

Though officially retired from designing boats, Bruce Farr's legacy lives on in his winning designs and cutting edge firm.

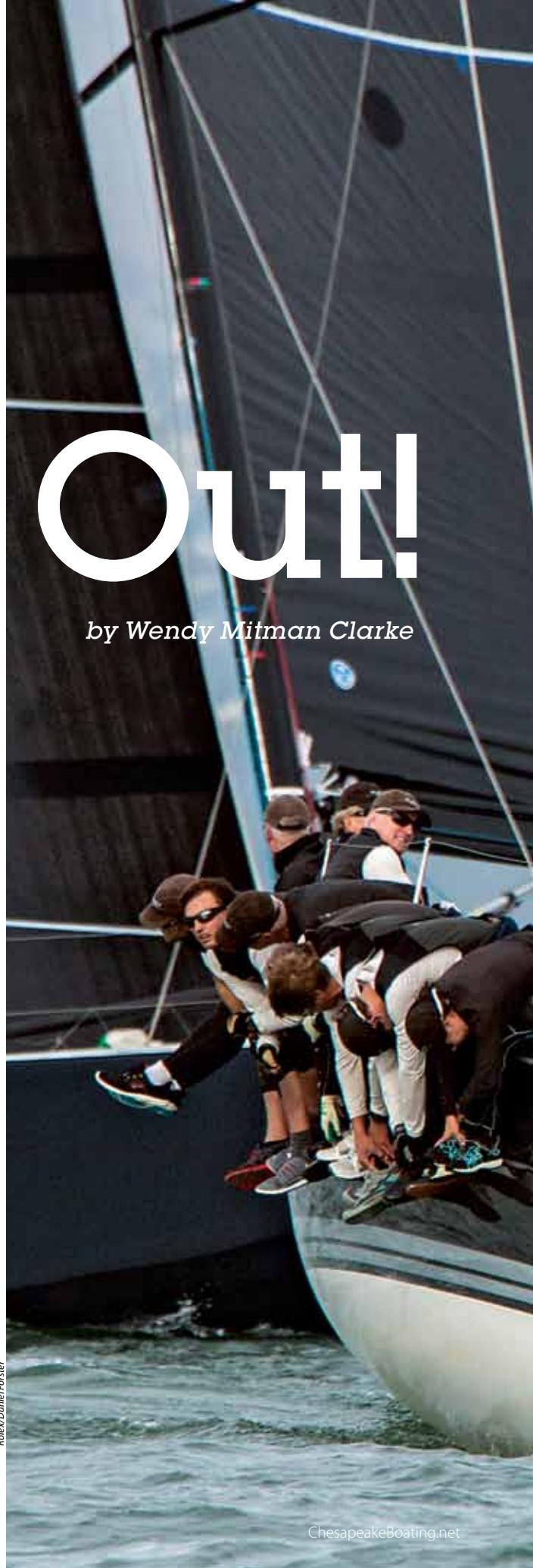
# FARR

A FEW DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, WHEN MOST Chesapeake sailors were dreaming of a spring still months away, a great story was unfolding on the other side of the world that undoubtedly brought a smile to Bruce Farr. In the 70th running of the Rolex Sydney Hobart race—one of the toughest, most prestigious and potentially dangerous offshore yacht races in the world—the overall winner on corrected time was not the newest, most expensive, or flashiest racing rocket. It was a 29-year-old Farr 43 named *Wild Rose*, owned by Roger Hickman of New South Wales, who took home the coveted Tattersall's Cup. This same boat won the race 21 years ago, then named *Wild Oats*. ¶ For Hickman, it was the culmination of a lifetime of yacht racing, that pursuit which has at its core the pure joy of sailing well in a fast boat. For the man who designed the boat, a New Zealander who chose Annapolis, Maryland, as home base for what is now arguably the world's

# Out!

by Wendy Mitman Clarke

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best known and most successful yacht design firm, it was further confirmation of a basic fact that trumps the vagaries of international yacht racing politics and rules: Bruce Farr's boats are wicked fast. They always have been.

