



The Peter Lester Story

Photos courtesy
Peter Lester and **John Macfarlane**

Peter Lester is one of the country's most recognisable yachting commentators. His style, observations and insights are founded on a rich and varied sailing background featuring plenty of competition.

A 10-knot SW ruffles the sea off Takapuna Beach as 66 OK dinghies jockey around the committee boat. The starting gun signals the last of the seven race series to decide the 1977 OK Dinghy Worlds.

As one of four sailors in contention for a series win, Peter Lester feels the pressure; one mistake and its over. He responds as champions do and leads the fleet off the line. Lighter than many of his competitors, he struggles to hold his OK upright in a building breeze but hangs on to finish fourth, enough to give him the series by one point. It's only the second monotype World title won by a New Zealand sailor.

"My earliest sailing memory is in a Z Class with someone from the Canterbury Yacht and Motorboat Club, before my grandfather gave me an old P Class," says Lester.

It's a long path from sailing an elderly P Class dinghy on a blustery Lyttelton harbour, where Lester learned to sail, to winning a world championship and like many journeys of this nature it didn't happen without the support of a great number of people.

First was his father Gordon, an engineer with local company Sinclair Melbourne who built many of Lester's boats, including the P Class in which he twice won the Canterbury P Class trials for the Tanner Cup, and a Starling, the first built in Canterbury.

Then there was Brett de Thier, Graham and his brother the late Peter Mander, and fellow members of the Christchurch Yacht Club, who all helped Lester refine his sailing and racing skills on the Christchurch Estuary and Sumner Bar.

Auckland OK sailors helped too: Harold Bennett, who loaned

Lester with his P Class
 at the 1970 Tanner
 Cup, Auckland





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Lester at the 1977 OK Worlds, Auckland; at the 1975 OK Worlds Helsinki, Sweden; and the 1978 Finn Pre-Olympic Regatta, Tallinn, Estonia.

Lester an OK dinghy and a bed when he was in Auckland, and the late Clive Roberts and Alf Locke. But the biggest help Lester received was from an unlikely quarter – the Lyttelton Waterfront Union – which supported him financially for two years.

That support came about when Lester, then aged 18, finished second in the Laser Nationals to Barry Thom, and consequently qualified for the 1974 Laser Worlds in Bermuda. But his then employer, Christchurch clothing manufacturer Lane Walker Rudkin, refused to give him time off and, hearing about this, the Union raised the funds for Lester to go.

While Lester was technically working on the wharf, it was understood he was free to train and attend regattas whenever necessary. He also received financial support from Ashley Meats, a company owned by Cyril Stevens.

“Looking back, I would have been the first professional yachtsman in New Zealand by a country mile,” says Lester. That same year he won the under-19 OK Nationals, which also qualified him for the OK Worlds in Adelaide, where he finished top junior and a credible eighth overall.

The next year Lester competed in the OK Worlds in Finland where he finished second. When Lester moved to Auckland in 1976, the Lyttelton Union persuaded its Auckland branch to

continue the financial support for another five years.

Lester won the 1977 OK Worlds win as described in the opening paragraphs. Incidentally, he credits a suggestion from John Douglas, while at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, to bring back an experimental Finn mast built by Needlespar in the UK as one of the keys in that 1977 win. This Finn mast was modified to suit an OK dinghy. Another key was his Alf Locke designed Mk2 hull. Subsequently he also won the 1977 New Zealand Yachtsman of the Year.

Having attended the 1976 Olympics in Ontario as a reserve for the sailing team, Lester next set his sights on competing in the Finn in the 1980 Olympics to be held in Russia. Having won the New Zealand Pre-Olympic trials, and placed first and third in two pre-Olympic European regattas, Lester felt on track for Olympic success, but was bitterly disappointed when New Zealand joined the USA-led boycott of the Russian event over its invasion of Afghanistan.

“I was gutted, and I gave it [Olympics] away after this.”

Auckland keelboat owners hadn't been slow in recognising Lester's abilities and one of his first invitations of note was to join Graeme Woodroffe's Mr Jumba campaign for the 1977 One Ton Cup (OTC), where they finished second.



LEFT: Lester enjoying the spoils in 1993 – an AC replica, Admirals Cup and One Ton Cup. ABOVE: Lester with son Paul in Captain's chair on the aircraft carrier *Ranger*, San Diego 1995; BELOW: Lester in his Finn, Pre-Olympic regatta, Helsinki. 1978.

Lester was a trimmer on *Wee Willie Winkie* in the 1981 Admirals Cup, and *Epic* in the 1984 Admirals Cup. He then joined Del Hogg's *Pacific Sundance* and *Dollar Equity* campaigns, helming the latter to win the prestigious Kenwood Cup in Hawaii in 1986.

The following year he helmed Bevan Woolley's *Propaganda* which, along with *Goldcorp* and *Kiwi*, made up the three-boat New Zealand team for the 1987 Admirals Cup in Cowes, England. In what was New Zealand's fifth attempt they convincingly won the Admirals Cup, with *Propaganda* winning top individual boat in the Cup and the best IOR performance in the 1987 season.

