

Gary Bodie

From Hampton to Beijing

by
Chip Barber



Gary Bodie at speed in his 505 in San Francisco in 2000
(Photo courtesy of Gary Bodie)

When I first met Gary Bodie, he was standing in an 18-foot rigid-hulled inflatable boat, with a whistle in his mouth and a loud air horn in his pocket. Practice was on for over 30 Naval Academy varsity sailors. The small boats tacked and gybed back and forth across the choppy Severn River in Annapolis with no apparent pattern. But there was a pattern, just as there is a pattern and a method to every drill that Coach Bodie runs. And because of his meticulous focus, that team, like all of the teams that Gary coached, was an unmatched success.

That was in the late 1980s, and I had taken over as Director of Naval Academy Sailing, responsible for all of the various sailing programs and teams at the Academy. My hands were full with leading the day-to-day operations on the waterfront and attempting to make long-term improvements to the program. I was a busy man. But Gary required no supervision. He accomplished his job as Head Varsity Sailing Coach with aplomb; his teams repeatedly won national championships and earned all-American laurels.



Gary Bodie, Head US Olympic Coach (Photo courtesy of US Sailing)

Gary was the best sailing coach in college sports. If I had stepped in, I would have only mucked things up.

So what does the best collegiate sailing coach in the country do for an encore? He becomes the head coach of the US Olympic Team. Today he is considered to be the best sailing coach in the country.

Gary wasn't always a sailor. He came to sailboats and sailboat racing much later than most kids do. After his family moved to Hampton when Gary was 13, he became "captivated" by the beauty of the boats in a Fourth of July waterfront parade at the venerable Hampton Yacht Club. His parents did not support his desire to learn



The fledgling Hampton University team practicing in the Hampton River (Photo courtesy of Gary Bodie)



505 racing in San Francisco Bay. Gary's crew is Kevin Eley. (Photo courtesy of Gary Bodie)

to sail, so Gary got a paper route and earned the money to join the Junior Program at Hampton Yacht Club and to buy his first boat, a Sail Fish. He was invited to become a Junior Member of the Hampton Yacht Club, and continually developed his racing skills. A great sailor in his own right, he was captain of the sailing team at Cal Tech for two years and has raced his 505 at the very highest levels of international competition.

After graduating with a degree in engineering from Cal Tech in 1978, Gary returned to Hampton Roads and became the sailing coach at Old Dominion University. There, he took over a program struggling for its very existence. His

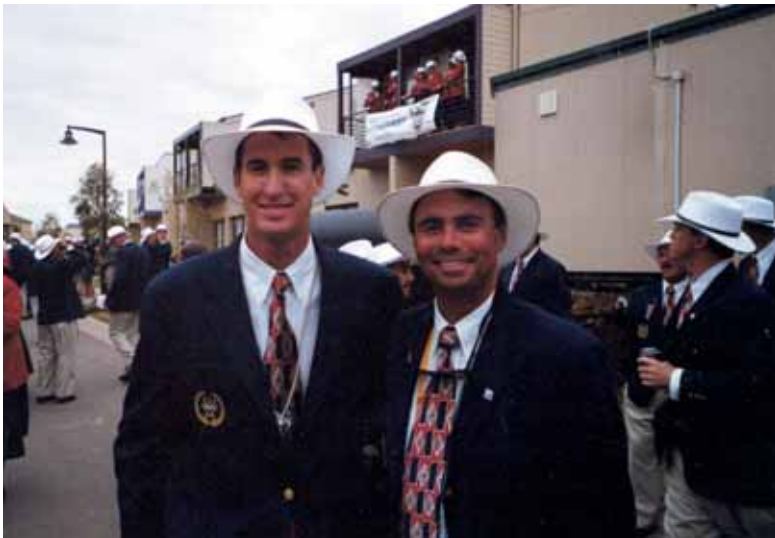
teams became better and better, eventually winning the Woman's National Championship in 1982 just after he was able to establish sailing as a varsity sport. Overall, in his seven years with ODU, his teams won eight national titles. Gary was elected to the ODU Athletic Hall of Fame in 1996 for making ODU a national power in sailing.

In the mid-1980s, Gary was recruited to head the intercollegiate coaching staff at the Naval Academy. At Annapolis for 10 years, Gary's teams earned more national championships and all-American honors than any other collegiate team. During these years, the Navy football team had some pretty lean years,

and the Monday morning department head meetings with the Admiral were not always a cheerful occasion. But thanks to Gary, I was usually able to report a major win on the water. These wins included the repeat national championships in many events, as well as winning the Fowle Memorial Trophy for the best overall team in intercollegiate sailing. It wasn't the Rose Bowl the Admiral was seeking, but it was almost always a notch in the win column.

