

History of the Ensign Class

by Gerald Daly (1990)

In 1990, the January issue of *Sail* contained a special tribute to those boats considered by the editors to be the most significant of the previous two decades. Of the 34 boats chosen, one, a full-keeled day sailer with soft lines and lots of wetted surface, seemed completely out of place. It looked too ordinary, too sensible for this group of sailing rockets. That boat was the Ensign.

How did the stodgy old Ensign make it into this company of Solings, 470s, windsurfers, cats, catamarans, and other sailing machines chosen for their influence on future yacht designs? For a reason that seemed forgotten in all the other choices . . . although the Ensign is an exciting one-design, still raced after thirty years, it is comfortable and forgiving enough for daysailing or even a weekend cruise.

That one boat can both race and be daysailed is not unusual. The remarkable thing about the Ensign is how well it carries out both its intended purposes. You can take your grandmother or a group of small kids out for a picnic sail on Saturday, and race around the buoys Sunday. Indeed, about two-thirds of the more than 1780 Ensigns that have been built are used solely for daysailing. But the other third enjoy spirited racing in some 40 fleets ranging from Maine to Colorado, and from Lake Superior to Galveston Bay and Florida waters.

Today, thirty years after the first boat was built, Ensigns are the largest class by far of full-keeled, one-design sailboats in the United States.

The 22.5-foot, fiberglass sloop was first built by Pearson Yachts in 1962, as the Electra Day sailer, and as may be guessed from the name, was really a re-design of an earlier boat. In 1959, Pearson commissioned naval architect Carl Alberg to design a 22-foot cruiser suitable for racing in the Midget Ocean Racing Club (MORC). His design, called the Electra, had a masthead rig, a small, self-bailing cockpit, and a cabin with galley space, a head and bunks. About 350 Electras were built over the next six years.

But Pearson dealers, notably John Nichols and his colleague Osman Robinson of the Nichols Yacht Yard in Mamaroneck, New York, found that many prospective Electra buyers would prefer the boat with a larger cockpit and smaller cabin. They passed the information along to Pearson, who subsequently asked Alberg to design a day sailer, suitable for one-design racing, based on the Electra hull.

“I felt the idea to be quite feasible since the Electra’s displacement was quite light, and the day sailers would be even lighter,” Alberg wrote in the 1975 Ensign Newsletter. “We determined that a large cockpit would be essential both for racing and day sailing, as would a small cuddy for locking up sails and gear.”

“For the benefit of newcomers and less experienced sailors,” he continued, “we made the rig simple and easy to handle. I moved the mast six inches forward, increased the area of the mainsail, and reduced the height of the fore triangle.”

The Electra Day sailer seemed a popular boat from the start: Pearson sold 219 of them in 1962, their first year, despite only one racing fleet having been formed that year. (Fleet #1, about thirty boats, is out of Larchmont, New York, and is still one of the largest Ensign fleets in the country.)

The next year saw 213 more boats built and nine more fleets formed - in Houston, Texas; Hingham, Massachusetts; Providence, Rhode Island; Huntington and Port Washington, New York, Miami, Florida; Gibson Island, Maryland; and Falmouth, Maine. Among the first Pearson dealers to take on the new boat was Rufus G. Smith of Houston. He bought Ensign number 5 himself, named her Spun Sugar, and raced her through the mid-seventies.

Over the years, a total of 66 fleets were formed. Fleets grew on the coasts, lakes and rivers, even on reservoirs. They showed up in the places you would expect, such as the West Coast, the Great Lakes, and all down the East Coast. But fleets also formed in places you might not consider keel-boat waters; places like The Dillon Reservoir in Colorado, nearly 9000 feet above sea level; the Finger Lakes; and Lake Winnepesaukee. Not all of these fleets have endured, but the active roster has held steady at about forty fleets over the past decade. Every year, one or two will become inactive, but every year others (sometimes old fleets reviving) will take their place.

