

Studying the classics

WITH MARK ELLIS

This sultan of sail is also a prince of power. By John Morris

Sometimes we Canadians have a lot of time for foreign success stories but fail to notice our homegrown hot properties. Mark Ellis has made extraordinary strides in the world of boat design. His Nonsuch catboats have been hugely popular in Canada and the United States and recently in England. His first production powerboat, the Limestone 24, has been an immediate hit.

Canadian Yachting editor John Morris visited Ellis in his Oakville office to find out what it takes to make waves in the world of boat design.

Mark, how did you get started in boat design?

In this wonderful business? I started out self-taught. I was sailing when I was four on the St. Lawrence in upstate New York—Watertown, the boonies. I was interested in drawing too when I was young and I probably thought of being a

boat designer from the time I was in grade school. So I just began drawing boats.

I picked up the usual books on yacht design and taught myself. I went to university and studied business rather than engineering. The business background is very important. If you're going to be a success in this field, either you have to be wildly successful as a designer of racing boats or something flashy or you've got to have some business sense.

During school I worked at Minneford's, a boat yard on City Island, and some other yards as well. I worked at every job in the yard, scrubbing barnacles and everything else.

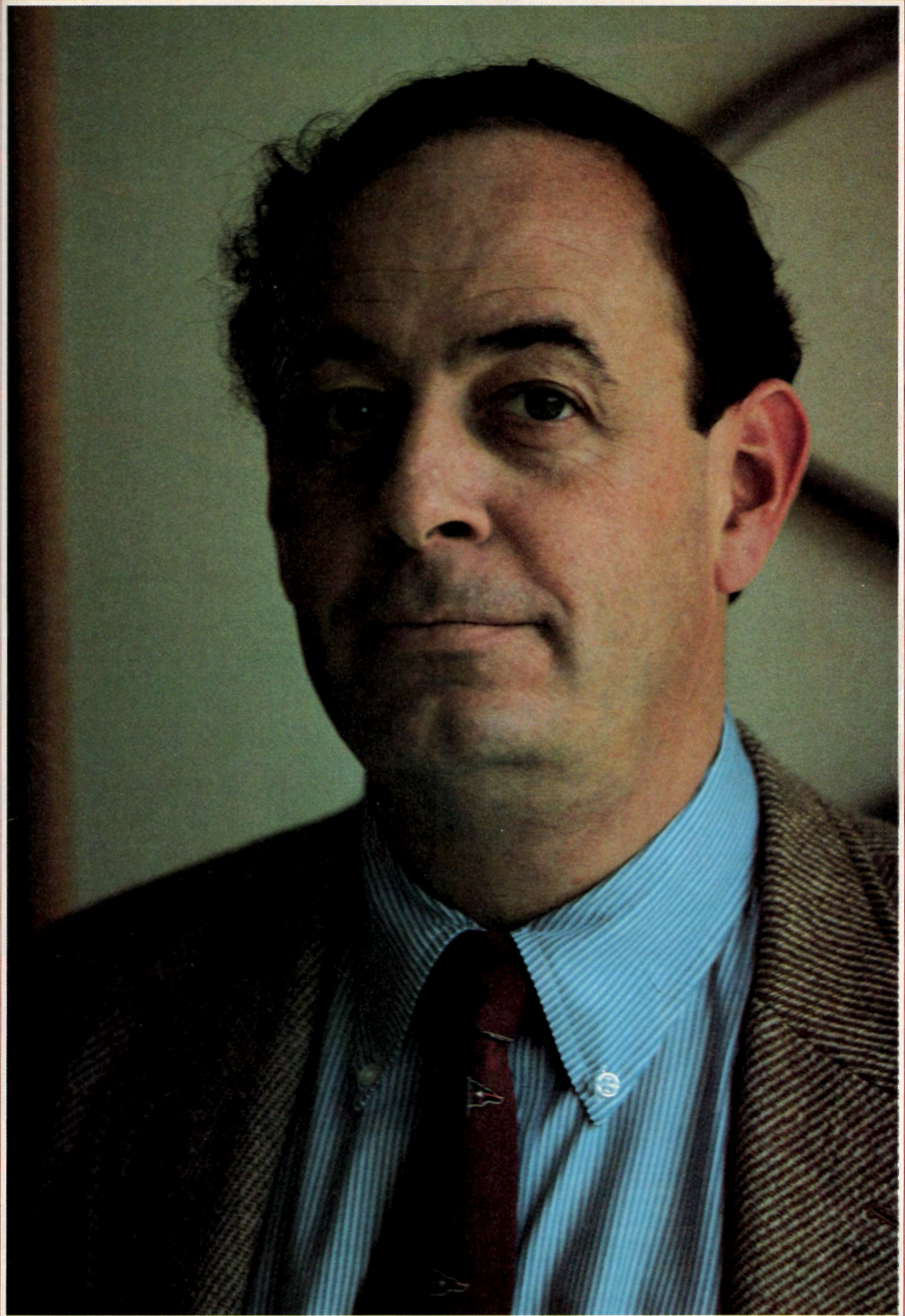
By the time I was finishing up at Boston College I was working at C. Raymond Hunt. Why they took me on as a draftsman when I really wasn't a very good one I don't know. But I learned a great deal. I went to work for Phil