Now retired from Farr Yacht Design, Bruce Farr seems content to watch the game from a distance, though he remains one of the most influential sailboat designers in the sport's history. With over 40 world championships in Farr designs, as well as successes in the America's Cup, Vendee Globe and Volvo Ocean Race (for which Farr Yacht Design is presently the exclusive designer with the Volvo Ocean 65), his name is synonymous with world class grand prix yacht racing.

It is a rarified world indeed, and a hard world in which to survive, let alone consistently succeed, and the man behind the name doesn't seem the type. The shy son of a New Zealand printer-turned-fisherman and lifelong

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sailor (the latter being pretty much part of every Kiwi's CV), Bruce Farr even now is soft-spoken, a lean, precise and elegant man who, if looks were all there were to go by, could just as easily be a professor at university instead of an internationally known naval architect. But there's that old saying, "Beware the quiet ones." From his earliest years, Farr was passionate about racing sailboats. Combined with his mathematician's mind and artist's eye, he would turn that passion into

cutting-edge designs that would baffle, thrill, infuriate and exhilarate, depending upon which end of that particular yacht racing story you happened to be.

"Ask Bruce Farr how he got into yacht design, and he'll tell you he never got out of it," writes John Bevan-Smith in *The Shape of Speed*, a definitive biography of Farr, his business partner Russell Bowler, and the design firm they built. "Raise an eyebrow and he'll tell you he was sailing before he was born. That he was still in nappies when he and Alan [his late older brother] were bundled into *Santorin's* forward cabin to ride out storms. He'll tell you that from the day he could walk he was standing beside his father watching him build and rebuild an assortment of boats from dinghies to keel-boats. That he was using hammers and chisels before he was using crayons and pencils." A gifted student, at 16 years old Farr left university to begin designing boats fulltime, fully



Farr Yacht Design

Bruce Farr sailing on the Farr 43, *Snake Oil* in the 1980s.

PRECEDING PAGES: 2014 Farr 40 World Champion *Plenty* racing in San Francisco Bay.

exotics as well as one of its most gifted helmsmen and designers of racing dinghies,” writes Bevan-Smith. “He brought, along with his lateral-thinking mind, a calmness of presence and a quiet but steely resolve. He also brought a sharp business sense.”

Shortly after Bowler joined the team, New Zealand imposed a 20 percent sales tax on boats, a move that kneecapped the country’s boatbuilding industry. It was partly this economic reality, as well as the team’s desire to lead the world in racing design butting up against the logistical challenges of traveling between Europe and New Zealand to work with clients, that prompted them to move to the Eastport neighborhood in Annapolis in 1981 and open Bruce Farr & Associates.

“I first came here to a boat show

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supported by his parents, though naval architecture was “virtually unknown in New Zealand,” Bevan-Smith writes.

By 1979—13 years after Farr had left school and started his own company—Bowler joined him at Bruce Farr Yacht Design. One of New Zealand’s best young skippers, Bowler

had studied civil engineering and also liked pushing the envelope in every way—in sailing form, in design, and most importantly for his partnership with Farr, in spearheading the use of lightweight but super-strong materials in boat construction. “He was the country’s leading pioneer in small-boat

in 1979 to meet Ian Bruce [who with Bruce Kirby designed the Laser sailing dinghy]," Farr says. "We were talking about doing a project together, which eventually became the Laser 28. I was coming back from Europe, and he said, 'Stop by and see us in Annapolis,' so I did. I didn't know anything about Annapolis, I had heard of it, but I thought, well that must be a big city, I'll just roll in and find a hotel. And I quickly found out there weren't any hotels." He took a room in Washington, D.C., and drove to Annapolis the next day while it rained nonstop. "It was one of those boat shows where they sold all the foul-weather gear on the first day. But the next day was gorgeous, and that made up for it."

