

Viggo Jacobsen & the Optimist Dinghy

An extract from *The Optimist Dinghy 1947-2007*

Robert Wilkes

Europe and beyond: 1954-1970

The immediate future of Clark's design lay in Europe.

In 1954 Danish architect Axel Damgaard [sic] Olsen learned about the design. Unfortunately there is no evidence for the romantic idea that he imported one from Florida on a tall ship. As recorded by his great friend Gerald Elfendahl, he saw the Optimist in Clearwater while working on a freighter. It is also a myth that he saw the plans in *Woman's Day*. That publication was in June 1955 *after* the first Danish boats were built. Axel, who lived in Seattle from the late 1950s, was also the inspiration behind the International OK Dinghy.

Whatever the truth of these stories it probably was Axel who had the first seven built by Hans



Christian Brorsen, dinghy chairman of the Sejlklubben Snekken and owner of a woodworking company. History relates that the first race was held on 15 April 1955 in Vordingborg.

The idea was taken up by Poul Gustav (P.G.) Hansen, a school-inspector from Hvidovre who is quoted as saying that building Optimists was better for his pupils than breaking open cigarette machines! Kits were available from Brorsen and it is recorded that more than 2,500 were sold over the next seven years, including exports.

In the following year Hansen and his great friend Viggo Jacobsen from Århus set up a 'self-selected committee within the Danish Yachting Association' (for ten years separate from its youth section) to promote the new boat. Bent Lyman's account of the period summarises that Hansen was the 'Interior Minister' and Viggo the 'Foreign Minister' of the partnership. Supported by the great Paul Elvstrøm, already winner of three Olympic golds, the idea spread throughout the country and by 1960 there were over 2,000 Optimists in 44 clubs in Denmark. A national championship (initially called a schools' championship) was created in 1957: the first winner, Ib Ussing Andersen, was to become CEO of North Sails Europe and as of 2006 tactician on a 94ft Wally Class yacht.

P.G. Hansen published in 1968 the 'how to rig and sail it' book *Optimistjollen: teknik, regler, taktik*. It was translated into English (as *First Steps in Small Boat Sailing* published in 1970 by Adlard Coles), French, German and Spanish and served as a brilliant guide to the strange new rig.

The Optimist was introduced to Finn Ryghelmer of the Royal Norwegian Y.C. who also started building. A Nordic Championship was established in 1959, the first edition being in Copenhagen. Sweden started to participate the following year with the first Optimists probably being sailed in the town of Viken, just across the Kattegat from Denmark, under the auspices of Carl Quiding. In Finland the first Optimist was imported from Denmark to Turku by Yrjö Valli in 1958: sadly he died in 1969 but by then Turku alone had 260 boats and his son Olavi continued with the Class for twenty years.



Technical changes

As the Clearwater pram of 1947 metamorphosed into the International Optimist of the 1973 rules, it is sometimes hard to know when changes occurred, not least because the specification of the Clearwater pram itself changed over the period. Moreover at the foundation of IODA in 1965 the (non-technical) Rules stated “identical building plans should be obligatory for all members - *with certain exceptions for USA*”.

The actual hull dimensions changed little. When Nigel Ringrose came to transfer the metric dimensions of the Danish plans (Britain did not start metrication until the mid-60s) he recalls: “I remember my puzzlement when finding that the measurements would always divide neatly by 2.54 i.e. equal to USA/British inches”. The biggest change was that the hull was made lighter by, for example, replacing the 3/4”/18*mm transoms with 12mm ply. According to Michael Ranson’s excellent history of the U.K. Class 1960-1980, *The Greatest Little Boat in the World*, now sadly out of print, the original weight of the ‘British Optimist’ was 27.2kg, increased in 1969 to 33kg and by 1972 to 35kg.

The foils were reduced in thickness. The daggerboard, planed down from 1”/25.4mm cypress in the prototype and using 3/4”/18*mm plywood in the 1955 pram plans, was reduced in thickness to 12mm plywood. The maximum width of the slot, 1”/25.4mm on the pram, was reduced to 16mm. The rudder thickness was also reduced from 3/4”/18*mm to 12mm. The external dimensions of the daggerboard were left unchanged (though the diagonal edges were discontinued in both the pram and the Optimist) but the vertical length of the rudder was increased from 660mm (26”) to 750mm (29.5”) and the width reduced from 292mm to 260mm. The actual rudder shape was not prescribed in either boat and remained undefined until the next century.

* 3/4” is in fact 19mm but the closest standard plywood thickness is quoted.

