

Sea Spray Dec/Jan '72-3



DESIGNERS IN PROFILE No 2:

JOHN SPENCER

by DAVID PARDON

IT WAS MY first Anniversary Regatta. Bright sunshine sparkled off the Waitemata and a stiff breeze was enough to lay even the keeler fleet on its ears. We sat in the middle of the harbour in a runabout while someone pointed out the big names of the fleet . . . *Ranger*, *Ariki*, *Kahurangi*, *Ta'Aroa*.

Suddenly a shape sliced past our stern. Ten feet away, low, sleek, black. Crew flat on the windward rail. A swish of water and a violin note of wind through the rigging. She was the most thrilling sight I'd seen on water. She was — and to me still is — the most beautiful yacht yet made. She was *Infidel*.

Some Squadron buffs called her the Black Box. It was meant to be derogatory, though her designer argues that the name came from Doug Bremner, who was being far from insulting. Black Box was a wartime air force nickname for any hush-hush device or secret weapon designed to shock the opposition.

December, 1972 / January, 1973

Certainly *Infidel* did just that — and, as the renamed *Ragtime*, is still doing it on the Californian racing scene.

"Tom Clark never suggested to me that we build a boat to clean up *Ranger*. When it was finally suggested by someone else, Tom, much to my horror, said he was confident she would. I said 'Oh, yes . . . well, let's wait and see'. I felt myself she would, but I didn't like agreeing with them until I'd actually seen it."

John Spencer, designer, boatbuilder, the Browns Bay Plywood King, is like that. He knows damn well his ideas are going to work but won't say so until they actually do. A frustrating man to interview; eloquent, yes . . . but modest to the point of vagueness. It's hard to imagine that you are talking to one of the most brilliant designers on the yachting scene, an ingenious mind that can push a sailboat through water fast

yet at considerably less expense than practically any other man in the game. He seems to want you to believe that he just picks up an offcut of wood and whittles away with a knife until something emerges which floats upright and has a sharp end and a blunt end.

Which is more or less where it all began.

"I hate to admit it, but I was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1930, although my parents, who had originally met and married in New Zealand, at least had the good grace to get me over to New Zealand by the time I was four," he says, when you finally manage to steer him to the subject of John Spencer.

Primary school and Wellington College took him to the age of 14, by which time he'd already started yachting at Evans Bay Yacht Club, where, after waiting some time, he acquired one of the club's P class. Even at this stage, however, he was keen on designing yachts as much as on sailing them.

"We lived at Roseneath and the area was mostly retired people; not many of my age. What few there were tended to stick together . . . Dave Catchpole, Bill Yates, Bill McQueen and myself were all the same age and all at Wellington College. The other three were all mad about yachting, so naturally I got in with them. We used to hang around Craft Construction Ltd at Balena Bay. Occasionally Athol Burns would give us a piece of wood and we'd build a model yacht from it.

"One day Athol saw me with one of these models and it must have impressed him because he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, took me up to his loft, stuck a pencil in my hand, gave me the back of an old plan or something, and told me to draw the lines. He sat down with me and wouldn't let me go home until I'd drawn the lines, worked out the displacement, the centre of buoyancy and all that sort of thing.

"I've read a great many books and other material on design, but I reckon I learned more in that one day with Athol Burns than from all the rest put together, though later I was influenced, too, by the late Bert Woollacott. Both men taught me to think and to do my own thing."

Spencer began sailing in Wellington in the P class, along with Hal Wagstaff, Graham Hargraves, Bill Yates and several others. Then the Spencers moved to Tauranga, where John sailed for a hand on a Z. A year later the family moved on to Rotorua where John spent his last two years at school, completed the eight-footer he'd begun to build in Tauranga, and crewed racing in an Idle Along.

Two careers en route

Even after many hours talking with Spencer, copious tapes of conversations ranging over pretty well every yacht and designer on the New Zealand scene, you're left with the conclusion that Athol Burns, more than anyone else, influenced him into the decision to set up on his own as a designer and boatbuilder.

But it wasn't easy and though he designed and built the eight-footer, sheer economic necessity deflected him into alternative careers en route to Brown's Bay, *Buccaneer* and all that.

