

# Tom Blackaller biography

Why, in 1987, was the buoy, #16 off Crissy Field, renamed for Tom Blackaller? What is it about his short life that still echoes decades after his death?

With his mane of silver hair, Tom made a windswept, indelible impression on everyone he ever met. Though born in Seattle, Washington, on January 6, 1940, Thomas Davis Blackaller, Jr. started sailing at age 12 in an El Toro that he and his dad built in Tomales Bay, Marin County. One of the local girls had named her El Toro *Ador-a-bull*. Showing his combative nature early, Tom named his boat *Horr-i-bull*. At age 17, Tom got his first Star #2482, a slow clunker named *Spirit*. Tom was lightning-smart, had a brash personality, and loved to clown around. From the back of the pack, he would trash-talk his competitors to rattle them during mark roundings. As his reputation for antics grew, some called him “Charlie Brown on the Racecourse” after the popular cartoon series *Peanuts*. In 1958, Tom ordered a new Star #3938 from builder Carl Eichenlaub and taunted his competitors even more by naming it *Good Grief*, a catchphrase from the cartoon strip.

In 1966, Tom bought a new fiberglass Star # 5150 by Lippincott, retained the name *Good Grief* and began his ascent. Tom took second in the Star World Championships in 1969, won the Star Worlds in 1974, took second again in 1975, and won the World’s for a second time in 1980. Tom was deprived of possible Olympic glory when America boycotted the games to protest Russia’s invasion of Afghanistan. Tom solidified his place as an elite sailor in grand prix handicap racing, winning the StFYC Big Boat Series, Southern Ocean Racing Conference, Clipper Cup in Hawaii, Sardinia Cup, Transpac, Fastnet, and the Newport-Bermuda Race.

After earning a mechanical engineering degree from UC Berkeley, Tom worked a traditional job for a few years before Lowell North recruited him as a sailmaker. From 1973 through 1985, Tom developed into one of North Sails’ most visible champions. He influenced the lives of many young sailors, including Paul Cayard, Russ Silvestri, Skip Allen, Craig Healy, and Jeff Madrigali, while inspiring the lives of thousands whom he never met.

Tom broadened his resume by winning the 6-meter Australian-American Challenge in 1970 and the Worlds in 1974. Though Stars had the prestige of being an Olympic Class, 6-meters are a developmental class and proxy for 12-meter competition in the America’s Cup. In 1980, Tom was a tactician aboard Russell Long’s 12-meter *Clipper* in the America’s Cup Trials off Newport, RI. *Clipper* was slow and no match for *Liberty* driven by Star Class rival Dennis Conner, who won the Trials and successfully defended America’s Cup.

For the 1983 Cup cycle, Tom founded the Defender-Courageous syndicate and recruited topflight teams for the brand-new *Defender* and his practice boat *Courageous*. Sadly for Tom, *Defender* lost to her older stablemate *Courageous*, sailed by his tuning partners John Kolius and John Bertrand. Dennis Conner aboard *Freedom* beat *Courageous* and won the Defender Trials but then lost to the winged-keeled *Australia II*, enabling the Aussies to take the Cup down under to Perth, Australia.

In San Francisco, Bob Scott founded the St. Francis 12 Foundation and raised a touch more than the \$10,000 deposit required to Challenge for America's Cup. Two years later, a larger group at StFYC lamented the potential loss of San Francisco's first-ever opportunity to challenge for the Auld Mug, due to a lack of funding; Blackaller, Bob Cole, and Ron Young were in that larger group.

In May 1985, Cole agreed to initial funding, Blackaller agreed to be Skipper, and Young agreed to be General Manager of the renamed "Golden Gate Challenge for America's Cup '87." Over the next nineteen months, they raised \$8.7 million and built two new boats, including *USA* (12/US-61), the first boat with either a bow-rudder or a bulb keel – and it had both! The complexity of bow-rudders made them problematic. However, *USA*'s innovative bulb-keel proved a breakthrough and has been broadly adopted by nearly every racing monohull since.

In the fall of 1986, when *USA* arrived in Fremantle, the secret underbody was revealed to the world through a lead story in *USA Today*'s sports section and in a simulcast TV special with Channel 7 in Perth and KRON-TV in San Francisco. As the Aussies applauded the innovative, underdog challenge from San Francisco, the charismatic Blackaller held up the GGC's bumper sticker, which read, "We don't just want the Cup, we want the whole damned island." Australian and American viewers loved the spirit, audacity, and innovation. Tom loved the spectacle - especially since it was the opposite of the once-staid, traditional America's Cup. Tom had also fallen in love with Christine Gummersbach, a beautiful, organized, sophisticated woman who would change his life.

The innovative *USA* out-performed New York Yacht Club's *America II*, sailed by one-time stablemates Kolius and Bertrand, as well as San Diego Yacht Club's highly funded *Stars and Stripes 87'*, skipped by Star nemesis Dennis Conner. Tom was at the pinnacle of his sailing career with *USA*'s selection to the Semi-Finals of the America's Cup Trials in December 1986. With new-found success on the water and love in his heart, Tom used the short break between the November and December Trials to leave town and elope with Christine.

The America's Cup Semi-Finals in December 1987 were short but not sweet. Prone to provoking giants, upon rounding the first weather mark a mere length ahead of *Stars and Stripes*, Tom turned back to Dennis and shouted, "See you later... FAT MAN!" That was to be the last time *USA* was ever ahead of *Stars and Stripes* during the entire regatta, as Dennis would go on to win the series, four zip, win the Trials, beat the Aussies, and bring the Cup back to America.

Upon returning from Perth, Tom added multihulls to his quiver with a Formula 40 catamaran in the \$500,000 Salem Prosail Series, resumed competing in his Sports 2,000-class race car, and moved into a Sausalito townhouse beautifully decorated by Christine.

In the last year of his life, Tom raced in the 12 hours of Sebring, won the Fastnet, was leading the Prosail 40 circuit, and exploring another run at America's Cup. In a Shakespearean tragedy, just when Tom found true love, happiness, and a partner for life, his life instantly ended – with a massive heart attack. On September 7, 1989, four months

shy of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, during a practice session at the Sears Point Raceway in Sonoma, CA, his fast life and car gently rolled to a stop as he, famous for racing boats, died in a race car.

While Tom's passing was being mourned by his bride, Christine, and two daughters from a previous marriage, Brooke and Lisa, the members of Tom's St Francis Yacht Club imagined a fitting memorial: renaming in his honor the weather mark — that he had so loudly rounded, "Tom Blackaller".