Perhaps most important were the changes in the sail. Whereas the pram rules stated clearly that “all sails must be flat cut and composed of three panels with seams parallel to the leach [sic]” the Danes introduced battens and lateral panels while abolishing the ‘flat cut’ rule. The Danish plans also permitted the sail to extend beyond a straight line drawn from the peak to the clew and this, at least by 1971, increased the half-width by around 20%, and sails were now tied to the boom.

The basic dimensions of the sail were also increased as follows

	Pram	Optimist
Luff	1676	1730
Head	1219	1240
Foot	1981	2130
Peak to Clew	2667	2800
Diagonal	2464	2580

Dacron was permitted and the Optimist exhibited at the 1961 London Boat Show is recorded as having a “varnished terylene” sail. Cotton remains a theoretical option even today.

The length of the mast was increased from 2290mm to 2350mm to match the new luff but the length of the boom and sprit were left unchanged. More surprisingly the spar diameters were left unchanged in the 1961 plans, though circular sections were permitted. Only around 1970 was the mast diameter increased from 41.3mm to 45mm and the sprit from 19mm to 24mm. The boom however remained at 25mm.

It appears that it was the British who first added buoyancy, absent from the Clearwater pram, the Danish Optimist in the museum and the first imported hull. At the 1961 British Championships one of the few rules was “At least two separate buoyancy units, together supporting at least 100lb [44.6kg] must be securely fitted to the boat.” Further work on this was done by physicist Pierre Lostis from

Aberwrac'h in Brittany and three buoyancy units supporting 60kg became the standard. Initially polystyrene foam was permitted as an alternative to buoyancy bags but this was later permitted only if encased within built-in boxes (as shown in the Esgrus photo).

Important improvements later in the 1960s were:

- Toe straps: permitted from 1968. Tiller extensions reportedly introduced around the same time.
- Ratchet blocks for the mainsheet, first allowed in 1969.
- A transparent sail window, allowed in the 1971 rules but not seen on photos from the mid-1970s.
- While early pictures from Clearwater show mast-head ribbons, such devices do not appear in the Class Rules; other wind-indicators were not permitted until 1980.

Great Britain

In 1960 the British sailor Nigel Ringrose, while sailing his Shearwater catamaran, came across the Optimists in Vordingborg, imported one for a cousin and started building them as a hobby. He re-wrote the Danish rules in English and established a fleet at his grandmother's house at Bursledon on the Hamble river.



Despite showing at the London Boat Show at Earl's Court in late 1961 there was little interest from established yacht clubs, with the honourable exception of the Royal Southern. The first commercially produced boats were made by Moores of Wroxham who in fact were to continue to build in wood and later GRP until 1998. They also supplied kits and more seem to have been built by private builders in the U.K. than elsewhere. Perhaps due to competition from the Cadet and Mirror dinghies, 'only' around 120 were sold in the first two years. As late as 1967 it was recorded that: "Virtually all Optimists . . . were in Hampshire or nearby" and by the end of the decade less than 700



sail numbers had been issued.

The first 'Worlds'

Two years later Nigel invited the Danes, Swedes and Germans (though only the first two attended) to the first 'International Optimist Regatta' which is now regarded as the first World Championship. The Beacon Cup, still awarded to the champion, had in fact been used for the British Nationals in 1961 but in future was used for the international event.

Scandinavian sailors dominated and did much to convince doubters of the seaworthiness of the boat. The winner was the tiny Anders Quiding (see photo) followed by Peter Due, a later Tornado Olympic silver medallist from Århus.

The following year the Swedes returned the invitation by inviting the British to the second 'International Regatta' which was held in Göteborg, this time including Norway to give a five-nation event. Not surprisingly the third regatta was held in Viggo's home town of Århus. The USA was enticed across the pond - and won the team prize - to give a seven-nation championship.



Some of the participants in 1962.
The British team is in the front row



The Swedish team 1962. Second from the left is the winner Anders Quiding next to his father



The Danish team 1962. Second from the right is silver medallist Peter Due

Growth in the '60s

Geographical spread thereafter was incredible. The years in which Optimists were introduced by the other countries (as reported in a questionnaire circulated in 1980 unless there is clear evidence to the contrary) were as follows:

- 1959 Norway
- 1960 Great Britain*, Sweden*
- 1962 Germany*, Rhodesia*
- 1963 Finland
- 1965 Austria, Belgium*, Bulgaria, Greece*, Italy
- 1966 France*, Japan, Poland
- 1967 Venezuela
- 1968 Ireland§, Monaco, South Africa, Czechoslovakia
- 1969 Argentina*, Bermuda, Spain*, Turkey*, Switzerland
- 1970 Morocco*

* the countries which, with USA and Denmark, supported the 1970 application for International status (see below)

§ But East Antrim B.C. and Carrickfergus Y.C. in Northern Ireland had introduced Optimists as early as 1964-5.