After 3½ years with Auckland Education Board architect's department and a further six months with Edward Pipe and Associates in Rotorua, boats got the better of him and he returned to Auckland with the intention of setting up as a boatbuilder.

Having designed and built a hard-chine International 14 while in Rotorua, summer weather, Brown's Bay beach and the Hauraki Gulf looked just too good. Four months living on the beach, swimming and sailing the 14 saw his small savings somewhat depleted and the offer of a job designing dies for Alex Harvey Industries seemed the best means of righting the situation. Six months later he opened his boatbuilding and designing business in Devonport and has been in the game ever since.

First major success

He designed the *Cherub* in 1951 while still with Auckland Education Board and this was his first major success.

The fact that he studied architecture at Auckland University, worked as an architect and as an industrial designer, is a common denominator with John Hakker, Hal Wagstaff, Alan Mummery and other top New Zealand designers. It accounts, perhaps, for the mathematical precision and draughtsmanship of a Spencer plan . . . yet Spencer himself

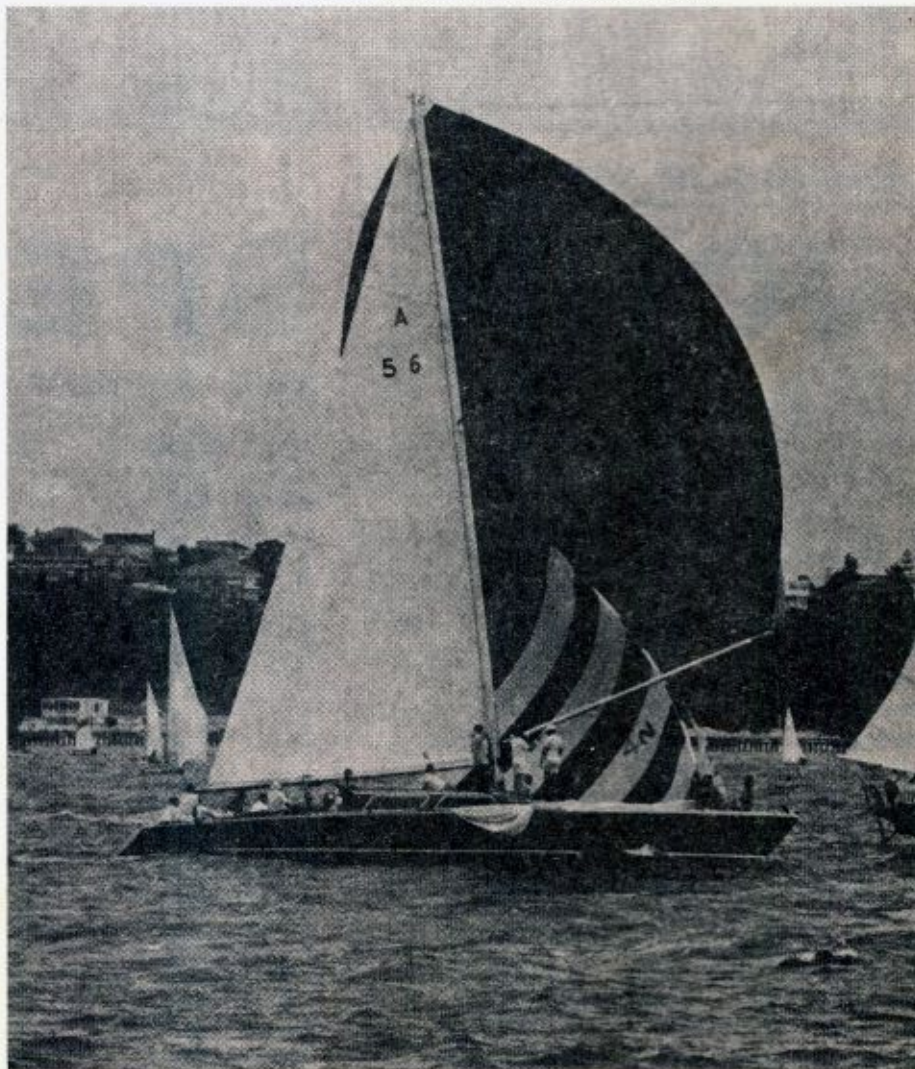
attaches no great importance to this talent.