"We were really fast, and that win opened doors for me." The door that mattered was being invited to join Michael Fay's Big Boat Challenge for the 1988 Americas Cup (AC) as tactician.

"Although that campaign against Conner's catamaran was messy, as a sailor it was just fantastic." There Lester worked with Laurent Esquier, who more than anyone had instilled a sense of professionalism into the Kiwi AC sailors. "The talent had always been there but the discipline probably wasn't. Laurent changed that."

The following year Lester joined the Bengal Bay Challenge to help lift its skills for a possible future Japanese AC campaign. With a Japanese crew augmented by Kiwis, Lester skippered *Tiger* to top boat in the 1990 Kenwood Cup, helping Japan win the team event for the first time.

The New Zealand Challenge team didn't require Lester for the 1992 AC in San Diego, so he joined the Spanish AC Team as coach. After they were eliminated from the Louis Vuitton Cup (LVC) Lester was engaged by Television New Zealand (TVNZ) as a commentator for the remainder of the LVC and the AC. Since then he's commentated for TVNZ at the 1995, 2000, 2003, 2010 and 2013 AC regattas.

He's also commentated for ACTV-TWI for the 2007 AC in Valencia and for BMW Oracle during its two-nil drubbing of Alinghi in the 2010 AC. Lester's now widely regarded as one of the most knowledgeable AC commentators.

More about Lester's competitive sailing history: in 1993 German industrialist Willi Illbruck invited Lester to join his Judel/Vrolik *Pinta* campaign, initially as tactician and later as skipper.

However the OTC rules required the helmsperson be a national of the boat, so instead of changing helmsman, Illbruck offered Lester a peppercorn charter of *Pinta*, enabled Lester to enter the OTC for the RNZYS as helmsman.

Pinta went on to win the 1993 One Ton Cup under a New Zealand flag; then reverted to a German flag and team for the 1993 Admirals Cup, which they also won. This achieved Illbruck's goal of winning the OTC and Admirals Cup in one calendar year. Lester enjoyed sailing with the Germans, but found them hard taskmasters. "When it [the campaign] was over, it was over."



Lester then joined Chris Dickson's Tag Heuer Team for the 1995 AC San Diego as tactician and part of the management team. "We had some really good people involved, almost the Team New Zealand B team, but we had budget issues and the boat had the wrong bow shape."

Late in 1995 Lester was recruited by the then New Zealand Yachting Federation, later Yachting New Zealand (YNZ) to establish and run a High Performance Programme targeting the Olympics.

In 1996 and 2001 he was Head Coach for the New Zealand Olympic sailing team for Atlanta and Sydney respectively, then in 2002 he was appointed YNZ Team Manager for the Athens pre-Olympic test regatta, helping set up the sailing facilities for the New Zealand team for 2004 Athens Olympics.

Meantime, Lester was sailing as a tactician, helmsman and skipper for one of Turkey's eminent industrialists in various yachting campaigns in the Mediterranean. Under Lester's direction, this team won the Aegean Cup three times – 2003, 2004 and 2005.

In 2007 Lester was appointed Head Sailing Coach of the Aspire Sports Academy in Doha, helping introduce competitive sailing



Peter Lester, one of the most respected AC commentators of the modern era.

for the local youth. Despite their inexperience, two of Lester's students qualified for the 2007 Laser 4.7 Worlds, one finishing a very creditable 12th in a 320-strong fleet. But Lester's wife Susie struggled to adapt to living in Qatar and he resigned from the position in 2009.

Reflecting on his yachting career, while Lester's certainly proud of what he's achieved he's more proud of the fact that he's maintained his marriage and family life. He and Susie have three grown sons, all of whom are well-settled in their own careers.

"I don't think it's healthy to have your family immersed in yachting because some of it isn't that nice. You just have to look at some of the guys on the circuit – their personal lives are a disaster."

In the last few years Lester has reduced his workload, picking the contracts and jobs that really interest him.

These have included commentating for the World Sailing Teams Association (WSTA) for the 2010-2011 LVC, for IMG for the Volvo Ocean Race, for the Olympic Broadcast Service (OBS) in the 2012 Olympics and also for OC Sports for Asian Pacific legs of The Extreme Sailing Series. For the 2014/15 VOR he was asked by ATEED to be a member of the LOC for the Auckland stopover. He'll also be commentating for the OBS at the 2016 Olympics in Rio.

Meantime, Lester's returned to grassroots and is back into OK dinghies. He built one of the new kitset plywood OK dinghies, which he races in the Golden Oldie division at Wakatere Boating Club.

"It's all gone full circle. I'm back where it all started years ago. And it's great. No crew, virtually no budget, just rock up and go sailing – that's what its all about. I'm really enjoying it."

Peter Lester, another world class Cantabrian sailor who's done a power of good for New Zealand sailing. ☐

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