Rhodes in New York, then I went up to Marblehead to work for Ted Hood.

How did you come to Canada?

In the mid-60s I admired the work that became C&C—Northstar, the Corvette, the Redline 41 and *Red Jacket*, so I approached and came to work for George Cuthbertson in 1970. I worked with George Cassian and Rob Ball. The office had been Cuthbertson's house, next to the A&W in Port Credit. I did rigs mainly. Later I worked on decks and interiors. At C&C I became increasingly involved in marketing.

From there I went out on my own. I did some work for Bruce Kirby, mostly interiors since they weren't his specialty. In 1975 I collaborated on the Aurora 40—that was my first real design. The next boat I did was the Niagara 35. I did it on spec. John Burn, Dave Harris and I ran around quite a bit selling it on blue



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sky without knowing who would build it. We sold the idea to George Hinterhoeller, who decided to return to the boat-building business, and opened Hinterhoeller Yachts with the Niagara 35 as its product. He set up his shop in St. Catharines to start building the boats.

Then came the Nonsuch, which certainly has to be one of the most successful production sailboats.

We've built about 450 Nonsuch 30s to date. It's a Hinterhoeller-built boat—they own the tooling and I own the design. I never sell my designs outright. It works on a fee-per-boat basis.

Is it fair to say that Mark Ellis is only interested in certain kinds of boats?

We're pretty widespread actually. We would happily do a steel powerboat, a trawler perhaps. Any kind of yacht interests us. I think the only exception would be that we're not good for flat boats. We're not good for speckle flake, Italian styling—it just isn't our sort of thing. If the boat can have our kind of nice aesthetics and be for a sensible purpose, we're interested in designing it, with modern or classic lines.

Would you be interested in doing a mega yacht?

We could certainly do a mega yacht. It wouldn't be a Jon Bannenberg type of boat because that doesn't fit our style. Look at Feadship or Burger. We'd be happy doing them, but we wouldn't be right for the super-sleek, oval-port look. From a basic business standpoint I'd like to do that style: there's a big and rich market for it, but it's just not what we're good at.

What about working with the big Canadian power manufacturers?

I would love to do a boat for one of them but probably what we'd do would be hull lines if they were looking for a particular kind of performance. We could help them from a structural and hull standpoint but they probably wouldn't like what we'd put above that. They're going to stylists for their aesthetics.

There are a lot of powerboats that don't perform as well as they could.

But there are a lot of performance boats that go very fast.