"Drawing was something I could always do; even the drawings of boats I did at school were neat, if not professional.

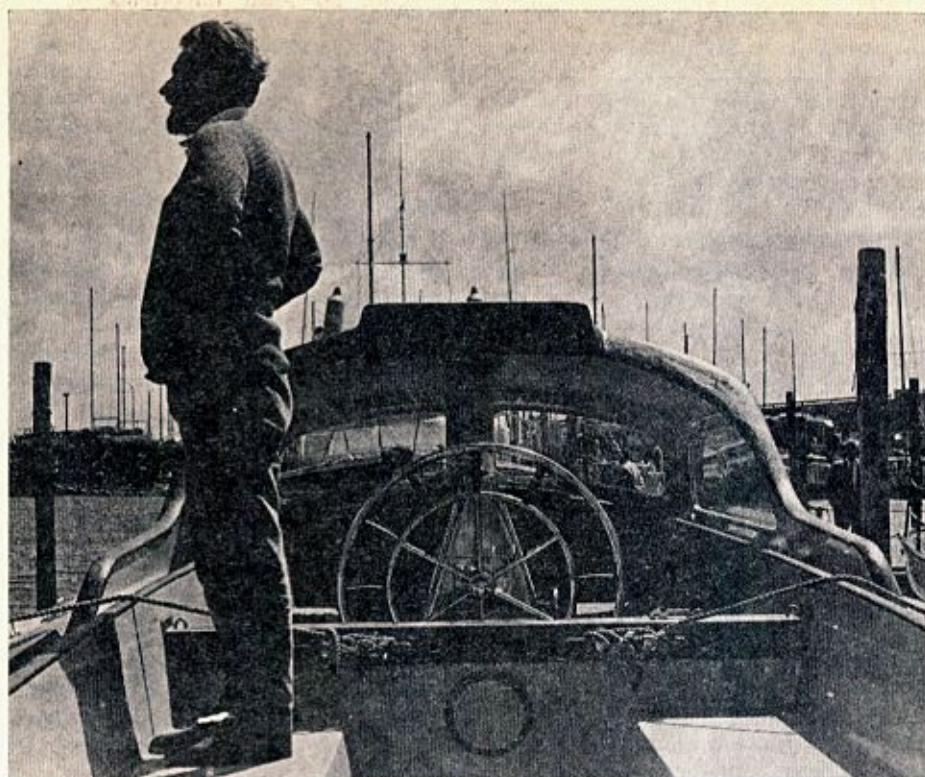
"But take Athol Burns, for instance. So far as I know Athol is a carpenter by training . . . a tradesman first and foremost. His drawings have got a hell of a lot of character. A bit like William Garden, the American designer. He did fantastic drawings — often working drawings — freehand. Some are works of art. In fact I've been trying for a long time to get a good one, have it blown up photographically, and use it as a mural.

"Garden had a reputation for traditional designs . . . you know, schooner rigs, even tops'ls. Then, suddenly, out of the blue about 20 years ago he designed a 60ft motor sailer, *Oceanus*, for himself that was way ahead of its time . . . a light displacement fin keeler, modern as tomorrow, which could sail like a racing yacht yet hold its own with launches under power."

Infidel . . . was, and still is, the most beautiful of all



SEA SPRAY



Spencer on *Buccaneer* . . . Tom Clark got impatient

That word "powerboat" was something I'd steered clear of. I had presumed it to be a dirty word to someone whose reputation is, for me anyway (a New Zealander of eight years) staked on sail, sleek black hulls and the aesthetics of *Saracen*, *Infidel*, *Buccaneer*.

So it comes as a bit of a shock to learn that, for many years when he set up on his own in Devonport and later, after a spell as a boatbuilder with Brin Wilson, at Browns Bay, Spencer earned his living, and reputation, as a powerboat designer.

"I began designing powerboats shortly after Carl Augustin. I remember Jack Stewart coming up to me at the first Auckland Boat Show (October 1961) and saying 'they ought to call it the John Spencer Show'. He reckoned half the runabouts on show were mine, and the rest were Carl Augustin's. But I had the edge because a lot of the yachts were mine, too. Stewart reckoned two-thirds of the boats were mine. That was a bit of an exaggeration, I suppose . . ."

