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Roderick "Rod" Stephens, Jr.



August 7, 1909– January 10, 1995  
Birthplace: Bronx, New York

***“Don’t forget your storm sails are for storms. When it’s blowing 60, small is beautiful.”***

Twenty-five years ago, a photographer who was spending the day with Rod Stephens stopped for gas. When he returned from paying the bill, Stephens had cleaned out the car of film boxes and assorted trash. Three times a day Stephens jogged up and down the 15 flights of stairs leading to the Sparkman & Stephens design office on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, and knew how many seconds it took to walk to Grand Central Station. A master of details, he had a commissioning document he shared with owners that listed every item in every drawer and cubby of *Mustang*, his New York 32. When customers asked for advice about naming their boats, Stephens told them to imagine they were yelling the name across a quiet, crowded

harbor at midnight in hopes of raising someone to come get them.

Rod Stephens was a consummate seaman. His brother Olin designed the boats. Rod, rigger and engineer, oversaw their construction and fitting out, made sure they performed, and schooled their new owners before turning them over. It was a natural, agreeable division of labor for the Stephens brothers that began in childhood, and launched their careers with the *Dorada* collaboration in 1931.

*Dorada*

won the transatlantic race that year by two days. Rod became Harold Vanderbilt's right hand man on his 12-meter, *Vim*, and on his America's Cup winning

*Ranger*

in 1937. Stevens also crewed on Cup winning 12-meters

*Columbia*

and

*Constellation*

. On a boat, Rod was everywhere solving problems. In a crisis, he was always the first man up the rig.

During World War II, Stephens helped develop the DUKW, an amphibious truck, for the US Army. For this he was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award presented by the White House.

At regattas, Harold Vanderbilt permitted shore leave only for tennis, not for dances or night life. Stephens, an enthusiastic dancer, would pile his evening clothes on his head and swim ashore for the festivities.

Before he died in 1995, Rod had completed 100 pages of a book. *Roderick Stephens – His Book,*

*Rod on Sailing,*

*Lessons from the Sea*

, covers everything from anchors to swing tables to rigging. For an aspiring seaman, it's as close to a Bible as sailing has to offer.

- Roger Vaughan

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[Rod's book: \*Roderick Stephens – His Book, Rod on Sailing, Lessons from the Sea\*](#)

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[New York Times Obituary for Rod Stephens, Jr.](#)

[Cruising World article tribute](#)

[Archives & Collections Society entry for Roderick Stephens, Jr.](#)

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