In 1995, after winning every possible intercollegiate title at Navy, Gary was persuaded to return to Hampton. My friend, television commentator, author, America's Cup sailor, and Hampton University board member Gary Jobson, convinced the President of Hampton University, Dr. William Harvey, to start a sailing team at this historically black college. With full backing from the top down, Jobson brought Gary Bodie in to build a varsity sailing program where it had never been done before: at an HBC. One would think that Gary had finally met his match. But here, too, he motivated his student athletes to excel.

Gary tells the story of the first days of sailing at Hampton University with pride. I've always known Gary to be soft-spoken and extremely modest, but one can tell by listening to him quietly relate his time at Hampton that he considers his years there as one of his greatest accomplishments. Not knowing what to expect when he arrived, Gary advertised for and held "tryouts." The obligatory swimming tests were a real challenge for more than a few aspiring sailors: One student had to be rescued from the bottom of the pool by a lifeguard. After a month of remedial swim training and a tremendous amount of coach-provided motivation, the same young man made the team and eventually became team captain. The Hampton University team quickly earned the respect of intercollegiate sailors nationwide. Gary had made the first-ever sailing team at a historically black



Gary Bodie (right) with John Mydal, US Laser representative, at the Olympic Village, Sydney 2000. (Photo courtesy of Gary Bodie)

college a team to be reckoned with.

And don't think that it wasn't noticed that these successes at Hampton University took place just yards away, directly across the Hampton River, from the Hampton Yacht Club where Gary first learned to love sailing. Gary was elected to our national Intercollegiate Sailing Hall of Fame in 200. He is only one of six professionals so honored.

Because of his collegiate coaching successes at three schools over 20 years, Gary was asked to become the head coach of the US Olympic Sailing Team in 1998. He was promoted to high performance director for the team shortly thereafter. Like all great coaches, Gary's goal is to have his athletes perform at the best of their ability at the time of their most important competition—in this case, the Olympics. Unlike most of us who think of the Olympics every four years, Gary is not a "medal counter." While he is very much aware of the medals his teams won in Sydney and in Athens, he doesn't dwell on this aspect of team recognition. He is quick to point out that because there is so little television coverage, most Americans don't even know that sailing is an Olympic sport. But in the overall medal count, the US sailing teams have garnered more medals than any other Olympic sports except for track and field and swimming. According to Bodie, other nations may

win as many medals in sailing as the Americans, but only because they concentrate on just a few of the 11 Olympic sailing events. Our team qualifies sailors for *all 11* Olympic sailing events.

Asked about our team for the 2008 Olympics in China, Gary remains as understated as always. He won't make any predictions, but says that the American athletes who will sail at Qingdao are better funded and prepared than any team he has ever worked with. He likes our chances.

When I asked Gary what aspect of the sport he liked the most, I wasn't surprised by his answer. Although I thought he might describe his successes as an international competitor in the 505 class (he came in seventh overall in the 1990 World Championships), he became animated as he described his love of team racing. In team racing, teams of three or four sailboats compete against another team head to head on the water. This is more akin to soccer played out in sailboats than to traditional sailboat racing. Individual scores do not count, only the total team score at the end of a race matters. Thus the usual tactics of fleet and match racing are moot. For a team to win, a skipper must both get around the course quickly, and help his teammates by using the racing rules to prevent the opposition team's boats from doing the same. Team racing is a very cerebral sport and one that, in my

opinion, has much potential as a spectator and television sport. The boats are always in close proximity, and sometimes even do better for the team by reversing on the race course to "attack" an opposition boat so as to allow a teammate further back to pass. It is *very* exciting both to compete in and to observe. It should probably be an Olympic sport!

Team racing action is always fast and furious, and whenever I've had the opportunity to compete in this sport (I skippered a Sigma 33 for a US team in an international regatta on the Solent several years ago), I've relied on Gary to help me brush up on tactics beforehand. When he has had the time available from his busy travel schedule, he does all that he can to teach and promote this exciting part of our sport.

While he does not garner front-page recognition and instant name recognition like Dennis Connor, Ted Turner, and Paul Cayard do, Gary Bodie is truly at the pinnacle of sailing's elite. He has personally taught hundreds of sailors the finer mechanical and technological aspects of racing. More importantly, he has inspired and motivated everyone he comes in contact with to achieve his or her best. I am pleased to be among this group and to be able to call Gary Bodie both coach and friend.

Charles Barber is a veteran sailor of over 40 years. He was the Director of Sailing and Commodore of the Naval Academy Sailing Squadron and was the coach on board the Naval Academy's 48-foot sloop *Constellation* in 1992 when she won the coveted St. David's Lighthouse Trophy for First-in-Fleet in the Newport to Bermuda Race. Upon leaving the Navy, Chip founded an international yacht management service and provides administrative management and special project management for high-level racers as well as for long-distance sail and powerboat cruisers. charles@chbarber.com.