



A Dream Fulfilled

Rodger Forkert and the *Panache*

by STEVE GRUTZMACHER

The minds of young boys and girls are filled with thoughts of what they will become when they grow up: professional baseball players, ballerinas, firefighters, nurses. Rodger Forkert's dream was very different from most young boys – he dreamed of sailing solo in one of the ocean races he read about in sailing magazines.

The son of Franklin Forkert, owner of Anchor Marine (now Yacht Works), Rodger began sailing when he was seven years old.

"He was almost obsessed with solo ocean sailing races," his younger brother Gordon explained. "He subscribed to all these sailing magazines and was always talking about a race he had read about."

But Rodger's dream wasn't simply to compete in a solo ocean race – he wanted to *build* the boat he would sail. He contacted naval architect

Richard C. Newick, of Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, whom he deemed to be a premier designer of multi-hull boats. After securing a loan of \$26,000 from the Bank of Sturgeon Bay (now Nicolet National Bank), Rodger purchased plans for what would become the trimaran *Panache*.

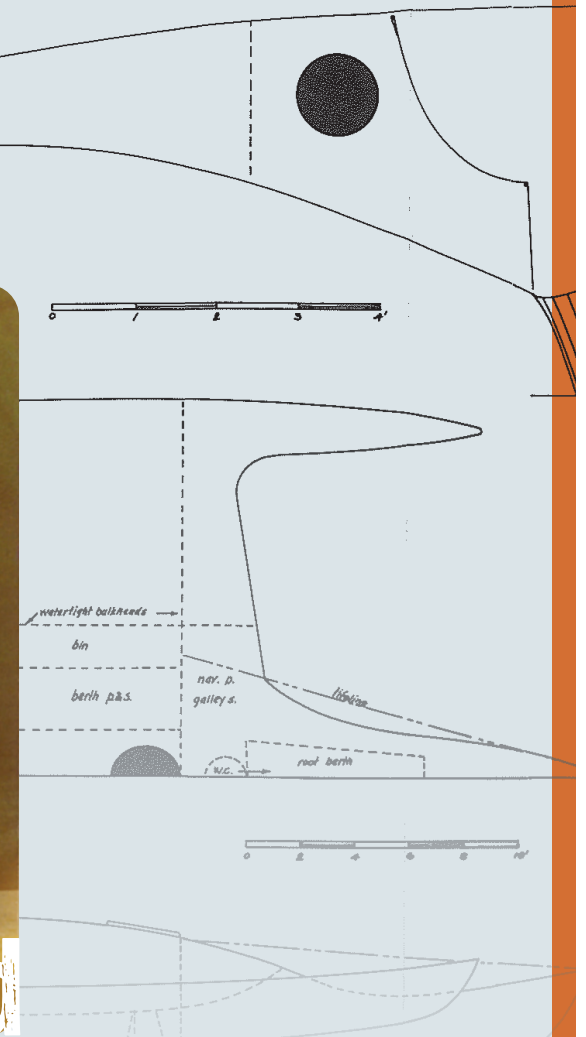
Work began in December of 1977 in the garage at the Forkert family home in Sister Bay, starting with the construction of the "plugs" over which the hulls would be built. Since the two outrigger hulls (called *amas* in sailing parlance) were identical, only two plugs were required. Construction was time-consuming and tedious. The hulls were laminated, layered veneers of mahogany and ash. All laminations were glued with an epoxy resin with microscopic cotton-linen fibers for additional strength and durability.

