

the **Malcolm Tennant** **STORY**



by JOHN MACFARLANE

An only child, Malcolm Tennant was born in Whakatane, New Zealand, where his father Bill ran the local picture theatre. The Tennant family moved to Auckland during WWII, but when his parents separated shortly afterwards Tennant went to live with his grandparents.

TENNANT ATTENDED three different colleges – Wesley College, Howick College and Papakura High School, before undertaking a psychology degree at Auckland University.

By this time Tennant's interest in multihulls had already been stimulated when he and his friend, the late John Keen, were given an old 5.7m Rod Macalpine-Downie catamaran. They fixed this up and taught themselves to sail. Improving the catamaran's performance became somewhat of an obsession for Tennant.

In 1963 Tennant married Justine (nee Jones), and the couple moved to Sydney. Ostensibly in Sydney to undertake a PHD in Nuro-psychology, Tennant was soon building a Yachting World catamaran in the couple's flat. More sailing followed on Sydney Harbour, Tennant continually seeking ways to make his catamaran faster.

After two years in Sydney, the Tennant's moved back to Auckland and took over the family business, Pet Products. While the business paid the bills, Tennant was more interested in sailing and racing catamarans.

He was soon meeting other multihull aficionados, including Ron Given and Ken Fay. In 1966, Tennant formed a partnership with Given and Fay, GTF International Catamarans, to design and build A-Class cats. The partnership built 32 boats before disbanding. Out on his own, Tennant became the licensed builder of the Olympic Tornado and the Australian designed B2-Class catamaran, the Stingray.

He designed his first cruising catamaran in 1969, the 11m Vorpall Blade, which was one of the first catamarans this size to use alloy cross beams. Tennant built two of this design to a bare hull stage.

In 1972 Tennant designed Bamboo Bomber; a 9.8m open bridgedeck racing catamaran, featuring stepped, flared hull sides and blister cabins. Journalist Gary Bagient requested Tennant make changes to this design, including fairing up the hull sides to enable construction from stressed plywood. Two boats to this design were built, *Supplejack* and *Superbird*.



The 13.75 powercat, *Escape* at speed.
(main pic left)

Malcolm Tennant in his Titirangi office.
(left)

A raft up of GBEs – party time.
(below)



“When launched the Blade Runner design was an awesomely quick piece of kit, but modified, as most of them are these days, they remain virtually unbeatable”



Baigent launched *Supplejack* in 1977, and with her rotating plywood and foam wing mast, proved devastatingly fast in certain conditions. While *Supplejack* attracted considerable interest in avant-garde circles, many monohull sailors viewed it with horror.

The following year Richard Pilkington approached Tennant with a drawing of a catamaran built by Californian surfer Micky Munoz, who'd worked with Hobie Alter of Hobie catamaran fame.

Pilkington wanted a high-speed commuter catamaran to sail to and from land he owned on Great Barrier Island,

and in response Tennant created the 8.5m cruiser/racer Great Barrier Express (GBE) catamaran.

Designed for building in double diagonal skins of kauri or plywood, the GBE quickly became known as a giant killer and became so popular Pilkington set up production in GRP. The plug for the moulds came from Tennant's own GBE, *Von Tempsky*. Pilkington built around 30 GBEs over the next few years, and won the Best Production Boat at the Auckland Boat Show in 1979. Tennant sold around 270 sets of GBE plans worldwide.

Tennant followed up the GBE with two bigger versions, the Turissimo-9 and the Turissimo-10, which despite their full headroom and fatter hulls proved faster on the water than the GBE. Turissimo's were produced in New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, France and the United States.

Tennant took the open wing deck/alloy beamed GBE concept several stages further when boatbuilder and GBE owner John Douglas approached him with concept drawings of a 13.15m design, which became known as the Blade Runner. Douglas built the first, *Ultra Violet*, and later on boatbuilder John Hughes, another GBE owner, built two more, *Afterburner* and *Limelight*, now *Slime*.

When launched the Blade Runner design was an awesomely quick piece of kit, but modified, as most of them are these days, they remain virtually unbeatable. Tennant later redrew the Blade Runner design making it 15.2m overall, appropriately renaming it *High Octane*.

Tennant was long time prompter of stressed plywood construction, a method he had learned when building Tornado class catamarans years before. Over the years he designed several stressed ply catamarans, including the nine-metre racing catamaran Red Shift. The first of this design, *Illegal Alien*, was built by



Hull flying a GBE at speed. (top)
One of the first Bamboo Bomber designs – Superbird – note the wing mast. (above)

sparmaker John Tetzlaff and performed extremely well due to its light weight.

