

Top: The IODs of Maine's
Northeast Harbor Fleet have
been racing since 1938.



STAYING



ALIVE

IN MAINE, AN 83-YEAR-OLD FLEET
OF INTERNATIONAL ONE-DESIGNS
KEEPS GOING, AND GROWING

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In spring 1936, Cornelius “Corny” Shields, an investment banker and hardcore sailor at New York’s Larchmont Yacht Club, was racing in Bermuda when he spotted a new Six Metre yacht, *Saga*, built by Norwegian boat designer Bjarne Aas. Shields was instantly smitten. “The minute I saw *Saga*, I fell in love with her,” he later wrote. “I thought she was the most beautiful boat I had ever seen. She literally haunted me.”

At the time, Shields raced on Sound Interclubs, a 1926 Charles Mower design and a class that never outgrew the confines of Long Island Sound. He was concerned that the Interclubs were becoming dated and that the hardcore racers at the local clubs would abandon the class. He felt they needed a newer boat class to keep the competition sharp, provide opportunities for international competition and restrain operating costs during the Great Depression.

Shields contacted Aas and commissioned a scaled-down, beamier, more comfortable version of the narrow 37-foot *Saga*. Aas responded by sending him a drawing of a boat he already had on the boards that closely fit those parameters. After some input from Shields, the 33-foot Marconi-rigged sloop with its long, elegant overhangs got a 45-foot mast that carried nearly as much sail as a Six Metre. Uffa Fox, the legendary English boatbuilder and sailor, would describe its lines “as clean as a smelt’s and each and every line perfect for

its purpose.” Paul Shields, Corny’s brother, is credited with naming the new class the International One-Design (IOD).

Fearing that the introduction of a new class of boats would devalue the existing fleet of Sound Interclubs and that the cost of a new IOD might scare off buyers, Shields concocted a secret scheme with a few close friends. He commissioned 25 IODs from Aas and had them shipped to New York. To make the switch to the new class more attractive for sailors, Shields and the Interclub owners agreed to a minimum selling price of \$2,100 for the used boats, making the cost to transition to the new \$2,670 IODs no more than \$570.

To ensure that the IODs in a fleet would always be identical and to keep operating costs down, strict rules were created. Shields wanted the best sailors, and not just the ones with the deepest pockets to win races. To make certain everyone’s sails were the same age, each boat was allowed to replace only one specific sail per year—replacing the jib one year, the main the next and the spinnaker the following year. Sails were ordered from the same sailmaker, cut to the exact same specifications and assigned to owners by drawing lots.

The first four IODs reached New York in December 1936, and by summer 1937 all 25 hulls had been purchased by Long Island sailors. That same year, sailors in Bermuda and Norway ordered IODs too and overnight, the IOD became a truly international class.

The Long Island Sound sailors were not the only Americans to catch IOD fever.

The Northeast Harbor Fleet in Maine also ordered IODs. In May 1938, the Norwegian steamship *Toronto* dropped its anchor in Mount Desert Island’s Great Harbour and offloaded 14 shiny International One-Designs.

Between 1936 and 1967, Aas built nearly 300 wooden IODs as the class garnered a reputation for developing some of the world’s best racing skippers. “Bus” Mosbacher, who skippered *Weatherly* to victory in the 1962 America’s Cup and *Intrepid* in 1967, was Long Island Sound IOD champion eight years in a row, and “Ted” Hood, who co-skippered *Nefertiti* in 1962, was a Marblehead IOD champion.



Over the decades, fleets were formed in Sweden, Nova Scotia, San Francisco, Nantucket, Fishers Island and other locations. But over the years, interest in IODs has waxed and waned and sometimes fleets struggled to get just two boats to the starting line. The British fleet twice moved locations, and a fleet in Marseille, France, disappeared altogether.

By the 1960s, the Northeast Harbor fleet struggled to get three or four boats to the starting line. Eventually, old boats were restored, and additional boats were purchased from other fleets. Some fiberglass IODs—introduced in the 1970s—were also added. Today, the Northeast Harbor Fleet has 30 IODs, making it the largest fleet in the world, and 83 years after being lowered from the freighter's deck, 12 of the original racing sloops still actively race

there. It is also the only IOD fleet in the world that still uses wooden masts. A recent effort to switch to carbon fiber sticks was rejected by majority rule, and it takes a concerted effort to keep the fleet going.