Note that in many cases there were individual Optimists built before the dates shown.

Germany

The introduction to Germany resulted from a demonstration by Danish sailors at the Warnemünder week regatta in 1961. Eight Optimists were built and in the following year a joint regatta was held. Political separation could not keep a good idea down and building started almost immediately at Rerik on the Salzhaff in the DDR ('East' Germany). Growth thereafter was phenomenal with, for example, clubs in Schleswig building sixty Optimists in 1963 and holding an 80-boat regatta with the Danes, attended by Viggo, the following year. Contact with the DDR was difficult but future winner of four Olympic medals Jochen Schümann records that *"In 1965 I took a school vacation course on 'boatbuilding & sailing' in Berlin-Köpenick, where I helped building Optimists. I started sailing those Optimists in 1966."*

Finland

The introduction to Finland may have been earlier. Despite rapid growth the Finnish Yachting Association was reluctant to accept the new dinghy, reputedly on the grounds that many of them carried advertising. This debate about advertising in the sport of sailing was to continue internationally for many years and only recently may have been finally resolved.

and beyond

Austria actually participated in the 'International Regatta' in 1965 *before* they had any Optimists at home. Following the trip described below, Kurt and Erika Olga Jirasko from the Neusiedlersee Y.C. invested their entire savings in importing 20 Danish boats, price at that time ÖS 4,500 each [USD 173, about \$460 in 2012 terms - *Ed*] and on 24th April 1966 the first Optimist Club was founded.

After what might be regarded as the 'contagious' spread in Scandinavia and onwards to Germany and Austria, it is interesting that two of the next introductions were by National Sailing Associations in communist Bulgaria and in Greece where the Hellenic Yachting Federation had the vision to import

120 wooden ‘Hannibal’ Optimists in 1965. In Italy the first fleets were in Liguria and Lake Garda but, like the Balkans but unlike Scandinavia, for the first ten years boats were mostly owned by clubs and used primarily for training.

The idea of junior sailboat racing was regarded with some suspicion. The 1980 Italian report noted that “according to Italian law no young people under 14 years of age can start in any competition” which may be why even today some Italian regattas are still called ‘meetings’. Austria too reported that “the Austrian Sailing Association . . . has a strong policy against children sailing races.” This was a theme which would recur intermittently for many years.

France, starting in 1966 under the aegis of Jo Chartois, director of the *Ecole Nationale de Voile* in Carantec, took enthusiastically to the *caisse à savon*, sailed in the Worlds of 1967 and hosted the 1968 Worlds in Carantec. By the time of its 1980 report POP (“an independent institution recognised by the National Authority F.F.V.”) boasted “about 20,000 Optimists”, second only to Sweden. At that time boats were privately owned though “some wealthy clubs put very good boats at the disposal of young sailors”.

Poland too developed rapidly with about 1,500 boats by 1980. IODA knew nothing of the USSR but the Poles reported that they participated in “great regattas organized by the socialistic countries.” Intriguingly the 1980 report from Hungary mentioned an Optimist training book in Russian published in Estonia in 1966.

Japan

Outside Europe Japan was the first Asian country to acquire Optimists, influenced by another Dane, Kaj Wolhardt (grandfather of 1967/8 world champion Peter Warrer) and led by the charismatic Ben Majima but numbers by 1980 were only 300.

Africa

In Africa a fleet had existed since 1962 in Rhodesia, introduced by Andrew Huddleston, and a Class association since 1964. In 1967 Nigel was posted to Pietermaritzburg in Natal and soon had the first fleet of South African Optimists sailing on the nearby Midmar Dam. By 1974 they sailed in the Optimist Worlds and proudly reported that they were the best-placed English speakers “beating out the super confident and organised Americans and Brits”. Sadly however for fifteen years from 1976 their teams usually encountered problems with entry to World and European Championships.

South America

Little is known about the early fleet in Venezuela but the breakthrough in Argentina was also helped by Nigel Ringrose, working with Hugo Tedim and Hugh Warneford-Thomson of the Y.C. Argentino, who had imported two British Optimists in 1968. Plans for the first boats built in Argentina were bought by naval architect Patricio Billoch and built by Jorge Cavado. Patricio’s son Martín owned A-1 and was to win the Worlds the first time Argentina participated in 1974 on the Silvaplana, Switzerland. As well as Martín, who went on to become a very influential boat designer, the initial group included (A-3) future Olympic medallist and GRP Optimist builder Santiago Lange. The yacht clubs of San Fernando, Olivos and San Isidro followed quickly and the first national



A-1: Martín Billoch

championship with 19 boats was held in 1971, followed in 1973 by the first South American Championship.