Began with power

Nonetheless, Spencer's success in powerboat designing was the root from which the rest has grown and, as if to prove the point, he suggests I refer to the last Atlantic 100 (April 1972) . . . where, to my shame, I had overlooked the fact that Alf Pinker's performance winner *Debonair* was a Spencer design. Not only that, but *Debonair* also won prizes for the first 4-stroke petrol, the December, 1972 / January, 1973

4-stroke performance award, 4-stroke economy award, a prize for least fuel used and the R. G. Brunton prize for the designer of the performance winner ("Haven't you seen my cup?" says a wounded Spencer . . . "the only decent cup I've won in my life").

Alf Pinker's next boat is a 39-footer . . . designed by John Spencer.

"I got out of powerboats because they were costing too much time that I preferred to spend designing yachts," says Spencer. "People who bought stock plans would inundate me with questions about engines, modifications and so on."

"In the old days I'd be full up with powerboats and yachtsmen would come along for a boat or a design and get all impatient because I couldn't find the time. I used to keep three months of the year for building Cherubs, Javelins and things and the rest of the time I'd be on powerboats."

"Then suddenly things changed. Yachtsmen started wanting keelboats; they were prepared to wait a reasonable time and I began to get snowed under with yachts. So the powerboats more or less ceased to be. I still design the odd one — like Alf Pinker's 39-footer — but I haven't built one since shortly after I finished *Infidel* in 1965."

Two other designs had established Spencer nationally and internationally on the yachting scene . . . the Cherub (1951) and Javelin (1959). "I designed the Javelin and everyone got excited, keen

as mustard. There were meetings . . . Helmer Pedersen started talking Javelins, all sorts of people. Then it was Olympic time again and all everyone could think about was Dutchmen and things."

"I let it go for a while. Then I said to myself, oh to hell with 'em. I built one, John Burns stuck it in their window and everyone was mad keen again."

"I got talked into selling the hull, built another for the next season and this was *Hue and Cry*, in which Graham Phipps and I (20 stone total weight) were second to Bruce Wiseman in the Auckland championships."

"Also *Infidel* was in the offing and I was getting more and more keen on keelers. The first of my keelboat designs to be built was *Adrienne*; she was built for John Mallitte by Keith Atkinson during the time I was working for Brin Wilson. I'd just started out on my own again at Browns Bay when I designed *Scimitar* (SEA SPRAY, November 1960) for Alan Vause. She was too long for my shed, so Max Carter built her."

The too-small Browns Bay shed was to prove a problem to Spencer. It came to a head when Tom Clark ordered *Saracen*. "Tom had already decided on *Infidel* when he ordered *Saracen*," says Spencer. "*Saracen* was to be a dummy run for him. He'd had to give away car racing and while I was still building *Saracen* he told me that if he decided he liked yachting, it wasn't going to be big enough. He wanted something big because he had a family, lots of friends, and reckoned that a 60-footer to my design was what he could afford."

"There's no such thing as a cheap boat, you know . . . just some that are dearer than others. I had a client the other day, worked out a quotation for him and put it all down on paper. 'Hell', he said, 'that's a lot more than I bargained for'. I said 'I told you it would cost more than \$6000 before we started,' to which he said, 'Sure . . . but I thought you were going to give me mate's rates.'"

"That's the trouble. When it comes to building a boat, everyone is your mate, because while boats are your business, they're his hobby."

Three months drawing

Spencer was 12 months designing and building *Infidel* . . . three months doing nothing else but working at the drawing board. "I had to design literally everything . . . blocks, the lot. It was the same with *Buccaneer* . . . I was designing right up to the day she was finished. I'd told Tom Clark I wanted 12 months start on *Buccaneer*, but he got impatient so I didn't get it!"

Perhaps *Buccaneer*, even more than *Infidel*, confirmed Spencer in the image of the Plywood King. "I didn't set out to be the Plywood King," he says. "All through school I must have designed literally hundreds of keelers, but all conventional heavy cruising boats, and that sort of thing."

"When I came to Auckland I was surprised to find them going through a stage of believing that hard chine boats were slower than round-bilged boats. Later they reversed the thinking, but that was the argument at the time, and I didn't agree. I felt that hard chine was the way to go and plywood, to me, is the obvious material in which to build a hard chine boat. They began labelling me the Plywood King and it seemed like a good thing to latch on to."

