

## **Bruce Kirby—the Man and his Laser**

**By  
Peter Galloway**

*Author's note: What follows is an excerpt from an extensive interview I had with Bruce in 1987 for the Sonar class magazine, the Echo. This portion of the original article relates to the advent of the Laser that has become the most ubiquitous sailboat in the world. The story behind it is worth telling. Sadly, my friend Bruce Kirby passed away in late 2021.*

Upon entering Bruce's studio, one is immediately taken by the surroundings attesting to the lengthy career of this noted designer. Photos on the wall from days gone by. A half model of *Canada 1*, (the first of two 12 meters he designed for Canada's bid to challenge for the Americas Cup) and, framed on the wall, the original sketch on a yellow legal pad sheet of what became the *Laser*. The drafting table, which stretches the length of the basement studio and looks down the Five Mile River and onto Long Island Sound, was awash with drawings of yachts and papers of every sort—evidence of a busy designer. Bruce was at work on a new 18 foot cat rigged boat when Echo caught up with him.

**Echo:** Whose idea was the concept for the Laser?

**Kirby:** It's funny, there was no real concept. A friend of mine in Montreal, who was an industrial designer, a guy named Ian Bruce, who was a good sailor himself—he had sailed *Finns* in the Olympics, too—had a little side business which was building my Mark III *International-14*. He was commissioned by some consultants of the Hudson Bay Company, to come up with ideas for outdoor camping equipment. Sleeping bags, camp cots—that sort of stuff. Among the things on the list was a car top sailboat. Ian, who was not a boat designer, called me up and said: "Would you mind in coming up with something that I could show these people that would pass for a car top sailboat?" That sketch on the wall is what I doodled while I was on the phone to him that day. I said: "Fine, I'll see if I can send you something—I'm not too busy right now." At that time I worked eight or nine hours a day as an editor (Bruce was at one time the editor of One-Design Yachtsman that is now Sailing World magazine) and then went home and worked in the evenings as a yacht designer.

So, I designed this little sailboat and I knew when I was doing it that it was more than he was asking for. I think one of the interesting things about the *Laser* was there was really nothing like it before. It had to be light to put on a car top and that controlled the size to some extent. And yet, I wanted it to be long enough on the waterline to perform well, so I put a limit of twelve and a half feet on the water and wouldn't go below that. I tried to get something within those parameters that could be lifted and tossed around, so I had to keep the freeboard pretty low and couldn't make the boat too wide.

I sent off a set of lines to Ian with a sail-plan and deck and cockpit plan. As far as I knew, the boat might never be built. And, in fact, it was never built for that purpose. They (the Hudson Bay Company) decided they didn't want a sailboat after all so it sat in Ian's drawer. I used to chide him by saying: "You know, that little boat is more than you asked for originally. It might make a pretty good boat. You and I could make a buck at it." I have a letter that I wrote to him that says exactly that.

Remember the America's Teacup Regatta?

**Echo:** Sure!

It was held on Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in 1970. I called Ian in July of that year and I said: "Look, we're having a funny regatta. Any chance you could build one of those boats and get it to the regatta in October? Because, if we're going to do anything with it, this might be a perfect way to kick it off." He said: "Well, I'll build two of them and we'll try them against each other and tune them up and, you know, really do it." Well, reality reared its ugly head and he barely got one finished. He took it out of the mold, got a deck on it, screwed the fittings on it, and put it on a trailer headed Lake Geneva. On his way through Toronto he picked up Hans Fogh, an experienced racer and sailmaker, and the sail he had made for the boat. The mast had never been in the boat, and the sail, obviously, had never be on the mast.

They arrived in Lake Geneva, as I did the next day, and we stuck the whole thing together. The boat was molded with a purple hull and a pink deck! Hans put "TGIF" on the sail for "Thank God It's Friday" because we were thinking of calling it the *Weekender*. Hans sailed it because Ian and I weighed about two hundred pounds each, we were *Finn* sailors after all, and figured we should use someone lighter. Hans sailed it and won his class. Actually, he was tied for first place in his class after a couple of races and unfortunately, had a big lead in the third race when it was canceled for lack of wind.