Where Ensigns are raced, however, gives only a limited idea of where the boats are sailed. An analysis on the complete boat roster in 1976 (then 1,605 boats) showed Ensign owners in 41 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, Canada, and one each in France and Germany. The last known owner of every Ensign is recorded (as is what happened to those boats known to have been lost) in the class association's yearbook.

The class association is largely responsible for the Ensign remaining a simple boat. It has been an active group from the start. "I guess the real founder of the class was Gene Reichert," recalled John M. O'Connell, a Pearson dealer from New Hampshire and 1964 Ensign National Champion. "Reichert got the list of Electra Day sailers from Johnny Nichols, and invited the other owners to his home in Rye, New York. We had a lot of hassles about the rules, some of them interminable. In general, we tried to keep the family boating advantages of the craft, while at the same time ensuring the quality of racing. At the same meeting it came up that nearly everyone hated the name Electra Day sailer which, we felt, made distinguishing us from the Electras difficult. We came up with the name Ensign . . ."

Ensign class officers have tried from the beginning to uphold the two objectives of the association: "to promote and develop Ensign Class racing and maintain rigidly the One-Design feature of the Ensign; to promote the use of the Ensign as a family boat for recreational sailing." Efforts have, however, really focused almost exclusively on racing, and mostly on one-design considerations. Changes from the original Alberg design have crept in, but only very, very slowly, often after years of debate. Mainsheet travelers, not in the original design, were allowed. Removing heads, which were part of the original mandatory equipment, and fairing the hull outlets was finally permitted. Fairing the rudder post brackets was approved after it was discovered that many owners did it anyway. The same response was made when the class discovered that many Great Lakes sailors, particularly on Lake Erie, were dealing with the "square waves" problem of shallow water by installing electric bilge pumps.

Year after year, the Governing Committee has turned down requests for geared winches, barber haulers, internal halyards, halyards led through the cabin top, boom preventers, and a long list of other go-fast items and modifications. This conservative attitude has driven many aggressive racers out of the class - into Etchells 22s, Solings, and other racing machines. But it also accounts for the enduring vitality of the Ensign. Owners needn't fear expensive, obsolescence-causing rule changes, and they don't have to be string-pulling, athletic wizards to keep the boat on her feet and going.

It also helps the boats hold their value, and used Ensigns are comparatively hard to come by. A well equipped, used boat in good condition - when you can find one for sale - costs between \$3,500 and \$12,000. A brand new Ensign (Pearson sold 20 in 1981) can run upwards of \$13,000 fully clipped for racing, and close to \$17,000 if loaded with every last option. Ensigns have been good investments for their owners.

And old boats win. Charles R. Sligh III, of Holland, Michigan, has twice won the Great Lakes Ensign Championship sailing Sea III, Ensign number 3. John Calimafde, of Old Greenwich, Connecticut, is a perennial winner in his fleet and

regional regattas in Ya ‘ssoo. Ensign number 101, and has placed in the top five at the national championships seven times. Sligh and Calimafde are among the many Ensign sailors who haul their boats to regattas on trailers. Doing that is not easy. It takes a staunch trailer, a larger car or small truck, and plenty of common sense, but it is done frequently and successfully.

Sailing the Ensign to its potential does not require any techniques that are peculiar to the boat. But it does have to be sailed for what it is, “basically a little big boat,” according to Clark Thompson, Jr. the first person to win the nationals twice in two successive years. “It is heavy and requires time to reach full speed. Accordingly, it carries a great deal of headway. These and other similar characteristics,” he continues, “result in two primary objectives when racing: keep it flat and keep it moving.”

Despite its weight, Thompson says, “the Ensign, when rigged with its big, overlapping Genoa and large spinnaker, becomes a responsive and enjoyable racer. Though you’ll never see an Ensign planing around the buoys, its design and racing characteristics keep the racing close. More than any other popular keel boat, the Ensign emphasizes handling and tactics, rather than flat-out boat speed.”