

FAST FORWARD

From superyachts to Olympic match racers, and everything in between

WORDS AND PORTRAIT BY GUY NOWELL

RIGHT:
Maverick II racing in Hong Kong

OPPOSITE:
Elliott overseeing the final touches to the new Olympic 6m match-racer before it was shipped out of McConaghy's China yard

Greg Elliott has been designing quick boats for a long time, ever since he and his brother Bruce took on the New Zealand “establishment” with his garage-built cold-moulded Outsider. At that time, racing designs were dominated by the International Offshore Rule, a handicapping formula that produced boat shapes designed to “beat the rule”. Elliott went off in a different direction, and started producing boats with well-balanced and easily driven hull shapes. To this day he says that “I’ve always elected to use natural, fast hull shapes, rather than bending and twisting the hull shape to meet some racing rule.” The rules are constricting, he says, and “whenever you come up with a rating rule, just do the opposite and you’re bound to be fast.”

Any number of race winners later – including such famous names as Party Pro, Kiwi Coyote, Future Shock and Maverick – it is no surprise that Elliott was part of the team commissioned to design and produce Robert Miller’s Mari Cha IV. At a spectacular 142ft, this schooner-rigged carbon fibre beauty was the boat that destroyed the existing transatlantic monohull record by more than two days, making the crossing from the Ambrose Light to the Lizard in just 6 days 17 hrs 52 min 39 sec. Of course, the boat wasn’t built to any “rule” – she was just built to be fast.

“Fast” is Elliott’s one-word mantra, and it is not limited to racing yachts. He says, “A good cruiser is a fast cruiser. There’s no sense in sitting out on the ocean plodding along when you don’t have to. Apart from the frustration, a slow boat exposes you to danger unnecessarily. A faster boat gives you the opportunity to sail out of trouble, away from bad weather, if need be. I use the BMW analogy for my cruiser design philosophy: it’s all about comfort and performance – they’re not mutually exclusive.”

Most of Elliott’s boats over-perform for their size: one that made a brief appearance on the Asian racing scene was Maverick II, a slippery 45-footer that raced in the China Coast Regatta 2003 and snapped at the heels of the “big boats” all the way round the race course. Maverick was designed to be sailed short-handed, and indeed won the Melbourne-Osaka



Double-Handed Race in 2002. She has the characteristic Elliott shallow hull shape and low weight that allows her to get out of the water and plane much more quickly than her heavier, deeper competitors. She also has a rotating airfoil-section mast – part of the Elliott philosophy of increasing speed through reducing drag rather than just adding sail area.

“The boat is still racing in the Baltic and,” he happily admits, “it’s very gratifying that she is still competitive.” In the early 2000s water ballast was frowned on and boats with canting keels almost couldn’t enter a race – “Today, Maverick would probably have a canting keel... it’s the design parameters that have moved on, not the build technology. The boat was built light, in carbon, when that was almost a novelty.”

Time moves on, and so do yacht designers. In McConaghy’s boatyard in Zhuhai, China, right now Elliott is more concerned with the precise placement of a rope bag in the cockpit of his 6-metre design that has been selected for the Womens’ Match Racing event at the next Olympics. It seems a long way from the spectacular trans-Atlantic greyhound, but the designer says there is no difference between the two in terms of process. “The object of the exercise is always to produce the best possible boat required by the brief; no more, no less. Mari-Cha was designed to be the fastest monohull racing yacht in the world, and she was. The Elliott 6M is designed to fulfill ISAF’s requirement for a “match-racing boat with a crew of three, max crew weight 205kg, and capable of performing well in anything between 5 and 25kts of breeze”.

The Elliott 6M is the product of a design process that began 25 years ago with the Elliott 5.9, built as a New Zealand “trailer

**ABOVE:**

Mari-Cha IV was designed and built to be the fastest racing monohull in the world - and it was

boat". For almost 15 years, if you were a young sailor at the RNZYS, an Elliott 5.9 was what you sailed. "But it was a boat that was getting tired," says Greg, "and so in 2000 I reworked the design, kept all the good bits, and created a 6m version with a new deck layout." Then last year came ISAF's call for a new boat for the 2012 Olympic Regatta, which will be held in Weymouth, UK. "They wanted a boat that would fit into a 40ft container (you can get four Elliott 6Ms - and their masts - into a container), and of the 15 designs submitted, this was the one that was chosen - by a large margin. I am absolutely thrilled that there will be a New Zealand-designed boat in the next Olympic Games." The Elliott 6M (the "M" could be for "modified" or "match race" or anything else you care to think of) is "a sailor's boat. It's a boat that will really reward athletes that can sail. It's not a specialist boat, but a good all-rounder" - this in marked contrast to the now-displaced Yngling, which was often described as a technician's boat.

The 6M is designed with a "regular" spinnaker pole instead of a bowsprit, and Elliott feels strongly that this is the right way to go. "Spinnakers allow a boat to run dead downwind, which an asymmetric or gennaker doesn't," he says. "That permits more tactical decisions on the run, and allows passing lanes, which makes the whole race more challenging for the sailors, more exciting for the spectators and even more media-friendly."

In some of the Olympic sailing classes, competitors bring

their own boats, but the Elliott 6M is going to be "supplied equipment" at the 2012 regatta, meaning that the athletes turn up, get in the boat, and sail. "This takes away any equipment advantage that the better-funded teams can generate - when identical boats are supplied to all the competitors the event becomes all about the sailors and not about the boats."

The first eight straight-out-of-the-box Elliott 6Ms will make a debut appearance at Keil Week Regatta at the end of June, when 24 national teams will compete in boats that they have never sailed before. Elliott is very excited at the prospect - "How cool is that? Very cool! Now we'll see who can really sail!" he enthuses. "This is all about putting the emphasis on the sailors rather than the boats," he says, with a very happy designer's gleam in his eye.

"I believe that this is the best thing that has happened in Olympic sailing in a long while. Match racing is an event that you can run close to shore, which makes for great spectator interest and great media coverage. It's going to be conducted on a level playing field - supplied boats that are all the same [the first six out of the mould weighed within 1kg of each other]. The potential is there for some excitement, and I really think - especially if there is a bit of breeze - that it's going to be a very exciting event."

Undeniably, Greg Elliott is as enthusiastic about his little 6M as he is about a superyacht like Mari-Cha IV. "I don't think I am a one-boat wonder", he says. That just might be one of the greatest understatements we have ever heard. 