Six years ago, Rick Echard, the current IOD Class Captain for Northeast Harbor, purchased *Firefly*, the first IOD to come off the freighter in 1938. He was asked to buy *Firefly* when the previous owner put it up for sale, and he ascribes the IODs' survival in Maine to the fleet members who are devoted to the class. "We like to say that we don't own the boats," Rick says. "We're a steward for a period of time."

Echard started racing IODs in Marblehead, where for 15 years he sailed with 10-time IOD world champion Bill Widnall. "Marblehead was a great place to sail," he says

Left: Jay Robbins uses a Boston Whaler to deliver an IOD to the Northeast Harbor Fleet. Above: Dave Partridge repaints an IOD hull at the John Williams Boat Company.

Workers at John Williams
Boat Company prepare
IODs for delivery.







Top: Northeast Harbor Fleet sailors race their IODs twice a week from the Fourth of July through Labor Day weekend.

about the Massachusetts sailing mecca, which counts no fewer than five yacht clubs. “But after racing, all the IOD owners would return to their respective clubs. Here, 90 percent of people come out of the same place. That’s the community of the IODs here.”

Years ago, to make sure that boats don’t just hang on their moorings, former class captain David Schoeder launched the No Boat Left Behind program where owners who are unable to race may lend their boats to younger crews. Having young sailors was good for the fleet’s health, but it led to an interesting dilemma for

the organizers of the 2011 IOD World Championship in Marblehead who had to figure out what to do about one of the Northeast Harbor crews during social events: none of the sailors were of legal drinking age.

Many Northeast Harbor fleet owners also make their IODs available for the annual Barton Eddison Regatta, which gives the kids in the youth sailing program a chance to not just sail an IOD, but also take the helm. “That’s what it’s all about, Echard says. “Can the kids take over without us stuffing it down their throats?”

“It’s an acquired taste,” he says about owning an IOD,



“but once acquired, it’s worth it.” The wooden boats require significant resources to keep them afloat. Echard says it costs about \$10,000 per year for storage and maintenance, not including major repairs. “They all leak,” Echard says. “When I’m 83, I’ll probably leak a little too, but people have a low attention span for maintaining wooden boats.”

Many of the IOD owners leave the maintenance work to professionals, but that became a challenge in July 2018 when John

Butler, the owner of the Mount Desert Yacht Yard (MDYY) where 18 of the Northeast Harbor IODs were being maintained, notified the boats’ owners that they would have to find new storage and maintenance for their IODs for that coming winter.

MDYY had maintained IODs for decades, but Butler wasn’t just sending the IODs away, he was also laying off the men who maintained them, including two who had started working on IODs in the early 1980s

and had the expertise to keep them going.

Jay Robbins was 18 years old when he started working at MDDY in 1981. A couple of years later he was joined by Dave Partridge, who was then 22, and Butler showed the two of them how to maintain the lightly-built race boats. “John was our teacher,” Robbins says. “He approached the boats as if they were his own and he would try to keep the maintenance costs down for the owners.”

“They take quite a commitment,” Partridge says about the aging fleet. “The boats were not meant to last this long. Maybe 20 years. The planks fit perfectly together with bevels that change constantly as they run the full length of the hull. The hulls are not caulked. They have glued splines. They are marvels of engineering.”

Robbins and Partridge didn’t spend their entire careers working on the IODs. The men left MDYY after about a decade, but in 2013, after more than a 20-year hiatus, both returned and picked up right where they’d left off. “It was déjà vu,” Jay recalls. “A lot of the IODs had the same boat owners. Nothing had changed.”

So, when five years after returning to MDDY they learned they were losing their jobs, it was a shock. Anxious to find new work quickly, Partridge contacted the neighboring John Williams Boat Company where he explained to service manager Will Ratcliff that it wasn’t just him who was looking for work, but that some of his co-workers and the IODs needed a new home as well.

That winter, the former MDYY men and 11 of the IODs moved to the John Williams yard and into a shed, which they modified to prevent the wooden hulls from drying out, and made the repairs that they had made so many times before.

They refastened loose planks, glued splines back into the seams, sanded and faired the hulls, and painted them until their sides gleamed—just like *Saga* had in 1936 when Cornelius “Corny” Shields first saw her, and as he later wrote, “with seams so invisible the topsides shone like the side of a porcelain bathtub.” ❸