DIY is dying

Looking ahead, Spencer believes that the trend is more and more towards buying ready-to-sail boats. "Competitive yachts have reached a stage where amateur building has started to fall by the wayside. People have money, but not time, so they are getting their boats professionally built. Also, we are reaching an age where children have grown up in affluence; they just haven't learned to build their own boats, mend their own cars and so on."

"Of course, busy men DO build boats . . . but they are getting fewer and fewer."

"My future must continue to be in designing and building, but with labour costs so high, and getting higher, I must put the emphasis more and more on stock boats. Wood or glass it doesn't much matter at this stage, though sooner or later glass must take over."

"If I do go into fibreglass, I won't mould my own. I'll use existing moulders and sub-contract. The problem with fibreglass is that you can produce hulls quickly, but you've still got to put the rest together and the accommodation, etc, takes time. Somehow you have to organise things so that the whole thing comes together at the same rate, otherwise you finish up with an enormous operation producing hulls you just can't finish. And then you have expensive moulds and equipment lying around and not being used."

"If and when we go ahead with the 30-footer (SEA SPRAY, August 1972) the mould will probably be made in Adelaide because they've already started on a plug there. We've also got orders for two Three-quarter Tonners in wood and will probably be starting on the first in February. We might do that one in fibreglass, too. The sensible thing to do would be to make the plug, then take two moulds, send one to Australia and keep the other here."

At the moment Spencer's yard in Browns Bay is about to start on the seventh Half Tonner and an eighth is nearing completion in Christchurch. On the design side he has just finished work on a Quarter Tonner . . . "All the design work is complete, but not the draughting."

The combination of designer/builder prompts the obvious question "Which side of your business gives you the most personal satisfaction . . . designing or building?"

"Oh, designing," says Spencer. "I'm only in boatbuilding so that I can design. I haven't actually used a boatbuilding tool myself for two years or more. I didn't do anything on *Buccaneer* . . . in fact, I don't think I have actually worked on a boat myself since before *Buccaneer*."

"I need the boatbuilding side, obviously, but the trouble is that once you start with employees, overheads and so on, you have to go flat out to make it pay and this is difficult if you are short on capital. Unless you are suddenly big enough to take on office staff, typists, etc, it means that you are doing all that sort of thing yourself. This means that you still can't devote sufficient time to straight-out design, and so you get into a sort of vicious circle."

"But I think I'm finally coming right. Just so long as we stick to the smaller stock boats. Big boats are fatal. Somehow they just don't go right. Oh, I'll build Tom Clark's new harbour racer for him . . . somehow."

Spencer's remarks recall my conversations some weeks ago with Dunedin's John Hakker, who was fairly certain that no one in New Zealand could make a living out of yacht designing. Does Spencer think it possible?

"Well, Athol Burns does . . . so does Gerry Breekveldt, but, of course, Gerry is like John Hakker. They are naval architects, trained engineers. They do a lot of commercial work . . . tugs, fishing boats and so on. The rest of us are just pleasure boat designers."

Original thinkers

Other designers Spencer admires — though it doesn't necessarily follow that he admires their work — are Carl Augustin, Bert Woolcott, Van de Stadt and Ian Proctor. "All have been original thinkers," says Spencer, "and they have put a lot of people on the water."

Apart from fibreglass and earlier forays into the powerboat field, Spencer has few flirtations with variations on the yachting theme. Ferro-cement, for instance, just doesn't interest him . . . "too heavy" . . . and although he admits to an interest in multihulls, he says "I've only got so much time, and it's no good

mucking about with these things if you haven't the time to do them properly. That's why I got out of powerboat designing . . . it absorbed too much of the time I needed to spend on keel yachts."

Not a racing machine

Is his reputation, then, stemming more and more from the Javelin, from *Infidel* and *Buccaneer*? Is Spencer confirmed in the mind of the yachting world as the Plywood King, the builder of lightweight flyers? Is speed the preoccupation?

"I don't think any boats of mine were particularly fast, though they went well enough in good hands. *Infidel*, certainly, was a much better set-up boat than *Saracen*. A fantastic amount of effort went into designing *Infidel*, not just on my part but also from Tom and his engineer, Vern Grey."

