must be options and overtaking opportunities.”

At the first nationals raced in Christchurch bay, such were Tony’s standards as PRO, he was heard to apologise to one competitor after racing for not moving the windward mark on the second leg following a persistent wind shift of +20 degrees, following this with his large smile and saying...”you were so far ahead I didn’t think it would effect your result but I it did mean the fleet missed out on a good beat!”

These high standards reflected in everything Tony did on and off the water. He became the Folkboat Association secretary and treasurer after Peter Ament, in the early Tenties until May 2018. He handed over to Nicky Henderson with the association’s affairs more than ship shape.

The tin box file of folkboat registrations and owner details assiduously collated and brought up to date is the bedrock of the Association to this day, albeit automated now.

Tony led the way in constantly improving standards in the folkboat fleet. The Nationals were run separately to Folkboat week along with significant improvements to race and course management. Change was delivered through consensus and the ability to take folkboaters with him, through his friendly and respectful way of working.

Tony was the original driving force behind the popularity of Nordic folkboats racing from Lympington, with some 40+ boats on the river today. He also led the class towards NFIA compliance; realising nordic one design racing was the future in the UK and for those wishing to compete in Europe.

Mindful of tradition, this led to the development of the nordic and classic folkboat fleets, replacing the old non-engine and engine categories.

When Matthew Jones became chairman of the Folkboat Association, Tony took up the role of secretary and treasurer and was a great support during his four years in office. As Matthew put it, “although Tony stopped sailing some time ago, he remains a legend of the folkboat fleet.”



Tony at home on *Skidpaws*

Tony, thank you for sharing your genius with the folkboat class, and for leaving such a remarkable legacy to all members of the Folkboat Association UK and beyond.

The folkboat is the people’s boat: you will always be the people’s champion.

Graham Coulter
President, Folkboat Association UK, 14th January 2024.

With considerable thanks to Titch Blachford and Ed Donald, for drafting this tribute on behalf of the Folkboat Association UK.