The boat caused a hell of a stir because this was a professional regatta. All the builders, designers and sailmakers were there and they zeroed in on this little thing. Everyone wanted to sell it and handle it. We realized we had something unusual on our hands right then. Afterwards we took that boat back to Montreal.

I lived in Rowayton, Connecticut while Ian lived in Montreal and Hans Fogh in Toronto. Having sailed the boat myself on Lake Geneva and, in working with Hans, we decided the boat had too much weather helm. Luckily it hadn't blown very hard so the weather helm didn't show up. In stages I moved that mast forward and took rake out of it. I moved the center of effort forward about seven or eight inches—I've got drawings of the stages in my drawer. I would do a sail-plan then send the information to Hans along with a drawing and he would make a new sail. Meanwhile I told Ian what to do with the mast. By this time he had made a second boat with a moveable mast step so he could take a little rake out and we ended up moving the mast forward about three or four

inches and straightening it a few degrees. During that time Ian and others were sailing the prototype in Montreal. Eventually Hans and I arrived. By then it was late November, maybe even early December of 1970. We sailed the boat for one hard weekend, lucked out and got a variety of conditions including snow and sleet on the last day. We had females sail it as well as light guys and big guys. Heavy wind and light wind. Then we fixed everything and decided we'd use that top and bottom section for the mast and that sail in the final version. We never did move the rudder and the centerboard. All the hull stuff stayed and we only played with the rig.

That very night, coincidentally, there was a party at the Montreal Yacht Club. A presentation dinner—nothing to do with us at all, but we went to it because Ian and I both had been members of that club. Ian was talking to a young lad there who was a physics student at McGill University and was a very good *International-14* sailor. Ian told him we were desperate for a name. "We've got to put this boat to market in a few weeks and we still don't have a name we are happy with. We don't like "*Weekender*". It's not quite good enough." And the guy said: "Why don't you call it something really modern and scientific like "*Laser*"?" Ian shouted "*LASER!*" and stood up. I was down the table about twenty feet from him and he said "*Laser?*", and I said: "Yeah!"

Even then we did not think it was great, but it was the best we could come up with. It took a few days for it to sink in before we realized how good it really was. Ian went to the McGill library the next day and learned that the internationally recognized Laser symbol would make a hell of a good class symbol. That sort of clinched the whole thing, and that is how the name came to be.

Then they built a third boat which was the first true *Laser*. I owned it for nearly 18 years and gave it to the Mystic Seaport museum. That boat was delivered to me here in Rowayton in December of '70. The next boat went to the New York Yacht Boat Show in January of '71 and they sold 144 boats [laughs] which is an all-time record still. A hundred and forty-four boats off the floor of the show!

**Echo:** And what do they number now internationally?

**Kirby:** Now? About a hundred and forty thousand!

**Echo:** And how many builders?

**Kirby:** There have been as many as thirteen. It's now down to nine.

**Echo:** On all continents?

**Kirby:** Pretty well. The big factories are the U.K. and Canada and they supply Europe and North America. But there are good plants in Brazil, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Most of the Latin countries have gotten them but they don't produce that many boats. Chile,

Argentina and Mexico are setting up to do them. Mexico used to get boats from California but we don't have a California plant anymore. They are still turning out world-wide about four thousand boats a year. For a while it was twelve or thirteen thousand.

So that went very well. But what the Laser did for me, more than anything, was make me financially independent from the normal weekday. I realized I was working eight or nine hours a day as an editor for about ten or twenty percent of my income. It didn't make much sense, so I decided to stick out my neck and try to become a full-time yacht designer.

At this point the interview went on to discuss some of his other designs and experiences.

*Interviewers note: To date there have been more than 220,000 Lasers built and the boat has gained fame as an Olympic class and the logical choice for those wishing to hone their sailing skills while having fun. In addition to the Laser and the many other boats of his design, Bruce's successes include the International-14, the popular 23 foot Sonar that was selected as a Paralympic class, the Ideal-18, Kirby-23 and San Juan 24 to name a few.*

*Bruce has competed in three Olympic games representing Canada. He was awarded the Order of Canada for his contribution to sailing and has been inducted into the U.S. National Sailing Hall of Fame.*

*In his memoirs Bruce gave credit to his friend, Ian Bruce: "I designed the little boat, but he made it happen."*