The Farr team considered locating in Florida and Rhode Island, both states being known for their strong boatbuilding industries, but in the end they chose Annapolis for its climate, its proximity to international airports, and the Chesapeake itself. "It was a sailing

Entering the office is like going to yacht racing Mecca; the walls are adorned throughout with half-models of some of the most famous boats in the sport's history.

center, though it didn't have much boatbuilding, but lots of service," Farr says. "It seemed a better climate, a really nice place to live from the look of it, it had a nice sailing area and industry, and when we asked around, everybody—even people overseas—knew Annapolis."

The move positioned the company perfectly for its ambitious future. Today, the Farr Yacht Design office continues to occupy the corner of Third Street and Eastern Avenue, overlooking Back Creek on the eastern side of the Eastport peninsula. Entering the office is like going to yacht racing Mecca; the

walls are adorned throughout with half-models of some of the most famous boats in the sport's history: *Steinlager 2, Sayonara, Swedish Match, NZ Endeavour, Ragamuffin, Longobarda, Geronimo, UBS Switzerland, Ceramco, Kiwi Magic*—to name only a very few.

"Fifteen-thousand boats have been built from designs created here," says Annapolis native Patrick Shaughnessy, 44, now Farr Yacht Design's president. Although 21 years younger than his mentor, Shaughnessy bears uncanny resemblance with his quiet ways and subtle humor that belie a talented, driven character. Like Farr, Shaughnessy never finished his studies of architecture and design at University of Maryland and Anne Arundel Community College. Rather, he joined Bruce Farr & Associates as a part-time draftsman in 1990 after answering an ad. Since then he has worked steadily to gain the insight and experience needed to oversee the team that designs and sells multimillion-dollar

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projects, and to handle the delicate business of working with the enormous egos that come with the territory.

“He stood up and was counted when it mattered,” Farr says of Shaughnessy. “He did a good job and worked his way into the position.”

Farr seems well satisfied with the hand-off of the firm that for years defined much of his life. “I help out when they can’t figure out some old design,” he jokes. “It’s these guys’ game now, they have been running the show for awhile, and clearly they don’t need me, and I’m happy doing my other things.” They include, he says, “catching up on a lot of things that I wasn’t able to do for thirty years. So I’m taking more responsibility on the family side, and I’m spending a lot more time with my mother, who’s living on her own in New Zealand. I’m doing a bit of hiking and biking and skiing, and I’ve taken up some photography, which was something I did a bit of way back in my twenties, I guess, when I wasn’t quite

sure what I’d be doing with my life.”

The speed thing, though, doesn’t seem to have retired with him. When he turned 50, his wife Gail gave him tickets to an auto racing school. Driving on the track rekindled his interest in something he’d done as a youngster in New Zealand, but which he gave up when he came to Annapolis, “because there weren’t a lot of great, empty roads.” He got involved with the Audi Club as a student, then worked his way up to the advanced level and finally became an instructor himself. Now, he owns a Lotus Exige S260—“a barely street-legal track car”—which he drives at various tracks and venues, and he teaches at a half-dozen events a year.

“It’s the same as yacht racing in a lot of ways—spend a lot of money, do a lot of prep, and have a lot of fun,” Farr says. (His street car is an Audi R8. And for the record, the Lotus does about 135 mph, while the Audi rips at about 155 in the half-mile on a straight.)

As for boats, Farr is content to sail on OPBs—other people’s boats—among them a Farr 30 that he helps race around the cans out of Annapolis. This is where you may find him on any given Wednesday evening in the summer, perhaps—the tall, quiet one who was awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II, named an Admiral of the Chesapeake, honored in New Zealand’s Sports Hall of Fame, among dozens of other recognitions and awards; the one who changed the world of yacht racing with his intrepid and determined light-displacement philosophy and designs—all for what boils down to what was and remains the pure joy of sailing well in a fast boat. ⚓



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