## An interview with Mark Ellis,

creator of the cat-rigged Nonsuch series of sailboats that strained sensibilities and changed the way we think about sensible cruising boat design.

**By Sue Cornell**
For *Points East*

**Mark Ellis**, now 73, launched his yacht design career in 1965, honing his craft at such shops as C. Raymond Hunt, Philip Rhodes, Little Harbor (Ted Hood), and C&C Yachts. His own design firm, Mark Ellis Design, was established in 1975, in Oakville, Ontario, and later moved to Essex, Conn.

Of the many sailboat and powerboat plans that have come off his board, nine were Nonsuches: the 22, 26, 30, 32, 324, 33, 36, 40 and the 45, and nearly 1,000 of the various models have been built. These all have been ear-marked by the qualities of simplicity, seakindliness, efficient performance, and ease of operation. In the following paragraphs, Sue Cornell asks Mark Ellis how this wondrous design came to be.

***Points East***: When did you realize how special the Nonsuch design is?

***Mark Ellis***: Out of the box, even as my client, Gordon Fisher, de- scribed what he wanted. [Fisher had the concept and provided brief de- sign requirements; Ellis did the actual design.] I thought it certainly was a different boat. It took a while for it to sink in that it worked well enough to be special, but also it was special as an idea because there had-n't been a fin-keel/spade-rudder cat- boat done before to my knowledge.

Today, they call boats like that – which are sort of traditional from a topside look, although the rig is not – the spirit of tradition. That's sort of the way I saw it: The boat would sort of have East Coast catboat aesthetics. But I think the idea of a fin-keel and spade-rudder catboat, as opposed a piece-of-pie wedged centerboard and a big barn- or rudder, and a freestanding wishbone rig as op- posed to the standard gaff rig, was all special, as we did it. As it turned out, it worked.

When it worked as we hoped it would, that made it special also. From our standpoint, it was interesting to have a singlehanded boat of 30 feet overall that performed as well as it did. For people who had sailed standard fiberglass production sloops of that size – and there were lots of them – they were just blown away by the way the boat performed, and how simple it was.

***PE***: To what do you attribute the Nonsuch's success?

***Ellis***: A major part of the Nonsuch's success was its simplicity to sail. It was as Gordon anticipated: You could singlehand the boat, and you could take people sailing who weren't sailors and make them happy. Essentially, you could control the whole thing from the helm once the main was up. on top of that, because the boat has such a long waterline and, therefore, a lot of volume for the overall length, the boat, in 30 feet, had an amazing interior.

***PE***: How did you deal with any objections to the boat's appearance?

***Ellis***: People thought it was a very odd boat. Friends of mine, who were good sailors and sailed lots of different boats, asked, "Why did you design a boat like that?" How- ever, a lot of people picked up on the traditional aesthetics of the sheer line and the house and the basic catboat look. If they liked that, it was fine. But, for others, it took a little while to establish the idea.

I would add to it that Gordon Fisher, who was a major business leader and a major character in Canada, also had a substantial sense of self. He wasn't pushy, but he did know who he was. People didn't make fun of Gordon Fisher very readily because he was generally correct on things. He was an established, knowledge-

able businesman, political, and a general character who was thought highly of. It was easier for him, with that sense of self, to show the boat off.

I'm not shy – I hope I'm not pushy – but it took a sense of self to carry on when people made fun of it. I just carried on. A good friend, sort of on the same level as Gordon Fisher, said, "That's the ugliest damn boat I've ever seen." I took him out on it, and he said it was wonderful. I don't think I took offense.

Gordon Fisher wanted a boat that could be easily sailed by just one person.

When I look back on doing it 40 years ago – I'm 73 now – I believe I was self-assured enough and didn't worry about it.

***PE***: Why does the boat have such a following after 40 years?

***Ellis***: First of all, there's the success of the boat. Then, the building of the class had a lot to do with it. It was odd, and then it wasn't odd. It was a kind of cult following that's carried on, with the stewardship and support of the International Nonsuch Association (INA). The boats were well-built, and the concept does make sense. But then there's that group. The fact that the boat has value that way is because there's an interest, and there's a group that brings the Nonsuch enthusiasts together.

I don't want to get too kitschy-family, but I think there's some of that. It goes on having a value because there are a number of interesting and interested people in that group. It's a great thing.

***PE***: What's your favorite Nonsuch story?

***Ellis***: Over 40 years there've been a lot of them! I owned a 30, No. 38, for almost 20 years. I had the boat on Lake Ontario, and also on the St. Lawrence River because we have an island on the St. Lawrence. I brought it to saltwater three times: I did the saltwater Nonsuch Rendezvous on odd years. I did a lot of cruising on it, but as far as a favorite story goes, I won't go there.

As opposed to a favorite story, I have a lot of personal feeling outside of being the designer for the class. There are so many people I've known, liked, had fun with, and admired. I feel I have a strong connection there and great memories of the whole thing.

