



Contests at Sea and in the Courtroom

By Jon Caroulis

In many ways, sailing, including competitive sailboat racing, has its parallels to the courtroom.

“Just as I prepare a case or to advise a client, I prepare to go out to the racecourse — both require knowledge,” said Patricia Santelle, chair emeritus/former managing partner and chair of the executive committee at the Philadelphia office of White and Williams LLP. “Just as a case or client matter takes its twists and turns, so does a sailboat race — both require problem-solving and resilience. Just as the success of presenting a case or providing advice to a client requires putting the right team together, so does sailboat racing. Both require synergy — combining skill sets.”

“There are similarities,” said Matthew Wolford, Wolford Law, Erie. “First, competitors like to win, of course. Second, sailboat racing has a set of rules that must be followed, not unlike rules of civil procedure, but instead dealing with rights-of-way, starting, rounding marks, etc. Just like litigation, you need to know the rules to be competent. Third, there is a right of protest if someone breaks a rule, which involves procedures not unlike arbitration. There are other similarities as well. Trial work is mostly preparation and

planning, and sometimes the unexpected happens. In sailboat racing, you practice getting better, but there are wind shifts, unexpected issues with competitors, etc. My dad had a sign on his boat: ‘No amount of planning will ever take the place of dumb luck.’”

Work brings rewards.

“Sailing provides a physical challenge,” said David Laigaie, of the Philadelphia office of Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott LLC. “It is hard work to hoist sails, to fend off piers, to drop or retrieve an anchor and to handle the millions of physical tasks that need doing. One of the reasons I will retire — at a young 61 — is to ensure that I have the physical ability to live as a cruising sailor.

“Sailing also provides terrific mental stimulation,” he said, “both in terms of the physical world, such as weather forecasting, tides, navigation and the mechanical world. Even a modest 38-foot sailboat has multiple systems, including sails, rigging, a diesel engine, heat, air conditioner, refrigerator, clean water system, heads, dirty water system. There is always something breaking or going wrong, which in turn provides constant opportunity to solve problems and,” he added, “to spend too much money.”

Santelle said, “I love the camaraderie of racing and/or boating with others. I enjoyed the challenge of the competition. Racing sailboats requires preparation, knowledge and resilience — though I am also just as content to cruise and spend time on the water with friends.

“Sailing has not only become a lifelong hobby for me, but it has also brought me many rewards in the form of friendships, opportunities to travel and the ability to give back to the community through a sailing foundation that I lead and that provides support to lower-income children to learn how to sail and spend time on the water,” she said.

Her involvement began when her firm provided pro bono work for the incorporation of the C. Wallace Stuard Corinthian Yacht Club of Cape May Sailing Foundation. “I was then asked to join the board and succeed the founder in leading it. In Cape May, our sailing club is adjacent to a Coast Guard training center and many of the children living there have never been on the water. We also partner with a local charity that offers educational opportunities to low-income families in the city. And we assist youth who are traveling to compete around the country and sometimes around the world.”

John Fiorillo of Unruh Turner Burke & Frees, West Chester, said, “When the motor engine gets shut off and we’re heeled over, it’s just peaceful. It’s nice, very relaxing. When you’re at the helm, you’re always engaged because you’re trying to keep the boat at a certain point of sail. If you’re not at the helm, you’re just relaxing and there’s no sound. I like it when we’re heeled over and the real sailing [starts].”

Patricia Santelle’s Max Power in the Cape to Cape Spinnaker, from Lewes, Delaware, to Cape May, New Jersey. Photo courtesy of Patricia Santelle.



Serious sailing means having serious boats.

Santelle has a J/105, which is a 34- 35-foot racing boat that can also be used for cruising. “I primarily sail on this boat,” she said. She also owns a J/70. It is a 22- 23-foot boat, essentially a smaller version of a J/105. Santelle also co-owns a 26-foot center console Hydra-Sport fishing boat.