"After all, what makes a fast racing boat? What makes a cruising boat? Tom Clark used to take *Infidel* on holiday with his wife and kids and a 16-year-old boy as crew, so you can't say she was just a racing machine."

"It's a popular line of bullshit around here that you insist your boat is a cruiser and everybody else has a racing machine. But with our Gulf, everybody wants good accommodation even in a racing machine. The IOR rule is supposed to encourage the cruisers but I haven't noticed it. Most IOR boats are extreme racing machines."

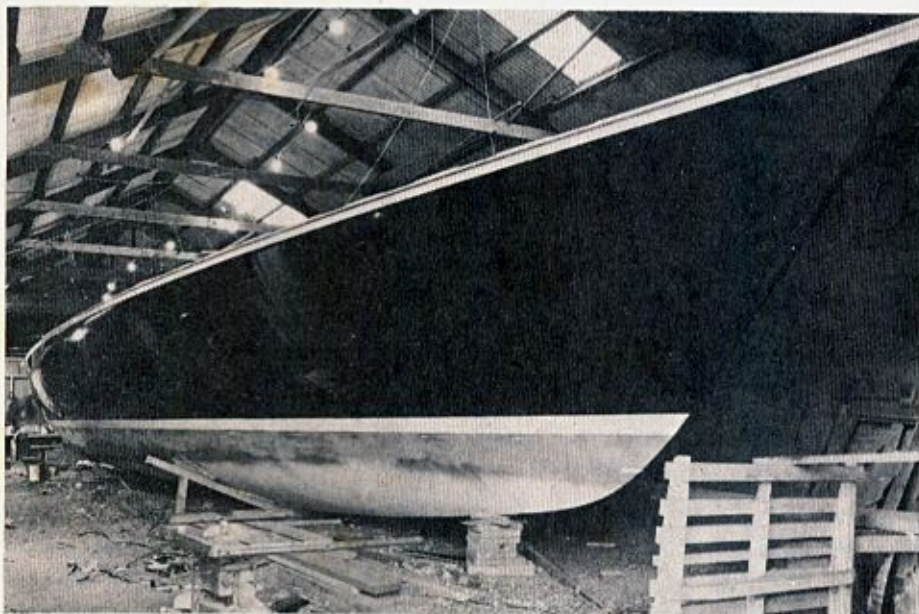
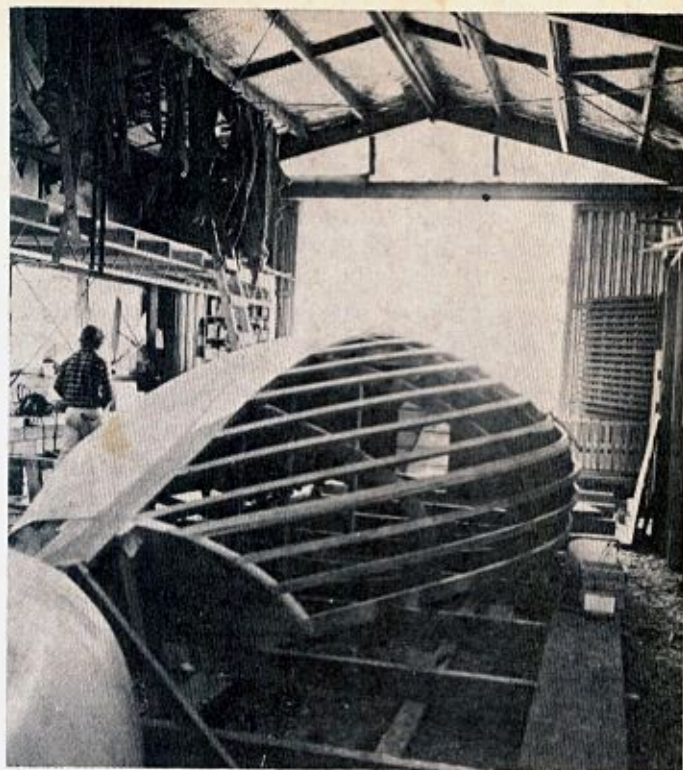
"My 30ft Half Tonner is the first boat I ever designed with any intention of it being a rule boat. The others I had to work out a rating because people overseas kept asking what they rated, so I had to sit down and work it out. You can't just think of a number. But they certainly weren't designed as rating boats . . . except to make sure the sail plan didn't carry any penalties and things like that, of course."

