

## At Association Island

# Surprises at U.S. Olympic Trials,

BY JUDY LAWSON

A 12-man and boy corps d'elite of America's presently hottest small boat sailors is Kingston-bound this month (the yachting games of the twenty-first Olympiad are July 19-27, at Kingston, Ontario), bent on capturing the elusive gold, silver and bronze medals

which define the classic pinnacle of excellence in sailboat racing.

They are young (average age 28), hard-muscled, formidably armed with the finest equipment and dedicated to their sport with an intensity far beyond the grasp of any who view sail racing as a

casual afternoon's fling 'round the buoys, eased by cold beer and tanning oil.

They were selected in an exacting 7-race, week-long Olympics trials series at the United States Sailing Center, Association Island, N.Y., last month. For the first time, all of the 6 Olympic classes gathered in one venue and ran their races simultaneously, under the aegis of the U.S. Olympic Yachting Committee and under rules and conditions identical to those of the Games, on courses a handful of miles from the Olympic site.

It was all extremely businesslike, freighted with high seriousness, and lightened only by the whimsically awful conditions of life ashore, conditions which the polite call "primitive."

Quantities of rain soaked the already spongy grounds, creating a vast inner bog through which participants slogged on the daily shuttle between cabins and boat park. With the bog came the bugs, then the spiders, frogs, snakes, and, some said, alligators. Mainly light breezes lent little relief on the water. Tensions never dissipated. There were no class parties, neither opening nor closing ceremonies, nothing to dignify the importance of this most special competition to which 304 men and women brought the results of years of sweat, times, energy and dollars.

The trends and emphases in American and Olympic class racing were very sharp. Partly an effect of the early dates of these trials, the advantage of

warm water, year-round sailors from California, Hawaii, Texas and Florida was clearer than ever. The success of a full-time training program -- many competitors had hung "gone sailing" shingles on school and office doors for 6 months or more -- was dramatic.

On balance it was a clean trials, with not too many protests, a week of rapid and astonishing changes on the scorecard, a regatta slighted by wind and sea and unfortunately devoid of any heavy air test. It was also a harsh lesson in losing for the

many who in their striving perhaps had become unable to foresee that they just might *not* win the coveted berth.

U.S. medal prospects look to be good or excellent in the Soling, Tempest and Finn classes, but fair-to-middling in 470s, Tornados, and Flying Dutchman. The single consistent certainly about the Olympic yachting contest is the consistent uncertainty of prediction. Hermes, the ancient Greek patron god of athletic contests, was also the protector of cheats, liars, thieves ... and the conductor of souls to Hades.

less than a year after he arrived in the singlehanded class. He was steady and he was brilliant. A race card of 1-dsq-2-7-1-3-3 took the trials by 7.3 points. Commette's dsq was occasioned by a too-early start. He would have won that race but for his forwardness.

A solidly-build, superbly-conditioned Senior at Tufts University, Commette applied the same methodical program to Finn sailing that he first evolved in the Laser. He received a leave of absence from Tufts for the year, sailed almost daily, tuned up against partners in the East, South, Midwest, ran, ate and built

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epoxy-treated wood process Gougeon has made famous. The hulls are said to be considerably stiffer than in other Tornados, although some 17 pounds heavier. The mast is by Sailspar, sails by McKibbin of California. McFaul has

designed and fabricated many of his own fittings. He is a tinkerer, a man-of-many-trades and idiosyncracies. He doesn't sail with a compass, preferring to feel the shifts.

Foremost among the Tornado-whizzers at Kingston

will be England's Reg White and John Osborn, current world champs. White and Osborn are known to practice plenty, as are some of the European competitors in the Olympics' fastest boat. McFaul, who has sunk all his limited means into the new boat, will have had two months to get his act together to meet this formidable contingent. Medal prospects: check your vibes.

**TEMPEST:** Dennis Conner, San Diego, California, and Conn Findlay, Belmont, Calif. Dennis the Menace, the *wunderkind* and golden boy of the 1974 America's Cup, Star class, Congressional Cups, SORCs, etc., etc., sailed an immaculate, conservative series to walk away with the Tempest berth.

And swinging on his wire is none other than one of America's truly great long-playing athletes, Conn Findlay. Findlay has been to no less than three Olympics, winning two gold and one bronze medals. All were in rowing, coxed pairs. Findlay's other noteworthy contribution is to up the average age of the sailing squad. He just celebrated his 50th birthday.

As usual, Conner's program left no stone unturned. He purchased two Mader-built Tempests and invited top class crews to his home base in San Diego for tune-ups. His sail inventory includes selections

from North, Dyson, Elvstrom and Fogh, the spars are by Proctor, the equipment innovative and refined.

Assured of his boat speed in the light airs of the trials, Conner intended to work chiefly on speed in fresh airs in the period before the Games begin. He will be tuned up by old rival Argyle Campbell, who was trials runnerup, and has arranged to borrow Don Cohan's Tempest. Not a man to write off those he defeats, Conner watched Cohan's erratic bursts of speed and concluded the Dragon bronze medalist's boat was possibly faster than his own. Cohan placed 13th in the trials.

Conner is a cool and cagey competitor. He has been to Europe, racing in the Tempest Europeans, and knows what he must do to win. Despite the "green" status of Conner and Findlay within the Tempest ranks, their medal chances are favorable.

**SOLING:** John Kolius, and Richard Hoepfner, Seabrook, Texas, and Walter Glasgow, Kemah, Texas. No one, but no one, would have thunk it. Kolius and Company defeated none other than Buddy Melges, the gold medalist at Kiel and the odds-on favorite to repeat in the Olympic trials and the Games themselves. Plus Lowell North (middleman for Robbie Haines), world titlist Bill Buchan, Dave Curtis, Stuart Walker, *et. al.*

Among all the classes, the Soling's selection series was the tightest. The young Texas crew's ultimate victory hung on the slender thread of a dramatic slant in the second weather leg of the last race. Kolius, who led on points, but not by much, lay second from last. Melges was first. Then, an act of nature, the fortunes of position, Kolius came home third, Melges sixth.

Withall, *Good News*, Kolius' Abbott-built Soling, piled up a convincing tally -- two firsts, two seconds, the crucial third, and a pair of fifths. The end result was no fluke.

John Kolius, although just 25 years old has bagged a lot of important titles. He has won the Sears and Mallory Cups, and was a Soling North American champ in 1974. A mustache and dark glasses mark his personal style. Hoepfner, 31, and Glasgow, 19, have been on Kolius' team quite awhile. Their rather punishing program began in January. A little physical training, and a lot of time in the boat -- five days a week -- some of it tuning against rivals from both America and other countries, who were invited to touchdown at the home base of Texas Corinthian Yacht Club whenever they could.

Financially, Kolius, a sailmaker with the Bludworth loft in Houston, has been helped along by the Texas International Sailing

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Association. Nonetheless, he says he is "in hock over my ears." "If there were still a debtors' prison, I'd be in it." A competitive Soling, costing upwards of \$10,000, would seem to limit the class to the well-to-do. Kolius proves otherwise.

In Canada, *Good News*, number 655, will be flying Melges mains and jibs and

Kolius own-make spinnakers. The medal hopes of any American Soling crew that might have won the trials are unreservedly excellent. Kolius foresees Australia's Dave Forbes, West Germany's Willie Kuwheide and Canada's Glen Dexter as the main force. Then he adds, "We'd better not lose or Melges will cut my ears off!"