Spain

Back in Europe Optimists were shown at the Barcelona Boat Show of 1968. Spain's sailors participated in the 1968 Worlds (now definitely so called) in Carantec but had warned the organisers that they were only present "to learn and to make contact with the little world of the Optimist which extends to five continents". Nevertheless they finished ahead of Venezuela, Great Britain, Belgium and Germany. Within a year the original fleets in R.C.N. Barcelona and Arenys del Mar had expanded to Bilbao, Malaga and Madrid, 150 boats in all, and the following year even as far as Ibiza where in July a blessing of the boats was attended by one Juan Antonio Samaranch '*delegado nacional de Educacion Fisica y Deportes*'. Arenys hosted the Worlds of 1970. Just two years later Spain broke the Scandinavian/USA duopoly of victors when Tomás Estela from Palma de Mallorca won the Worlds of 1972 and Spain the team prize . . . in Sweden.

Tomás was one of the first ex-Optimists to shine at the IYRU Youth World Championships, founded in 1971, where he took gold in the 420s in 1974 and silver in 1975.

The International Optimist Dinghy Association

The International Optimist Dinghy Association (IODA) was founded at the fourth Regatta in 1965 in Turku in Finland. The first members were Austria, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden and USA, followed shortly by Germany and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).

The new association brought together the work of Viggo Jacobsen, who was elected president, and that of Nigel Ringrose as vice-president. These two were to remain in those positions for over 15 years with Viggo's English-born wife Edith as honorary secretary.



Viggo was an ideal president. He had been trained in woodworking and had even owned a small boat-building company before the war. He had then joined the family paper-merchant business. As a Dragon sailor - like many of the most influential yachtsmen of his generation - he knew one-design sailing. Among other activities he organised the Århus Boat Show, the profits of which were used to fund junior sailing (after a loss in the first year). Bent Lyman's comment that he was a 'foreign minister' acquired a wider meaning as he worked tirelessly with the various national groups as

the Optimist spread.

Nigel was a great roving ambassador. "*He worked for the United Nations and set up Opti programs wherever he went around the world. He came here and said "why don't you guys have any Optis here?"*" was the typical report of Connecticut's Sinclair.

Ivar Ahlgren from Långedragss in Göteborg, president of the newly formed Swedish Optimist Association, became the auditor, a position he was to hold for over thirty years. Understandably apart from Nigel most of



the leading lights of the new IODA were for many years Scandinavian, among them Lars Wallin, Eric Carsten Hansen and Jens Andersen as chairmen of the IODA Technical Committee. None of these were current Optimist parents which gave a consistency and strength seen in few other Classes.

The International Regatta in the 60s

Title:

It is not entirely clear when the 'International Optimist Regatta' started to be called a World Championship. Certainly the 1967 event in Austria was not so called - but the Austrian sailing authorities were not that happy at there being any such event - and equally the 1968 it was so called, at least by the Spanish press when recording the first national participation at the event. According to Nigel, neither he nor Viggo liked the idea of a 15-year old world champion but the word 'World' was critical in attracting sponsorship for the organisers of a rapidly growing event.

Teams:

Nigel's invitation to the first 'International Optimist Regatta' had been for four or five sailors and it seems that official teams were established from the start as four plus a reserve. The International Team Trophy, later the IODA Challenge Cup, was based on the aggregate scores of the best four sailors in a series of five races "sailed under IYRU teamracing rules" and for many years was regarded as the primary world championship in line with Nigel's original concept to "encourage team spirit rather than individualism". The Beacon Cup for the individual championship, also five races, had in fact been donated the previous year for the British Nationals. A further trophy, the Miami Herald dating from 1966, was initially awarded for a single race between Denmark, USA, the host country and the two best teams from the Challenge Cup.

There was considerable demand for extra places and an additional secondary *open* competition was soon introduced for the Prins Bertils Cup (donated by a Swedish company which owned a vessel of that name). It continued in various forms, usually as a separate single race, until around 1988, after which extra sailors were no longer allowed. By then the IODA European championship was providing an alternative for those who did not make the first national team. The Prins Bertils Cup was later awarded for the silver fleet until splitting the fleet was discontinued in 1992.