Besides the GBE, Turissimo and smaller catamarans such as the 3m Eclipse and the 4m Esprit, Tennant designed another production fibreglass boat, the Northern 11. Whangarei boatbuilder Eric Knight made a huge investment in the production moulds of the Northern 11 and the first example was launched just days before the 1987 sharemarket crash. Sadly, the crash sunk the project and the moulds of this excellent design were sold to Australia.

Tennant was also involved with two smaller production catamarans, the 3m Eclipse and the 4m Esprit. He also designed trailer sailer catamarans, various trimarans, as well as a comprehensive range of bridgedeck cruising catamarans.

Whilst better known for his catamarans, Tennant designed many trimarans, including the 12.2m *Wild Thing*. Designed in 1983, the *Wild Thing* was among the first boats built in strip plank cedar/GRP composite. Featuring extra long outer floats for longitudinal stability

whilst reaching, *Wild Thing* and her sisters were extremely fast in flat water.

Around the same time, Tennant started developing his ideas on power catamarans. His starting point was the motor sailer *Cordova*, capable of 18-20kts under power and more under sail. To prevent the stern squatting at speed under power, Tennant put aft bustle on *Cordova*, but this proved difficult to build.

Tennant then developed the canoe stern (CS) catamaran; a double-ended hull underwater, with the aft end supported by a flattened area just below the waterline. Combined with a fine entry and round bilges, the CS hullform was low resistance, with minimal wake characteristics. Used for both recreational and commercial power catamarans, Tennant's CS hullform enabled his catamarans to perform at higher than displacement speeds with excellent fuel efficiency – usually mutually exclusive bedfellows.

The CS hull form was not only highly suitable for commercial ferries and the like, but also for privately owned medium

sized (17-22m) offshore cruising powercats. Tennant's CS offshore catamarans could comfortably cruise 3000-5000nm between fuel stops.

The CS hullform offered excellent fuel efficiency even for local gulf cruising. For example, Douglas and Tennant collaborated on the 13.75 powercat, *Escape*. With twin 210hp diesels, *Escape* could travel at 19/20kts using only 40 litres per hour. Tennant's pioneering design work in the CS area has since been widely copied by other designers worldwide.

During the latter part of his career, Tennant employed draftsmen to help out; the most recent being Tony Stanton, who joined Tennant fresh from obtaining a mechanical engineering degree. Stanton brought a solid theoretical understanding in composite construction to Tennant's largely self-taught, experiential know how.

With his boatbuilding background, Tennant was always seeking methods for his clients to own bigger, easier to build boats. He was a pioneer in the use of CAD yacht design, which was a natural fit with flat panel construction. This enabled builders to fabricate much of the boat to a gel-coat finish on a laminating table, a big saving in time and energy. While many Tennant designs were less rounded than offerings from some other designers, they were often considerably quicker and easier to build.

Tennant produced nearly 300 designs and had over 2500 boats to his design launched. He was well known in multihull circles overseas, where he tended to receive more recognition than in his own country. Over the years he was invited to attend various Multihull Symposiums in USA, Europe, New Zealand and Asia. Had he emulated Bruce Farr and moved to Europe or the USA, he could easily have been more successful. However, Tennant remained content with his life in New Zealand.

Tennant worked from an upstairs room in his Titirangi house with wide views overlooking the Manakau Harbour. He



Energizer – a Tennant Crazy Horse design.



and Justine moved to Titirangi in the late 1990s and spent considerable time renovating and improving the family home. Highly intelligent and well read, Tennant was vitally interested in cars, architecture, sculpture and the arts.

As well as all his cerebral interests, Tennant enjoyed gardening, which ironically and sadly proved his undoing. In May 2008 and aged 69, he suffered a fall whilst gardening and died a few hours later. He's survived by wife Justine, sons Andrew and Adam, and grandchild Jonathon.

When he died Tennant had several projects on the drawing board, some of them quite large. Luckily, Stanton was able to step in and complete those projects. Stanton has since taken over management of Tennant's design portfolio and continues to receive enquiries for the plans.

Tennant began his design career when multihulls were fringe boats. Like other pioneer multihull designers, Tennant lived to see the fringe movement become acceptable, then mainstream. The explosion in multihull development over the past two decades owes more than a nod to Tennant's work, specifically in two areas – the open bridgedeck catamaran and the canoe sterned powercat.

The late Malcolm Tennant – another of our gifted indigenous yacht designers who never really received the recognition to which he was due.

The GBE U2 racing in the Coastal Classic. (pic courtesy www.afaphoto.co.nz)

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