



Keep it sweet

Designer Greg Elliott has the same philosophy today as when he was drawing skiffs 30 years ago... as he tells Tim Jeffery

For a man whose raceboats carry grunty names such as *Future Shock*, *Overload*, *Maverick*, *Junkyard Dog*, *Gorilla Biscuits* and *Maximus*, Greg Elliott is a quietly spoken man. Quiet, yet opinionated, and a persuasive advocate too. He also shakes hands with a massive mitt, as we did in the lobby of the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron.

This is home turf for the Kiwi designer. Outside there is the Squadron's Elliott 6m fleet, the success of which was instrumental in ISAF picking the boat for the Women's Match Race event in the 2012 Olympics. He was there to meet the guys from McConaghy International, the 120-strong Chinese offshoot of the Australian boatbuilders supplying the revamped model. Inside, while waiting for Elliott, I looked at the honours board and there among the big boats was *Future Shock*, the Squadron's 1991 championship winner.

Elliott's been around much longer than this, having started designing in 1977, but his reputation has not travelled as widely as, say, Bruce Farr or Laurie Davidson. Look at the half models in the RNZYS and you'll see that Elliott is every bit a part of the thriving culture of Kiwis who have designed quick boats, men such as John Spencer, Des Townson, Jim Young, Paul Whiting, Murray Ross as well as Farr and Davidson.

'I guess I am just following on,' says Elliott with a shrug. 'Bruce Farr is the most... he's just fantastic when you think

about it, from where he started. But I guess there's a lot of people from New Zealand on a similar theme.' It's clear Elliott holds Farr in high esteem. Back at the end of the 1960s his father built the first one-person Q-Class and the first International Moths designed by a then teenage Farr.

The 'Kiwi theme' hardly needs stating nowadays, but in the 1980s, or even the 1960s in the case of Spencer and Townson, light displacement was far from the norm. Elliott's own work has always espoused the virtues of good yacht design: long waterlines, minimum overhangs, light displacement, low-drag shaping above and below the waterline and high stability. There is an Elliott 'look', less distinctive these days in a world of plumb bows and minimally shaped topsides. One-time radical is now contemporary mainstream.

'The boats were light, easily driven and well-balanced,' explains Elliott of what he's always strived for. His boats have had speed in their genes. 'There was no mystery to that, I thought, though people do seem to get it wrong...

'I liken it to a performance motor vehicle – always nice to drive. If you look at *Mari Cha IV*, the shape is not so different from the 6m. It's really just a big dinghy, let's be honest. If you look back to when Bruce Farr started designing skiffs and now look at his boats today you think, crikey! A Volvo 70 looks like that. They are the same; hard chines, slab sides...'

Some of the Elliott look is directly attributable to the New Zealand and Australian phenomenon of trailer yachts. Light weight and short-ends were needed to max out performance from a given set of dimensions. 'It's quite funny really...' muses Elliott now, 'but in the 1980s, with the plumb stem and cut-off ends and fair hull forms, when everyone else was making twisted and contorted IOR

products, I was just doing my own thing basically. But that was all pushed along because the trailer scene was very strong in New Zealand in those days.'

There is a perception that Elliott's early boats were too much of a good thing in terms of the old IOR and IMS rules, as the algorithms rewarded designers for making their boats go slower. Elliott is no fan of these rules yet inherently fast boats could still sail to their ratings. His 12m *Sassy II* for Kiwi offshore stalwart Tom McCall was top IMS boat at the 1992 Kenwood Cup and helped New Zealand claim the team prize. Elliott's famous 16m wing-masted schooner *Elliott Marine* was another McCall boat, built for fast offshore passage racing including the Melbourne-Osaka two-hander.

Disarmingly, Elliott reckons yacht design doesn't have 'much mystery behind it'. He's a man who's done a stack of offshore miles, and always ponders about pace, handling and sail carrying as he sails. He also believes his fundamental beliefs are scalable, which is not always the case when you study the results of some designers. 'If you strike that sort of theme all the way through, it was something I was doing in the 1980s and continued right through to *Mari Cha*, which I co-designed, and *Maximus*. So from 20ft to 30ft to 40ft to 120ft and 140ft, the boats are very, very similar. I think it's been pretty successful.'

Indirectly, the trailer-yacht got an Elliott boat into the Olympics. That's how the 5.9m started. For more than 10 years it was used for RNZYS youth training, a class in which the likes of Steve Cotton, Gavin Brady, James Dagg, Sean Clarkson, Richard Mason, Cameron Appleton and Adam Minoprio won their first keelboat titles before entering the world of the Volvo, America's Cup and match racing.