Entry:

The age limit for participants was debated for many years. The original 1948 Pram Rules were under-15 at the time of racing. By 1969 it was "Competitors must not have reached the age of 17 before 15th August" but in the following year this was replaced by the year of birth and in 1972 reduced to under-16. Discussions of the best age limit continued for several years but it was finally confirmed in 1981 as under-16 in the calendar year. Weight and height were factors in the debate but so was social maturity. Clark Mills had given a blunter contribution from the start: "*All of a sudden in two to three years a kid can turn into a monster. Not all of them but a lot of them - too many greaseburgers I guess.*"

From an early stage the entry fee included accommodation and meals. This gave the young people the experience of Hogwarts-style communal living and the chance to socialise with sailors from other countries. It also enabled teams to budget more accurately. The idea was adopted for the IYRU Youth World Championship when that event was created in 1971. Initially only two adults were allowed in this accommodation, later expanded to three; any other parents and coaches had to stay elsewhere.

There have been occasional problems. Some teams wanted to bring their own camper-wagons and

food, and an occasional wealthy team booked into the nearest luxury hotel, but IODA stuck rigidly to an inclusive entry fee. Some National Authorities perversely complained that the entry fee was higher than for other Classes where sailors found their own lodgings. However the principle survived and was later extended to most continental championships, at least as these became limited to official teams.

Sail Letters & Numbers:

Many early continental European Optimists carried letters and numbers which seem to have been issued at club level (see the photo of Peter Warrer). However the British used the sail letters 'OP' with consecutive numbers which they also supplied to a number of other Anglophone countries, even for boats built in those countries. The first picture where the Optimist logo can be seen outside the USA seems to have been that of the 1971 Worlds in Malente (see next chapter) and this use may have originated when IODA was in negotiations with Clearwater about copyright during the application for IYRU status.

The use of national letters appears to have started around 1968, certainly before the Optimist became an IYRU International Class. At that time the IYRU used national letters which had originated around 1925 and reflected their British origin. 'K' was used for Great Britain and most British Commonwealth countries had sail letters starting with a 'K', for example 'KC' for Canada. 'H' was used for what the British called Holland but some of the other letters are difficult to understand: why 'Z' for Switzerland? Not until 1993 did the IYRU change to the three-letter Olympic abbreviations though it still lists these as if issued by it.

Some regattas

A rare description of one of the early 'Worlds' comes from Austria, the experience of Kurt and Erika-Olga Jirasko from the Neusiedlersee Y.C. They had heard of the Optimists in Denmark and in 1965 the couple travelled with two children to Finland where the Optimist Championship was being held. Boats were supplied and the two sailors 'joined the party'. "It blew Force eight" remembers Erika-Olga "and I was terribly afraid for the welfare of my protégés". Unnecessarily as it turned out: the kids just did their own thing in the exceptionally stable *Kiste* (crates). Frau Jirasko was so impressed with the boat and the enthusiasm of the little sailors that she almost without thinking offered to host the 1967 event in Austria.

Before it could be held, there was a legal problem because at that time in Austria young people were not allowed to sail single-handed. At the event itself a heatwave hit the 61 participants from eleven countries. One little Finn wrote to his mother: "It is as hot as India but they don't have any elephants!"

Among the Austrian participants - in 30th place - was nine-year old Wolfgang Mayrhofer who, just thirteen years later, was to win Olympic silver in the Finn Class.

Getting to the Neusiedlersee was not without its problems. In the days of limited charter availability, high air-fares and customs barriers, travel was problem. The British reported a journey by train with "six Optimists as our luggage in the guard's van . . . and a vast amount of paperwork in advance as well as a lot of man-handling on the way". Nevertheless the number of countries represented reached double figures for the first time and the first participation of Rhodesia and Venezuela meant four continents.

The 1969 'International Regatta' (the British still did not accept the title 'Worlds') almost did not take place due to difficulties with funding. Finally sponsorship of £3,500 was found, arranged almost

inevitably by the Ringrose family.

Results:

As shown in the table below the early years were dominated by sailors from the big fleets of Sweden and Denmark, with the occasional success of the Floridans.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Venue</i>	<i>Countries</i>		<i>Winner</i>		<i>Team</i>
1962	Hamble	GBR	3	Anders Quiding	SWE	SWE
1963	Göteborg	SWE	5	B.Baysen	SWE	SWE
1964	Århus	DEN	7	Poul Andersen	DEN	USA
1965	Turku	FIN	9	Ray Larsson	SWE	FIN
1966	Miami	USA	6	Doug Bull	USA	SWE
1967	Neusiedlersee	AUT	11	Peter Warrer	DEN	DEN
1968	Carantec	FRA	13	Peter Warrer	DEN	DEN
1969	Stokes Bay	GBR	12	Doug Bull	USA	USA

Peter Warrer (DEN)
World Champion
1967 & 1968



The 1970s

IYRU Recognition

In 1970 IODA applied to the International Yacht Racing Union (IYRU) for the status of 'International Class'. In fact the boat had been called the International Optimist at least as early as 1961.