"The Gulf certainly ought to breed cruising boats, but guys want to race their boats, too, so you have to make them fast cruising boats, which means the same as racing boats with good accommodation."

The Half Tonner — and his next project, the 34ft Three-quarter Tonner, occupy all Spencer's thoughts and ideas today. "The Three-quarter Tonner is an ideal size," he says. "About the size of *Morningtown*. Alan Adams and I have been talking about it for a long time . . ."

On the subject of the Ton classes in general, Spencer is eloquent.

"Take the Half Tonners. Most Half Ton designs in New Zealand have ignored everything that has been done overseas . . . particularly in Europe. They're building boats such as have never



Parade of Spencer designs demonstrating the versatility of the Browns Bay designer . . . top left: the sleek, shining hull of Buccaneer nearing completion at Devonport (Spencer's own shed was not long enough for the 73-footer). Above left: the Javelin . . . when the first one appeared in John Burns' window, everyone got excited again

performed well against the top boats. There's nothing here even remotely like a Scampi, yet Scampi is basically similar to an Arpege — one of the most successful Half Tonners before the Scampis — and the Super Challengers, which were also highly successful.

"No Stephens design has really been successful in the Half Ton class. Bruce Banks couldn't do any good in a late design Stephens boat the year before last, but this year he sailed a Scampi and was second, so it obviously wasn't Banks that was at fault.

"Nothing over three tons or much under it has ever looked like winning the Half Ton Cup, and when I worked out the lines and the ratings on this design, starting at 2.7 tons, I found that I had to go to three tons to be satisfied I had enough sail area. Sure, Super Challenger was only 2½ tons, but that was under the RORC rule and you had more show of getting away with it then.

"The Poms, when they were relying on Stephens' boats, used to say 'Ah, wait until there's a breeze'. Then in one challenge they had a 54-mile bash to wind-

ward in a stiff breeze. Sure enough a She 31 rounded the top mark in second place . . . but who was ahead of her? A Super Challenger weighing 2½ tons, and when she got round the mark she just tore away on a reach home.

"They're designing them over-heavy to try and get more sail area and they are starting to build them over lightly. This is what happens when you use ocean racing rules to design harbour racing boats . . . and let's face it, all the Ton cup contests and a large percentage of rating races are held on harbour or

protected water courses. They're breeding light weather machines . . . something that's magnificent in the light and to hell with the rest of the time.

"Time will tell whether this is the fault of the designers or of the rule. I think largely the former. I certainly like the rule, but I think for harbour racing I much prefer the RNZYS method of handicapping.

"You want as much sail area as you can get, but it's no good building a boat that's just a great big clunker so you can get half as much sail area again if that extra sail area won't push it through the water any faster.

"If we're going to have ocean racing rules, then let's use them to go ocean racing. You don't cheat when you're ocean racing because the ocean makes the rules. But in the Ton cups, even in the long race, you get trained gorillas, Dutchman crews and all the rest stacked out over the rail on boats that are supposed to be ocean racers.

"When you get boats designed to a rating rule you can't tie things down. Then if you're going to add a list of compulsory scantlings to a particular class, says the Half Tonners, in which there are boats ranging from 24 tons displacement — which is what *Titus Canby* is — to 4½ tons, which is about what a *Cavalier* is — then obviously it's most unfair to the lighter boat. And you've already been unfair to the lighter boat by insisting that this short, light boat have the same accommodation and headroom as the bigger boats.

"Accommodation has nothing to do with safety, so what it boils down to is that if a 26ft boat that weighs 24 tons requires three berths, a cooker and all the other things, then surely a 32ft boat that weighs 4½ tons ought to have rather more than that? But as it is they're both governed by the same rule.

"And if they bring in scantlings, then, assuming that a 4½ ton boat has a 50% ballast ratio — it certainly wouldn't have more — then the only way you could have a 24 ton boat would be to have no lead at all.