When the 5.9s got tired after 12 years'

Left: right man for the job... Greg Elliott was co-designer with Clay Oliver and Philippe Briand of the ultimate reaching machine, *Mari Cha IV*, which has held the transatlantic monohull record since 2003

intensive use, the Squadron replaced them with Elliott's 6m update, itself now going on nine years old. The boats were also adopted by Wellington's Royal Port Nicholson YC and the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron. Though he has not designed anything as small for a long time now, it is the Elliott 6m that seems to have found its time for 2012.

He didn't push his boat forward when ISAF was casting around for a women's match racer. He is not a lobbyist in the same way as, say, Julian Bethwaite. In fact, it was ISAF itself not Elliott Marine that proposed the 6m, with Elliott only coming in to support his baby when the pick was being made in late 2008.

Last year's ISAF meetings were Elliott's first taste of the world governing body in action! 'I hear a lot of criticism of ISAF but the process was interesting for me because I'd never been involved before. As someone dipping in from the outside for the first time, I actually think ISAF is fine. Yes, there are the layers there but I think they do a pretty good job.' He considered the selection process as 'pretty robust' with the 6m winning every vote in every sub-committee until the final decision was made by the Council. Just as the 29erXX lobby found to its cost, previous success 'meant nothing on the last day. Absolutely nothing. Until each Council member pushes their button and votes, nothing is decided.'

But the Elliott 6m submitted for 2012 is different from the 35 boats previously built. Its creator went through the boat with a fine toothcomb with ISAF to add tweaks born of experience and to make it suitable for Olympic use. So the original fixed keel has given way to a removable keel, enabling four hulls to be fitted into one shipping container or a boat trailed with the 270kg keel retracted. The rig's altered too, because of ISAF's new 250kg crew weight limit, with the upwind sails trimmed down slightly.

To tighten up uniformity, the spars are now carbon as bend characteristics are easier to control than with aluminium. Southern Spars will supply full carbon mast, boom and spinnaker pole packages from their Sri Lanka plant. Removing 11kg from the rig package – worth some 20kg on the rail, says Elliott – harmonises the boat with the 250kg weight limit as well as increasing the wind range.

The boat's always been good in light airs (something of an article of faith with its designer) but Elliott was aware that the 6m needed to be an effective match racer in 25kt as well as 5kt in order to keep regattas on schedule. 'I have no concerns about the boat in light air,' he says of the tweaks. 'But I am trying to open up the upper wind range.'

Some minor adjustments to the moulds have also been made to facilitate volume

production, notably the hull/deck joint. This should allow McConaghys to produce the 100 boats a year requested. And fearful that the moneyed teams would buy up production, ISAF has taken control of distribution.

Elliott was more than happy to cede control over sales. 'The last thing I want is a country ringing up and saying 'We want to be no1.' I didn't want to be in that position! It was much better that ISAF handle it.' The first allocation of 80 boats was filled by the 1 March cut-off.

It is the designer's hope that the one-design aspects will be strict with a capital S and, with the boats being supplied equipment in the next Games, the Elliott 6m won't go the same way as the Yngling in terms of an arms war. 'Profiling and templating and all that shouldn't be necessary,' says Elliott. 'But it doesn't stop people wanting to fiddle with their boats.'

'People do that. But what you need to understand with all the big names is that they won't be able to bring their bat and ball with them to play. That's the best thing about supplied equipment. It's as simple as "there's your equipment, guys; let's go and see who can win the event".'

Elliott's own business has expanded way beyond the sporty small boats. His Tourer range of fast cruisers are recognised by cognoscenti for their speed and a novel layout that places the cockpit and saloon on the same level. George Stead, father of *Alfa Romeo* tactician Ado, through having run Poole's Southern Ocean Shipyard and done countless racing miles, knows his boats alright and commissioned a fast cruiser from Elliott. Germany's Tilmar Hansen of *Outsider* fame is another European believer. His carbon 52ft canting-keeler is designed for IRC and won its inaugural 2007 Newport-Hamburg transatlantic event.

Then ask Elliott about rating rules, and the opinions come thick and fast. IOR and IMS? 'They have probably done the most damage to hinder the development of hulls, IOR in particular,' he asserts, while conceding that he was able to do enough within the IMS system to produce winners, even though the rule 'purported to be able to rate all boats fairly...'

Today's particular bugbear is the Imoca 60 rule and he speaks from having designed Graham Dalton's Open 50-footer *A Southern Man*. 'The Open boats are fantastic! I just love them. But I think the Imoca rule itself is a total nonsense.'

'The 10-degree rule encourages barges. No wonder they have the structural problems they do. You try to get something like that through the ocean day after day and something's going to break. They are not sea-kindly shapes, they just aren't. The rule is fundamentally flawed. They chuck tons and tons of water at them just to get around this 10-degree thing.'

'Take that away and make a bit of box, a bit like the Volvo 70 rule... though that's got its flaws as well! But I'm sure the end result would be a different and a very much better type of boat.' □