Relatively few Classes already had that status which, even as late as 1986, required at least 1,500 boats worldwide with fleets of at least 50 actively racing in 11 countries, and 6 nations at the Worlds. The Optimist qualified easily on this numeric basis with 13 countries (see above) supporting the application and 12 at the 1970 Worlds.

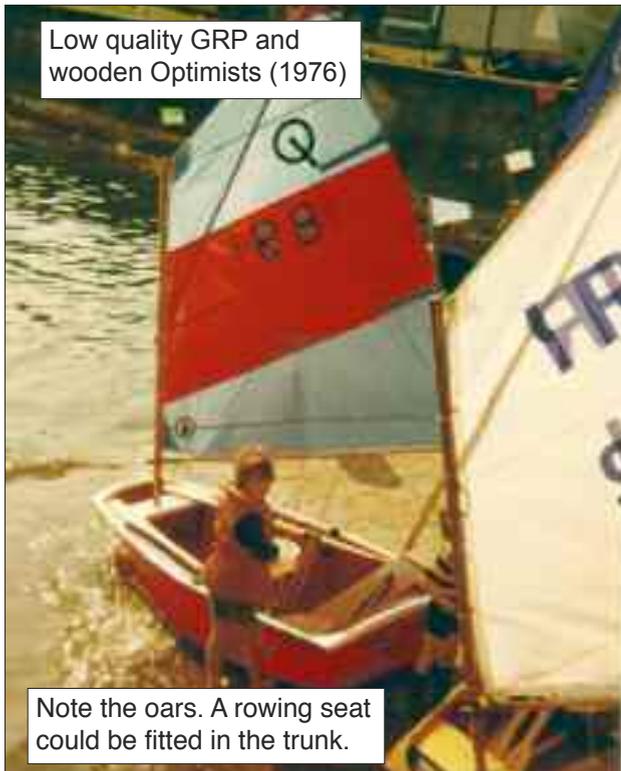
However at that time and for many years afterwards IYRU Regulations specified that: "The new class shall not be adopted if it is considered that it will adversely affect an existing International Class" and, as reported by Nigel, opposition came from supporters of the British-designed International Cadet, adopted in 1958, despite that being a two-person boat. Support for IODA's application nevertheless came from IYRU Secretary-General Nigel Hacking and Chief Measurer Tony Watts.

A further problem lay in ownership of the copyright. At that time the main requirement for International Class status was transfer of the design copyright (though it was and is somewhat questionable as to whether copyright law applies in many countries to the design of non-artistic products) and it was very debatable as to who owned any Optimist copyright. Clark Mills had designed a boat but had transferred any intellectual property to the Optimist Club of Clearwater. The Danes had altered the plans and negotiated with Clearwater the use of the name 'Danish optimistdinghy'. The British had reportedly registered the copyright on the 'British building plans (1961, revised 1966)'. Most existing International Classes had a single named designer such as Jack Holt (Cadet, GP14, Enterprise and Mirror) or Christian Maury (420) who received a royalty on boats built. But the Optimist had been changed and evolved in Denmark and England. Finally it was agreed that the building fee paid per boat would be split 37.5% each to the IYRU and IODA and 25% to the National Optimist Association, with no payment to any possible copyright holder.

The Class Rules too were not of the standard required by the IYRU. The Danish plans which Nigel had translated were revised by Edmund Spalding, at the time head of the IODA Technical Committee. Spalding wrote: "*Eventually at the [1972] IODA AGM in Sweden a draft of the Rules was agreed. When I got home I prepared a final draft and sent a copy to all member countries. I enclosed a letter to say that if no objections were received within TEN days acceptance would be assumed. None was received so this second draft was submitted to the IYRU.*" Finally after further inquisition by the Union the Optimist became officially international from March 1st 1973.

Technical Developments

British records show that as early as 1967 a GRP boat was built by the firm Polyastic. At the 1969 London Boat Show permission was given to show "a GRP boat imported from France provided that it was styled an 'Experimental Optimist'." Later that same year a Danish Henriksen was shown at the Worlds "for evaluation and measurement" and manufacture of the GRP hull was officially approved by IODA from January 1st 1970, provided that "it was not inferior to a wooden boat in regard to safety, strength and buoyancy". Interestingly the 1971 Class Rules attempted to specify the weights and standard of the laminates but these could not be easily measured and disappeared



from the Rules shortly thereafter.