In November 2022, Laigaie purchased a 38-foot Beneteau Oceanis (Beneteau, located in Southern France, he said, is one of the world’s largest boat manufacturers). “With over 750 built, the Oceanis 38.1 is the perfect family short-handed cruiser. The boat was first commissioned in 2018. It is sporty, spacious and very comfortable. It will take us wherever we want to go,” he said.

Wolford purchased a C&C 42 Custom and “rescued it from the landfill.” The number, he said, refers to the boat’s length. “The ‘custom’ designation was [the manufacturer’s] way of indicating a boat was part of a limited run, not a full production run, of boats built in its ‘custom’ shop,” he said. “Only six C&C 42 Customs were built.”

Matthew Wolford at the helm during a race. Photo courtesy of Matthew Wolford.





From left, Chester County Bar Sail Co-captain Chris Sondergaard and John Fiorillo navigate a sudden squall on the return from Annapolis. Photo courtesy of John Fiorillo.

“Just as a case or client matter takes its twists and turns, so does a sailboat race.”



David Laigaie on the Gypsea Soul. Photo courtesy of David Laigaie.

Wolford said he sails predominantly on Lake Erie, including Presque Isle Bay. He said he enters two “relatively serious” races each year, the Interclub Cruise, a five-day port-to-port series on the eastern portion of Lake Erie, and The Wolford Trophy, named after his late father John M. Wolford, which is a two-day racing series to from Erie to Port Dover, Ontario, and back.

The personal connections involved in sailing.

Even though she grew up around water, Santelle didn’t become a sailing enthusiast until she met her husband. “I realized that if I wanted to see him on the weekends, I was going to join him racing on sailboats. That was almost 35 years ago,” she said.

“I am on the boat every weekend from early June into September but, where possible, I sail and or attend sailing events in the off season,” said Santelle.

Laigaie said he “started sailing over 30 years ago when my wife Brenda and I started going to Maine in the summers. We rented a cabin on an island that has a terrific community sailing program, which taught us to sail and then enabled us to sail every summer. Our kids, Grace and Jake, also learned to sail in the same program.

“After Brenda passed away in 2017, I wasn’t sure what would happen, in general, and in terms of sailing. Luckily, I met my current fiancée, CarolAnn, who, although she had no experience sailing, was willing to give it a try. She enjoys it as much as I do,” he said.

Wolford’s interest in boating began with his father, who was a serious sailing enthusiast.

“When I was 10 years old, my dad bought a Cal 33 and named it Constance, after my mom. I learned how to sail on that boat, and we raced it seriously until my dad died in 1988. In fact, we won the Interclub about a week before he died.

“My dad was a highly regarded litigator and trial attorney. He also loved sailing and, in particular, sailboat racing. His favorite race was the Bluff Bar Race (now named the Wolford Trophy). The race was about 65 miles, which makes for a long day. In addition, it is always sailed after Labor Day, which means it’s more likely to have rough weather. Sailors used to fondly refer to it as the ‘Barf Bar Race’ because it was prone to make people seasick,” he said.

Wolford also participates in the local Erie Yacht Club Racing Fleet, which has a “user-friendly” Wednesday evening series

— which, he said, are less intense when it comes to competition — throughout the summer that he typically races. “My wife and I try to go out sailing at least once per week or so during the summer sailing season, including entertaining friends,” he said.

And while there are many boats to choose from, depending on individual preferences and circumstances, selecting a name for a boat is also influenced by individual preferences and circumstances.

As for the names of her boats, Santelle said, “The names started with Max Power, which was Homer Simpson’s alter ego in an episode of ‘The Simpsons,’ one of my husband’s all-time favorite TV series. Since the smaller sailboat was a smaller version, it was named Mini Max. Then, the motorboat was a Hydra-Sport, so we named it Higher Power, which also has a spiritual meaning. My husband felt his higher power came from being on the water.

“It is common to name a boat after a loved one, traditionally a woman, and sometimes incorporate their profession,” she said. In

Patricia Santelle says her late husband was a fan of “The Simpsons” and named the Max Power and Mini Max after Homer Simpson’s alter ego. Photo courtesy of Patricia Santelle.



the case of my boats, my husband was very clever, so he chose names that were simple, unique, funny and inspirational. And short!”