Just about impossible

"For harbour racing, the Ton classes, you're better off to have the whole thing completely open and off handicap like the Squadron races. Or else have restricted or one-design boats. A *Patiki* or a *Cavalier* can provide excellent racing and it is a simple matter to provide a good set of rules to cover just the one class. Trying to cater for a whole varying group of boats that are similar only because they have the same rating is just about impossible.

"At the moment you're getting yachts like Paul Elvstrom's *Bes* (SEA SPRAY, September 1972). There's nothing wrong with *Bes*, nothing against the rules. He had a similar cockpit arrangement to *New World*, except that *New World's* was sufficiently inboard to keep dry. Well, it was OK for Elvstrom to have his crew stacked to windward in those conditions, but if the wind had blown a bit the whole leeward cockpit would have been awash and the crew could not end up anything but jiggered.

Olympic opposition

"**TOR boats are supposed to be ocean racing boats, but no one is going to go out in race after race over long distances and in all conditions in one of these lightweight stripped-out racing boats. It would be just too uncomfortable, they couldn't drive it properly and there'd be a risk of the whole thing falling to pieces.**"

Spencer is equally adamant in his opposition to the inclusion of ocean racing in the Olympics . . . "but then I've always believed that yachting should not be in the Olympics anyway. It's done yachting a lot of harm, concentrating attention on Olympic classes to the detriment of local classes. And not just in New Zealand but all over the world. I don't imagine that this view would receive much support, but Hugh Somerville said the same thing back in about 1940 and I often wonder what he would say now.

"Most of the decisions the IYRU have made over the years have bordered on the ridiculous. Take the Dutchman. The FD was selected as the result of trials held to select an inexpensive, lightweight two-man craft, preferably made from sheet plywood. And the result? They chose the Flying Dutchman . . . one of the most expensive two-man craft it is possible to build. And almost the least successful in the trials. It was easily outtailed by two boats that WERE built from plywood . . . the *Hornet* and the *Osprey*. The *Osprey* was clinker-built from ply and most successful of all the trialists originally.

"Modifications were made to the Dutchman to make it perform better, but they just made it more expensive.

"It's the same with keelboats. It was clearly laid down what size of boat they were looking for . . . and they picked the Soling, which was smaller than the specification.

"And why are they so eager to get the Dragon out when it is still probably the most popular keel boat in the world and sailed by many of the world's best yachtsmen. Sure it's an old design . . . but what's wrong with that?

"Who the hell wants to get rid of the Finns? They're so popular there just isn't any alternative. When the trials came up the only boat that could beat a Finn was a 10 Metre canoe, and they refused to select that because they said it was an old design."

And so one sees this ranging interest of John Spencer. But always, it seems, returning to his favourite subject of the middle-sized keeler, the fast cruiser built for the man who has a limited budget and the urge to race whatever boat he can afford.

"Sure *Buccaneer* and *New World* have brought me a lot of letters from overseas, a lot of enquiries," he says. "But we haven't sold any plans. You just get a lot of guys writing to you when you build boats like these and they take up a lot of time, but they mostly haven't the money.

"I have a man in Japan who looks as though he could be seriously interested in something along the lines of *New World*. But we'll have to see.

"Japan seems to be an awakening market for me. I've just had an order for two *Serendipity* plans and I've been selling quite a few *Cherub* and *Javelin* plans to the Japanese. Yachting is really taking on there."

More arguments . . .

To the question *Sea Spray* is asked every day of the week: how much can the average person today get an average cruiser, say 30 to 35ft, for? Spencer says:

"Whatever I say will be wrong in six months' time. It's virtually impossible to estimate because so many factors are involved. But say, for instance, a family would be happy with a *Stiletto*, well, amateur built, they could put one in the water for around \$2000 to \$2500. But another family wouldn't wear that at all; they'd want full headroom and so on."

And finally, what next for Spencer?

"Well, I must finish the drawings for the Quarter Tonner, then there's the Threequarter Tonner . . . oh, and Geoff Staggs wants me to design a 40-footer for him . . . and we might have a look at . . ."

So it would seem that for all the opposition in the past, Spencer is still in demand — only more so. Perhaps the secret is in the character of a man who never rests on what he has done. Always there is something new, the next design . . . and the next argument.

● Wellington designer Hal Wagstaff is the subject of No 3 in David Pardon's *Designers in Profile* series, in the February issue of *Sea Spray*.

SEA SPRAY