

[next](#)

Bruce Robert William Kirby



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Birthplace: Ottawa, Ontario
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“Once I’m in my Sonar, the aches and pains go away.”

Bruce Kirby was a newspaper man in Ottawa and Montreal before he became a yacht designer. A competitive sailor in International 14 dinghies from age 15, his focus was on making the boats faster. After being beaten in a regatta at Cowes in heavy wind, he drew the Kirby Mark I on a piece of shelf paper. It was fast upwind in a breeze. He sold 30 of the Mark I.

Untrained, Kirby began designing by observing. “I had a copy of *Skene’s Elements of Yacht Design*. If you can understand 50% of what’s in that book, you can design a boat. Design isn’t brain surgery. We should always pretend that it is, but it’s really not.” Having made that modest disclaimer, Kirby grants that designing a vessel that is compatible with two disparate elements – air and water – is, in fact, a challenge. There were seven versions of the Kirby International 14 built: 739 boats total. “It was done seat of the pants,” Kirby says. “No testing. It was all empirical. Each new boat was a take-off on the old one.”

In 1964, Kirby moved to Finns and made the Canadian Olympic team.

He didn’t quit his day job. By the mid-1960s, Kirby had become editor of *One Design Yachtsman* (now *Sailing World*). He jumped into a Star boat in 1968, and again represented Canada in the Olympics. In 1971, a car-top dinghy he had designed at a friend’s request was launched, and Kirby’s fame was assured. The boat was called the Laser. More than 250,000 of this demanding Olympic class dinghy have been built.

In the summer of 2011, at age 82, Kirby sailed in the Sonar European Championships held in Scotland. He won two races. He continues to sail the 24-foot Sonar, personal favorite of his 63 designs, out of the Noroton Yacht Club in Darien, Connecticut. He gives away 20 years to the next oldest skipper, but still manages to record frequent top three finishes. “I do my best work in 15 knots and above,” he says. “Once I’m in my Sonar, the aches and pains go away.”

- Roger Vaughan

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