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by Heather Steinberger

photo by Billy Black

To purists on both sides of the powerboating vs. sailing divide, "motorsailer" has always been a little bit of a dirty word. Or at least an uncool one, because it symbolizes compromises that diehards say they would never make.

The prevailing image is that of a shoal-draft boat with an undersized mast, powerboat-style deckhouse and enclosed pilothouse that doesn't motor as well as a powerboat or sail as well as a sailboat. In **Best of the Best: The Yacht Designs of Sparkman & Stephens**, naval architect Francis S. Kinney commented, "The general run of motorsailers came to be scorned in salty quarters—scorned as 'fifty-fifties' because of their compromised rigs and hulls.

"But," he continued, "the best motorsailers would go on to win respectability."

Therein lies the twist. Not all motorsailers fit the stereotype, even in the early decades of the 20th century. Some designers proved to be visionaries. Kinney recognized the 1933-1983 Sparkman & Stephens motorsailers.

"Olin enjoyed the challenge ... of creating distinctive yachts that were neither cramped nor awkward compromises," Kinney wrote. "Another admirable line of American motorsailers had been created by William H. Hand, who (according to Olin) had 'one of the best eyes in the business.'"

And since then, motorsailers have continued to evolve. "The biggest change in motorsailer design came when designers realized

that the design features that made for good performance under power at displacement speeds were not much different from the features that resulted in good performance under sail," said Robert Perry, *SAILING's* technical editor and owner of Washington-based Robert H. Perry Yacht Designers. "For example, plenty of DWL, long straight buttocks, generous beam aft and moderate to light displacement. Much of this was driven by the introduction of compact, lightweight, powerful diesel engines and modern construction techniques."

Contemporary designs look more like sailboats and have impressive abilities under both power and sail. As a result, they're almost impossible to put into a clearly defined box.

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Certainly the definition is far more broad than it was in 1926 when William Hand Jr. started designing his series of magnificent motorsailers," Perry said. "Today the only definition that seems to fit is 'a sailboat with a good-sized engine, a raised pilothouse and an inside steering position.' Is the 42-footer that weighs 17,000 pounds, has a sail area-to-displacement ratio of 20.5, an 80-horsepower diesel engine and an inside steering position and sails like a rocket a motorsailer? I think so."

Southampton, UK-based yacht designer Bill Dixon, who designed the Moody 45 DS, agreed that the motorsailer category is much more broad today.

"The definition of a motorsailer could incorporate a spectrum of designs, from sail-powered, motorboat-style designs to basically very good sailing boats with motorboat comfort," he said.

He also pointed out that a lot of sailboat cruising does take place under power, and

those sailors place more emphasis on the boat's performance and range under power.

"The deck-saloon sailing yacht is the new motorsailer," Dixon said. "From my design office's perspective, we are developing hull forms that are more efficient and comfortable under power but still retain excellent sailing performance."

The definition of motorsailers is also expanding to incorporate the lifestyles and needs of the people who use them. To understand contemporary motorsailers, learning how the boats are used is just as important as knowing the elements of the design.

"The definition of motorsailer may have as much to do with 'stated intention of use' as it has to do with actual design features," Perry said. "As time becomes more and more precious to sailors, the ability to motor at hull speed becomes more and more important. The days when your diesel engine was considered an 'auxiliary' are gone."

And here is another surprise. Despite what purists might believe, many motorsailer owners come from a serious sailing background and still consider themselves to be sailors.

Mike, owner of the Shannon 53 hull No. 3, went for his first sail at age 7 on San Francisco Bay and continued to sail for his next 56 years.

"I've owned 11 boats, and all but one was a sailboat," he said.

The Shannon 53 is Mike's first motorsailer. He said he appreciates the amenities.

"Now I'm in my 60s, the destination is as important as the voyage, and I don't want to get beat up getting there," he explained.

He agreed with Charlie that the Shannon's ability to cruise at 10 knots on a direct course, regardless of wind, is appealing.

"We love sailing and will sail the 53 at every opportunity, but when it means slogging and adding days to our planned voyage, then I'll crank up the twin Yanmars," he said. "I've also found that motoring at low rpm to augment the sails produces wonderful results, particularly in contrary conditions."

Mike and his wife currently keep a Shannon Shoalsailer 35 in South Florida, and that boat inspired the decision to purchase the 53 HPS.

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"She's fast, sails better than advertised and is extremely comfortable," he explained. "The 53 is basically a grown-up Shoalsailer, so we already had great confidence in the design and its ability to both sail and motor."

Mike said three areas of the boat seem almost decadent: the saloon with interior steering station, the aft stateroom, which he compared to a high-end hotel room, and the enclosable aft lounge deck. He and his wife plan to use their 53 for South Florida daysailing, Florida Keys cruising and voyaging to the Dry Tortugas or beyond. At the moment, they're planning a Bahamas trip in conjunction with taking delivery of the new boat in Annapolis.

"I'm retired, but my wife works part-time (and occasionally) must make business trips," Mike said. "That was one of the considerations for purchasing the 53; while we don't want our voyages driven by a schedule, it's nice to know that I can count on 200-plus-mile days when it becomes necessary."

Greg Souder, who owns a Shannon 53, hull No. 2, came to motorsailing by a slightly different route. He grew up on small powerboats while spending summers on the New Jersey coast and didn't discover sailing until he was in his 30s.

"I took a trip to Ocean City, Maryland, and got hooked," he recalled. "But I wanted to go somewhere, not just do day trips."

Most recently, he owned 35- and 43-foot Nauticat motorsailers and a Hans Christian shoalsailer.

"If you really want to travel, you're going to be motoring, and you'll want to be more comfortable," he said, adding, "A motorsailer is more balanced than a trawler."

Greg's criteria, like Charlie's and Mike's, included speed and performance under sail and power.

"Time is a factor," he said. "I like to sail, but I want to get there."

Greg said he's looking forward to cruising New England in the summers and the South in the winters with his family, which includes four grown children and soon to be four grandchildren. He's planning to name the 53 *Harlen Wood* after his father and grandfather.

All the owners agreed that today's motorsailers consistently defy the old stereotype. And as more people discover the next generation of motorsailer, how these boats are defined and used will continue to evolve.

"The lifestyle aspect of modern sailing yachts is changing, which is attracting newcomers to sailing," Bill Dixon noted. "Yacht design still encompasses a wide spectrum, but

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the mainstream will definitely be more about the lifestyle of the boat, particularly with an aging population."

Some of those newcomers may be former sailing purists, and some may come from the powerboat camp.

"I would hope that motorsailers are accepted by both camps," said Shannon 53 owner Mike. "After all, whenever you motor your sailboat, regardless of size, you are motorsailing."

Shannon 53 HPS owner Charlie said he thought powerboaters might be drawn across the divide because motorsailers are "green." Referring to the 53, he said, "She uses very little fuel because the engines are small compared to a powerboat, the hull is easily driven, and the sails are the ultimate 'hybrid.'"

In a way, motorsailers themselves are the ultimate hybrid, and that's hardly an offensive title anymore. In fact, given today's economic, environmental and personal realities, it makes perfect sense—and bears an unmistakable air of coolness. ☺