We can make a Limestone go 60 mph but it won't perform well in a seaway at that speed. We've done it with 450 hp in outboards, but when you get it out in a sea, it's like any other boat that has its

weight behind it. With brute force you can do almost anything.

There's a huge market though for Canadian-designed powerboats. The big manufacturers can compete with anybody in the world in conventionally styled boats, although there's a lot of competition in that area of design. Fortunately, our boats seem to fit in where there isn't much competition. Mind you, the market for the Grews and Dorals or Thundercrafts is much larger. I think that market is swinging more our way and away from the speckle flake. You see the same thing in North American cars—

same thing is true in powerboats—it would be terrific to do some powerboats that were more performance-oriented apart from performing in a seaway. More sport boats—I really like some of those little boats I see. That little Donzi, for instance, is a wonderful boat. In the same way I like sports cars I could enjoy doing that kind of boat.

Still, there aren't many people who can afford a pure sport boat. They want an all-round boat, one that will have some longevity. A good example of sailboats like that are the Alberg 30 and 37. They still hold good value in the market—



Ellis and Mark Bruckman discuss production logistics of the new B-28 in the Bruckman shop. The cored plug for the new boat is in the background.

they're heading toward Mercedes, Audi and Volvo. Look at houses and what people do with them—far more classic now.

Within the kind of boats we like to do there's a whole range—power, sail, trawlers. You can do cruiser/racer, full keel, fin keel. You can do a whole variety.

I can't see you getting into everything. How about a Nonsuch ultralight?

I'd like to fool more with that. If someone came for a custom design—I don't think there's a broad market for it—it would be fun to do. The Nonsuch performs well for what she is but it would be great to do a lighter, scarier boat. The

place; people think they're pretty. In fact, they're skinny, not very commodious boats because they were designed way back when. But they are attractive enough and they perform well enough that they still have a market.

When we talk about the boats you've designed and their success, I wonder why no one else has emulated them. Why has no builder built a Nonsuch?

We find there really isn't anyone we compete with directly. At first I thought people just didn't have the guts, even though the concept was succeeding. Often in boat design there's an ego thing

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that they just can't copy. You can go into the racer/cruiser market and copy, but there are so many designers out there, who would you be copying? It would be hard to say that a boat was a copy of a C&C or an Ericson or whatever. But if somebody did a mono-rigged-wishbone, fin-keel, spade-rudder catboat, there's nobody else they could be copying.

There are still a lot of people who can't accept the fact that the whole thing works. They see it but they still can't believe it.

Is the Limestone having that same success?

So far the power manufacturers see us as small potatoes, the way the sail manufacturers did when we started up. About 100 Limestones have sold, although I think we could easily have doubled that if the boats had been available.

The boat is a response to a specific demand from a customer, Fred Eaton, as Nonsuch was designed for Gordon Fisher. Fred Eaton and I were discussing powerboats for Georgian Bay one day and he told me that he had really liked a 25-foot Bertram—a heavy boat. He needed a boat and I did a preliminary which ultimately became the Limestone.

It wasn't a question of my being so smart, looking at the market and saying "Hey guys, the powerboat market's going great, let's develop a 24-foot deep-V boat." But when we did develop the boat, it fit the rest of the things we had been doing. From my time with Ray Hunt, I liked the things he did and this is very much in the same vein. We've done some different things with bottom shape and lift strips—it's not an exact knock off, but the idea certainly is a Ray Hunt idea.

Any other ideas you'd like to try in powerboats?

While I tend to be fairly fixed in my views, I do look around to see what other

people are doing. We've done some work on inboards with notched bottoms—not really tunnels, just with a depression in the bottom. This means you can keep the draft down with an inboard. For a planing powerboat that has to go into a sea, I wouldn't move too far from the deep-V hull. You're working with what has been proved before and maybe you can improve it.

So that brings us to the question of where are you heading.

I think that there's a lot more to be done in both planing and displacement powerboats—nicely styled boats with the accommodation and amenities people want. There are still lots of those to be done.