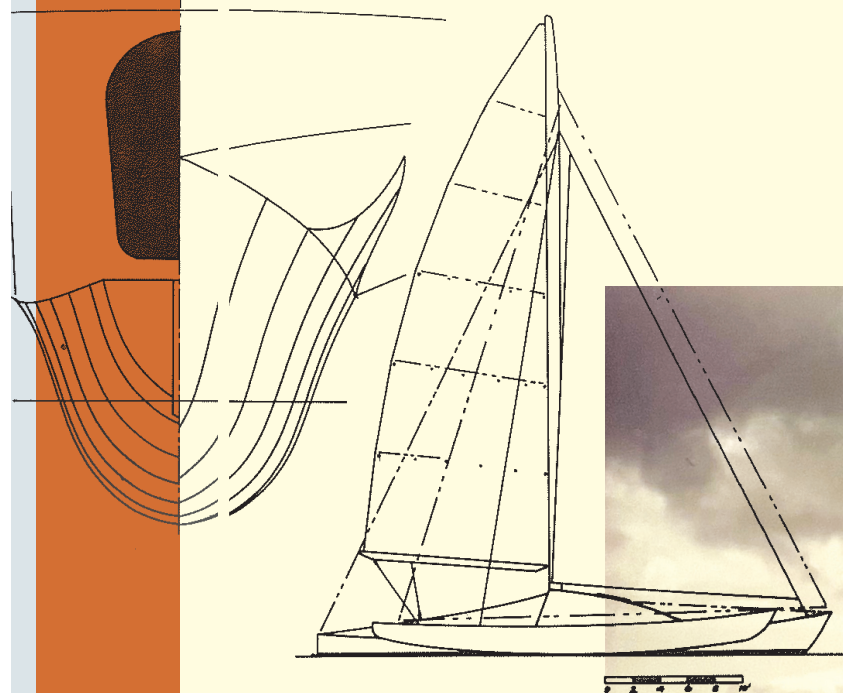
When it came to bending the wood for the curves of the boat, Rodger avoided

using any screws. "Screws really don't do anything but concentrate a stress point," he said. They also add unnecessary weight. His alternative was to use staples to hold the layers in place while the gluing cured. But pulling the staples became difficult and exceedingly time-consuming, so his brother, Russ (now the owner of Yacht Works), hit on the idea of cutting up plastic roll-up sleds to staple through. Then you could simply pull the plastic strips to remove the staples, saving considerable time.

With the three hulls nearing completion, disaster struck: a dust fire started in the Forkert's garage. The fire was extinguished and the hulls were saved, but many tools were lost in the blaze. With the garage now badly damaged, all work was relocated to the Anchor Marine boat hangar.

Rodger had over 2,000 hours of work in on the *Panache*, but much more





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 LWL 35'-10"
 BOA 27'-10"
 BWL 2'-11 1/2"
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work remained to be done. Russ returned from college to help get Rodger over the hump to finish the boat. After almost two and a half years of construction, the *Panache*, in keeping with its name, received a brilliant coat of yellow paint and was topped with a mast of vibrant orange.

When it was put into the Bay of Green Bay it looked like nothing that had ever sailed in the waters off Door County. With its sweeping curve connecting the outriggers to the main hull, and the central 2' by 30" Perspex dome above the cabin to allow for all-weather navigation, the *Panache* (without the mast) resembled a Klingon "Bird of Prey" starship from *Star Trek* (at least in my mind).

Rodger's goal was to race the *Panache* in the 1980 Observer Single-Handed Trans-Atlantic Race (O-STAR), sailing from Plymouth, England, and ending in

(Above) David LeClerc and Sam Snyder on the *Panache* conducting sea trials. Photo by J. Stotzer.

(Opposite) Roger Forkert working on the *Panache*. Photo courtesy of the Forkert family.

(Background) A page of Newick's construction plans for the *Panache*. Photo courtesy of the Forkert family.

Newport, Rhode Island, a quadrennial race specifically scheduled to take place during hurricane season to thoroughly test the skills and nerves of the contestants. In the boating world, this is considered the Indianapolis 500 of solo oceanic boat races.

He first had to get the *Panache* to the ocean, and it was sailing through the Great Lakes where Rodger faced his first significant challenge. As Gordon explained it, "The *Panache* was designed to sail on the ocean, and

waves on the ocean, due to its vast size, tend to be further apart. The Great Lakes are smaller and shallower, so the waves tend to be closer together."

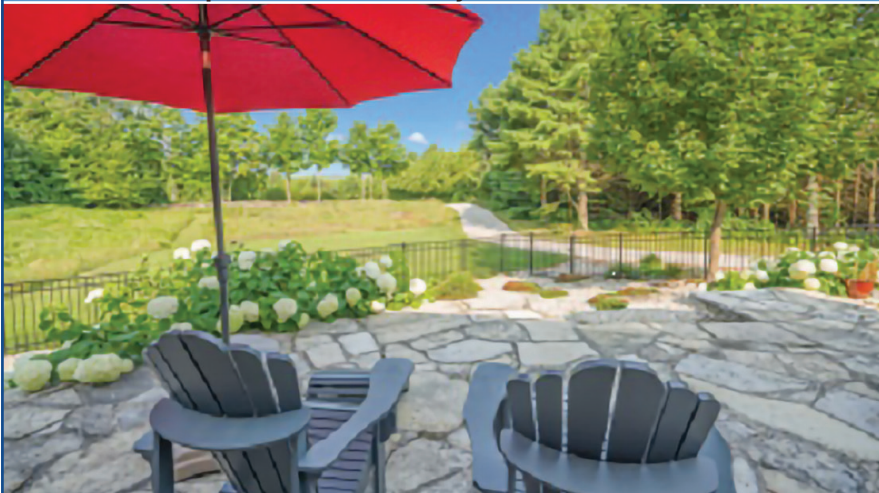
Thus, when Rodger ran into a storm on Lake Erie, he was forced to move closer to shore and the waves became tightly packed. "The nose of the boat started digging into the waves and, at one point, the *Panache* 'pitch-pulled', meaning the boat was basically turned around," Gordon said. "That was when