“Boat naming is quite a rabbit hole and, as with virtually every subject, sailors have wildly variant and strongly held opinions about it,” said Laigaie.

“My current boat will be my ‘forever boat,’ and I will change the preexisting name, which is Gypsea Soul. I like the existing name, and it comes from a wonderful Van Morrison song, ‘Into the Mystic.’ Yet, I wanted my stamp on my boat,” Laigaie explained.

“I pivoted to Third Half, which reflects not only my stage of life, but also the gusto with which I anticipate that stage. It also is easy to understand and to spell — invaluable when, for instance, you are hailing on the VHF [radio] a marina, another boat or the Coast Guard,” he said.

Wolford named the first boat he purchased Muireann, a close Irish spelling to his wife’s name, Marian.

“You need to know the rules to be competent.”

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A boat sailed last year in the Chester County Bar Sail. Photo courtesy of John Fiorillo.

“[It] requires preparation, knowledge and resilience.”

“By the latter part of the 1990s, my crew and I were racing on a Tripp 33 named Moonrise. In 1998 or thereabouts, I sold my Ranger 26 and bought a C&C 34, again named Muireann,” he said. “By 2000, I gave up serious racing because Marian and I started a family: Claire was 3, John was 2, and Ben was on the way.”

He later purchased the 42 Custom boat, Second Wind. When he bought it, he knew it needed work, but found out later it needed a great deal of work to make it seaworthy.

“I had a choice: either cut it up for the landfill or repair it. I decided to repair it, which

took two years on the hard and cost as much as I paid for the boat. The boat was fully repaired, and we have enjoyed it ever since. The 42 is the boat I currently race in the Family JAM (Jib and Main) fleet on Wednesday evenings, and seriously twice a year, the Interclub and the Wolford Trophy,” he said.

Wolford said, “I plan to have one last boat after Second Wind, which will be called Muireann.”

“By the way,” he added, “renaming a boat is fraught with superstition, protocol and danger. The wind gods will curse your boat if it isn’t done correctly.”

Boat owners such as Santelle, Wolford and Laigaie are veteran litigators, who have the personal resources to be avid sailors. But how can attorneys who are starting their career, or only a few years into practicing law, get started in sailing without emptying their bank account?

Laigaie suggests: “Start small with a simple boat [such as] a day-sailer without a motor that can be trailered. Join a sailing club and sail its boats. Once you have obtained basic sailing skills, serve as crew for boat owners. There are lots of opportunities to sail without the expense or commitment. But beware — if you catch the sailing bug, you will be hooked.”

Santelle believes, “You don’t have to buy a boat or make a financial investment in one to enjoy sailing. Meet people who own a boat, express an interest and show up at the dock with a positive attitude.”

“The way to enjoy sailing without spending large sums is to own a smaller boat or sail on someone else’s boat,” Wolford advised. “Young attorneys who are interested in

Chester County Judge Analisa Sondergaard is the co-captain of the Chester County Bar Sail. Photo courtesy of John Fiorillo.

racing could find a local sailboat racing program and get his or her name out there. There are often people looking for crew, yacht clubs with sign-up sheets, etc. [It's] a great way to start but be prepared to be yelled at.

“Racing is a fun way to learn because you’re doing something more interesting than just learning sailing basics,” he said. “Strategizing, learning the rules, constantly changing sails, learning different jobs, etc., makes for better learning, in my view. Of course, any young attorney who wants to go for a sailboat ride can visit me in Erie.”

Or join a group that sails simply for the relationship-building it can bring.

“There is not a hint of CLE.” That’s how Fiorillo, who is also a past president of the Chester County Bar Association, described the annual Chester County Bar Sail.

“Lawyers and judges either get on someone’s boat or they charter boats and have a rendezvous somewhere on the Chesapeake, either Saint Michaels, Annapolis or Baltimore, on a Thursday night. We have cocktails on the docks, and we have a crab feast. It is simply all social,” he said. ☎

Jon Caroulis is a writer who lives near Philadelphia. He has written for many newspapers and magazines.

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