The following years saw a free-for-all in the development of GRP Optimists, not least because of the wide range of options permitted; for example: “the bottom of the boat may be single, single with stringers, double, or a combination of these” (1976 Rules). These early GRP boats tended to be heavy and slow but there was a rapidly expanding market. Especially in sailing schools, maintenance costs were seen as lower than for wood. Customs barriers were still high, even in Europe, and, if government or National Sailing Association money was involved, a local manufacturer who could supply in volume was preferred. It was much easier to order a batch of GRP boats than the careful building of large numbers of wooden Optimists.

Many of these boats did not conform to such GRP Class Rules as existed. In February 1978 Viggo issued a circular:

“During the winter of 1975-76 members of the IODA

*Technical Committee visited three European Boat Shows and found that all was not well with the little boat. It was decided therefore [in] 1976-77 to visit five of the larger Boat Shows and we came across the real gravity of the problem with ‘empty cavities’. As can be understood we were not always received very friendly when we told the exhibitor . . . that these were absolutely **not** Optimist dinghies.”*

This circular highlighted two problems.

Firstly while the Technical Committee could apparently identify what were *not* Optimists when it saw them, such GRP plans as existed left builders great freedom as to what they built. As late as 1982 the minutes of the IODA AGM resolved that a “One-Design GRP hull plan [is] to be developed for submission to the 1983 AGM” and the 1983 IODA Yearbook stated that: “The hull may be built of wood, glass reinforced plastic, ABS plastic and self-skinning polyurethane foam”. Neither statement suggests clear guidance to builders as to what was and what was not permitted.

The efforts to define what was and what was not an Optimist were assisted by Tony Watts, the Chief Measurer of the IYRU. It was probably he who proposed the idea of a ‘Certificate of General Approval’ for builders to be issued by the IYRU but there is little evidence that many of these were issued.

Second was a situation which has never been totally resolved. National associations and parents often sought boats, at as low a cost as possible, simply to teach sailing. They did not appreciate that very soon the pupils from these ‘learn to sail’ programmes would want to go racing . . . and racing demanded boats which were more or less equal in specification and speed.

Typical was the experience of Yugoslavia:

“With the help of our own builders in 1975-6 we were able to supply the dinghies for every yacht club in Yugoslavia. We didn’t give much attention to the quality but after the World Championship in Turkey 1976 we were forced to think about better boats.”

Those “better boats” might have come from a number of builders such as Copino in Spain, Henriksen in Denmark and various French builders, but they were probably thinking of Falsleds. In 1974 that

Danish company launched a twin-walled Optimist with a GRP outer shell and an orange ABS-moulded inner shell, incorporating foam-filled buoyancy tanks. After an reported initial setback when an error of 30mm was reportedly found in the bow transom, the new boat was established to be as fast as most if not all wooden boats.

The impact of these competitive GRP boats could upset national fleets. Turkey had already over a thousand boats, many sponsored for club use by the Turkish Y.A., and was faced with the arrival of fast imported Falsleds “bought by rich parents”. Italy reported: “Optimist building in Italy is limited today to a few small shipyards while as to [competitive] activity Danish, Spanish and French dinghies are normally used.” In the same year the Hellenic Yachting Federation reported that it mostly imported French or, later, Danish boats.



The building of wooden boats continued, not least because they were still winning the Worlds in the hands of talented Swedes such as Johan Petterson, winner in 1979 and 80. As late as 1979 over 40% of Optimists registered in the British market were still wooden.

It is easy to be romantic about wooden boats built on the kitchen table. The reality is that in most countries the majority were built by commercial builders but expert parents or those ‘in the know’ always had an advantage. One future Olympic medallist wrote of another, a club-mate who won the Optimist Worlds: “*Dad built me a wooden Optimist. But [xxxxxxx] always had the finest, fastest wooden Optimists.*” Note the plural: they often didn’t last that long in top condition, not least because there were known problems with the quality of marine plywood which did not even necessarily comply with quality marks.

Falsled dominance of the market for competitive GRP Optimists was to be relatively short-lived due to the arrival of the rival Winner Optimist but that was mostly in the next decade.

Spars

One unquestionable improvement was the introduction in 1973 of aluminium alloy spars. At the 1971 Worlds it was reported that: “the wind became so strong that our masts (of wood of course) snapped faster than matches. We had to buy new ones and bind them with fibreglass tape. They must have been the heaviest masts ever but, with reinforcement, there were no more breakages”. The earliest known manufacturer in the U.K. was Needlespars. By 1978 Båths in Sweden were offering the Tecnospar, a “racing rig incorporating a high tensile aircraft alloy”.