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Rodger realized that the bow design would require him to sail carefully going into waves.”

Russ came to sail with Rodger from the Inland Waterway down to Florida and then Rodger faced his next challenge: to qualify for the O-STAR, entrants must first sail solo across the Atlantic to England.

Rodger started out twice, making it only as far as the Bahamas, before returning to Florida. “We weren’t sure he was actually going to do it,” Gordon said. But on his third attempt Rodger succeeded, sailing solo to Lands End, England, and qualified for the race.

Now qualified, Rodger picked up a sponsorship from a French newspaper, which led to the boat being renamed *Le Parisien* (though underneath the new name was stenciled “Sister Bay”).

On June 7, 1980, the race began and, through the first day and a half, things were going well with Rodger in third overall and first in his class. The the autopilot for the boat failed. The mechanism is packed with grease, but in this case, it was over packed and, in the cold nights of the North Atlantic, the mechanism seized up. Rodger turned back to Plymouth, where he was able to get the autopilot repaired and then began the race for the second time, having fallen behind the other racers by over three days.

The 1980 O-STAR was the first to feature the ARGOS tracking system, but during the race a number of trackers failed and other boats stopped sending signals. *Le Parisien* was one of the boats that disappeared from the tracking system – in Rodger’s case, for several days – concerning family and friends following the race back in Door County. Eventually his signal returned, and he was still in the race.

The winner of the race, Phil Weld, took six days off the race record (finishing in just under 18 days) by taking a southerly route below 45 degrees north 35 degrees south, while the vast majority of the boats, *Le Parisien* included, took the

standard northern route above 45 degrees north.

The weather was terrible for a significant portion of the crossing. Rodger would later say that in the high seas *Le Parisien* would literally launch into the air as it went over large waves before landing back on the water and it would sometimes bury into the waves and all he would see was green through the observation bubble. These were the times he wondered if he would be able to finish.

Ultimately, Rodger reached Newport in 31 days, 10 hours, 45 minutes. He placed 43rd overall out of the 90 boats that entered the race and the 71 boats that finished the race, and 25th in his boat class.

The *Panache/Le Parisien* never returned to the Great Lakes. Rodger sold the boat on the East Coast to pay off his remaining debts and several years later it broke free of its mooring in a severe storm and was wrecked.

After selling the boat, Rodger returned to Sister Bay and went back to work at Anchor Marine, refurbishing and repairing boats, having fulfilled his childhood dream.

Author's Note

I met Rodger during the winter of 1978-79, when Beloit College shifted from a trimester system to a semester system, and I had five weeks off in Door County over the holidays. That winter was brutally cold and included a stretch of 23 straight days where the high temperature never went above 10 degrees.

I was feeling bored and trapped when Russ Forkert, a close family friend, mentioned that his brother was building a boat and I was welcome to help. So I ventured up to Anchor Marine where I met Rodger in the boat hangar underneath heavy plastic sheeting with torpedo heaters roaring out warmth. I soon found myself taking thin strips of linen, laying them over seams, and "painting" them in place with epoxy using a 4" metal handled brush.

The work was infinitely pedantic and did nothing to relieve my boredom, but I did show up for portions of three days to place and paint, place and paint. Ultimately, my contribution was negligible, but I did form a friendship with Rodger, and got an inside look at a man's passion.

Though Rodger died on Dec. 30, 2023, before I could revisit his adventure with him, I would like to thank his siblings, Russell, Julie, and particularly Gordon for refreshing my memories of the *Panache* and correcting my misremembrances.

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(Top) The *Panache* nearing completion. (Middle, from left) Dave LeClerc and Rodger Forkert. (Bottom) Launching the *Panache* in the Sister Bay Marina. Photos courtesy of the Forkert family.



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