***PE***: How did you sell the wishbone concept to your client, Gordon Fisher, and then to builder George Hinterhoeller?

***Ellis***: I had to sell the wishbone concept to Gordon Fisher, who originally didn't want to have any boom at all. He wanted to have the sail trimmed like a genoa jib. He wanted to have tripods on the aft quarters of the boat – tracks that were on tripods so they could trim the thing that way. I convinced him that there wasn't going to be much interest in a boat on which you had to do that.

The other problem was that when you went downwind, reaching, how were you going to hold the sail out? There was just no real sense for how you were going to do that.

He was referring to a rig that was used in Europe called a Ljungström rig. It was a Scandinavian concept that called for a "two-ply" sail. When you went downwind you split the two plies of the sail and went wing-on-wing, one sail out on either side, if you will. That wasn't going to work, either.

I basically appealed to him that, if the boat was going to be easily sailed by most people, it had to have a way to have a boom, and you couldn't have a boom that was high enough off the deck to put a vang on. There was no way to hold down the end of the boom to keep the leach tight.

So, I referred to windsurfers, which have wishbones, and said the reason the windsurfer has a wishbone is that they have no way of holding the clew of the sail down and keeping the leech tight other than balancing to hold the foot tension. That's what the wish bone does: It balances the leech and foot tension, and, depending on the angle, the higher the angle the more leech tension you get, the lower the angle, the less. From an engineering standpoint, or, from a resolving-of-the-forces standpoint, you have to decide on that angle.

Ellis continued ...

I convinced him (and he had an engineering background) that that was the best way of doing it. Herreshoff had used it originally in the 1880s (the wishbone), but it was used recently by Freedom Yachts in the Freedom 40. They'd done that a couple years before – in 1975 or 1976 – with a two-ply sail that wrapped around the mast. That's the way they held it to the mast. I suggested we have a track and suspend the wishbone independently.

The Freedom 40 had a hole through the sail, and a rope from the wishbone that went through the luff of the sail through the other side, and that held the wishbone back. I suggested the choker lines and the hanger lines [the forward attachments of the wishbone to the mast], and that worked amazingly right out of the box – the first boat in 1978.

George Hinterhoeller built Nonsuches that have held up well over the years.

That sold it to Gordon Fisher. We didn't have to sell the idea of the wishbone to George Hinterhoeller; we had to sell the whole idea of the boat to George, who didn't believe in it. What convinced George was Gordon offering to pay for the tooling, and offering to finance the first four boats. George wanted the production, so he didn't have a choice but to go along. He was eventually a great supporter – and he was a good sailor. The thing that convinced him to build the boat was the financed-production opportunity.

***PE***: What is the single most impressive Nonsuch accomplishment on the water?

***Ellis***: I don't know. They've shown great seakeeping ability in a bunch of situations, and controllability and speed. From my standpoint, that's the biggest deal – they're good seaboats.

***PE***: How has a business degree helped you as a boat designer?

***Ellis***: I've always seen myself as much a businessman as a designer. My family was in the retail business, and I grew up in a business-oriented family. I have always had the view that if you're not doing this in order to support yourself and make money, you shouldn't be doing this. It's not an art form in those terms, but something I see as a business.

I've been lucky to go where I've gone, and I've had a number of opportunities. A business degree helped me because I could stay alive as a yacht designer. There are a lot of people in boating and boating-related businesses who aren't good managers; they don't see it that way, and they don't last.

***PE***: What do you sail now?

***Ellis***: I have one of my powerboats up on the St. Lawrence, a Limestone 20, but I sail a Northeast 400, a motorsailer I designed for Jim Eastland in 1994. There were 34 of them built in Costa Rica by Cabo Rico. My Nonsuch 30 was named *Lotus*, and my current Northeast 400 is *Lotus*. It's in Essex, Conn.

***PE***: What are you working on now?

***Ellis***: I'm currently working on a powerboat in Canada by Bruckmann Yachts, in Mississauga, Ontario. Bruckmann is a semi-custom builder I've worked with for a long time. They're building the Abaco 47 powerboat that I designed to plane at very low speeds.

***PE***: Which of your designs is your favorite?

***Ellis***: Fred Eaton owned Nonsuch No. 2, named *Elephant*. I was just in Toronto for the launch of his book of memoirs, at age 80, and there's a picture of *Elephant* there. I did a custom sloop for him which was, effectively, a 47-foot daysailor named *Volunteer*. She's on my website (www.markellisyachtdesign.com). *Volunteer* was my favorite design commission.

A resident of Killingworth, Conn., regular Points East contributor Susan Cornell is an independently contracted writer, photographer, and marketing and public relations consultant. During the summer, she and her husband Bob "pretty much live at Brewers Pilots Point Marina" aboard their Nonsuch *Halcyon*.

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Update thanks *Points East* magizine for allowing the reprint of this article from their March/April 2019 issue written by Sue Cornell, who also took the photographs — Editor