In sailboats, in powerboats too for that matter, I'd like to work on substantially bigger craft. I'd be very happy doing a 60-, 70- or 80-footer.

Any on the horizon?

We've done some preliminaries in the 50-foot range that look very promising in sail. We're fresh into the power side and there's a lot of interest. We're doing a 28 right now with Eric Bruckman. It's a good performance boat in rough water that I think has a market for fishing, both here and on the east coast of the United States, where they fish 60 or 70 miles offshore. If you can maintain 22 or 24 mph without jarring your teeth in rough water and stay on a good plane so the boat isn't mushing, that's a good all-round boat for people.

We're also working on a new Nonsuch, a 33-footer, which is in plug form at Hinterhoeller right now. We've got a 39-footer called *Nereus*, a cat ketch that's also in plug form which should be over here in late summer. It's being built in Taiwan. The other one that I'm really

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The success of the Nonsuch catboats has launched Ellis into international design prominence.

pleased with is a steel boat, a 40-footer, being built for Bob Heard who owns a Niagara 35 currently. It's being built in Markham by Aragosa Yachts and they're doing a really nice job. It's a radius-chined boat—that is, it's curved like a glass boat rather than angled like steel hulls you may have seen. I think we'll see



Ellis clearly enjoys boats, sail and power.

more of those if we can show steel boats built here that aren't chunky and have a nice form. I'm excited about that.

Other than that I have some ideas for bigger powerboats, but we'll probably have to start them off as preliminaries—we'll design them, then see if we can find some interest.

Let's go for some opinions, Mark. Do you think Canada should be in the America's Cup?

Yes, given that you can put together financing from a syndicate rather than "people"-financing. If it comes down to having to finance through the populace, then no. In order to be competitive, you just have to be financed by rich people who are interested. I think people-financing should be for the Olympics. But I think we have people who can design a competitive boat—Bruce (Kirby) and Steve Killing have shown that. We certainly have people to staff it. I think Canada made a very creditable showing in Perth, considering how late it was brought together. If they'd had enough interest from corporations or from individuals who had those funds from the start, I still don't think we would have come out on top, but we could have come out closing on it.

I must admit that the whole thing doesn't have my total interest in that it has become professional sport. It's very

good for my business because it gets more and more people interested in boats, but I just don't care for professional sport whether it's football, basketball or sailing.

Even with all the interest in America's Cup sailing, there seems to be a marked preference for powerboating recently. Any ideas why?

I don't think that very many people have turned away from sailing for powerboats. I think the market is increasing altogether and that the powerboat side is increasing more. Right now, with energy prices lower and the economy good, you're seeing new boaters. If the economy went bad or energy prices rose, you'd see the sailing market remain stable and the powerboat market would drop. That's the way I see it.

Any more thoughts on the world of boats?

When you talk America's Cup, it makes me think of ocean racing, which I used to be really involved in. It has gone professional too, which is a shame because it produced some wonderful boats. But it has become so professional that you don't see the average crew off the lake doing SORC anymore. It's such an expensive sport now—you used to see two or three owners here getting together to take a boat offshore. It used to be a lot of fun. Now the whole exercise is paid for by one sugar daddy.

Mark, as a designer who works on both power and sail projects, how do you feel about mixing the two?

The designers I think most of have been active in both fields. Phil Rhodes was, S&S is, Hunt is. I think it's a good thing to have the broadest base. It's just more interesting. As much as I like sailing, I really like powerboats too. Some people think sailing is "the only way." I don't divide it that way. I see it as *being in boats*. I'd be happy splitting my work.

Last question, what kind of boat do you own?

I have a Nonsuch 30 and I have a great deal of fun with it. I've had it since 1980. And I drive the Limestone a lot. One of the things that's pleasant about doing the kinds of boats I've done is that even though I spend all my professional time with boats, it hasn't ruined my own enjoyment of boating. **CY**

John Morris is editor of *Canadian Yachting*.



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