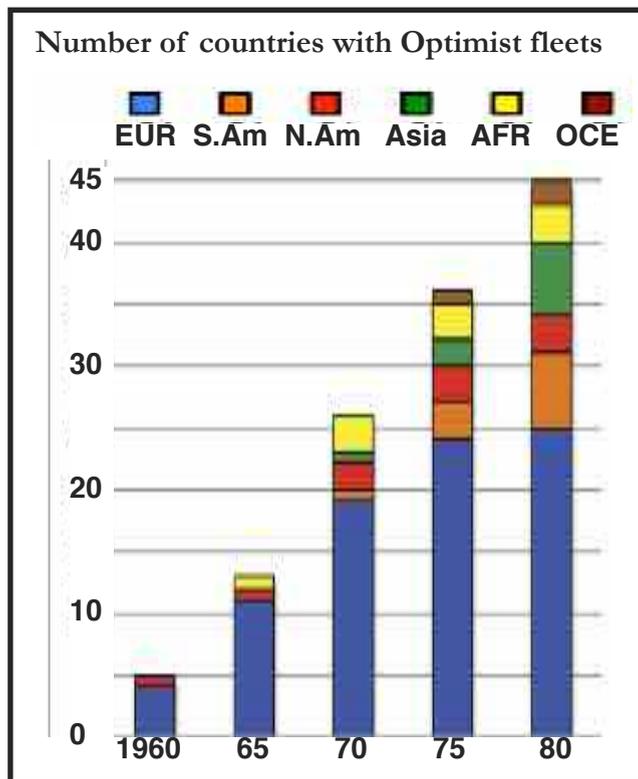
Sails

In the mid-’70s coloured sails disappeared from competition boats. This seems to have been partly to avoid being easily identified as OCS, but also due to lighter-weight sailcloth being available only in white.

Towards a wider world

While the number of national fleets in Europe continued to increase, the main expansion especially in the later '70s was outside Europe.

The growth, as reported in 1980, was as follows:



- 1972 Brasil, Hungary
- 1976 Uruguay
- 1973 Canada, Netherlands, Portugal
- 1977 Thailand, Korea
- 1974 Iceland, Yugoslavia
- 1978 Australia, Peru, Singapore
- 1975 Colombia, India, New Zealand
- 1980 Chile

Dates unknown:

Indonesia: listed as a member in 1980.

Romania: by 1979 were participating successfully in a Balkan regatta.

Thus by 1980 IODA listed 45 members.

The Optimist was introduced to Brasil in 1972 by triple Finn Olympian Jörg Bruder (who was tragically killed in a plane crash the following year) and Sibylle Sulzbeck from São Paulo. Within Brasil the Class spread rapidly through the vast country with over a dozen centres by

1980 from Fortaleza to Porto Alegre. By 1980, 1,150 registered Optimists were reported, as many as Argentina which had started earlier

Uruguay followed shortly afterwards, hosting the South Americans for the first time in 1978. In Peru the sea scouts in Callao built their first Optimists in the same year but the country did not participate in the South Americans for another eight years. In Europe Hungary started building and soon began fleets on Balaton and Lake Velence. The Optimist Club Nederland was established by Anders Pels whose son Jeroen (Jerome) sailed in three IODA Worlds and has gone on to become CEO of the ISAF. Portugal imported boats from Spain with the first fleets in Cascais, which was to host the Worlds in 1980, Oporto and Aveiro. While India was the second Asian country to start Optimists, at the College of Military Engineering in Pune, more immediate impact came from the foundation in January 1977 of the Junior Sailing Squadron of Thailand with the help of Al Chandler, an American lawyer resident in Bangkok. Al worked closely with the Thai navy but it was noted that “funding for its program has been raised from the private sector” and, as in the early days in Florida, sponsors of boats were allowed extensive advertising. By 1979 150 wooden Optimists had been built locally which enabled the world championship to be hosted in Pattaya. Al, like Nigel, travelled extensively and was soon spreading the gospel throughout Asia, crucially to Singapore.



Growth of the World Championship

The growth in numbers of fleets was matched by the growth of the Worlds. While in 1968 the popular venue of Brittany had attracted 13 teams, ten years later it saw 25. Understandably numbers fell in 1979 with the bold step of taking the Worlds to Thailand but this first visit to Asia led to Australia, India, Japan, Pakistan and Singapore participating for the first time. However of these only Japan was to compete in the following years when the event returned to Europe. Air fares were still very high: the USD600 ‘special fare’ arranged from Copenhagen to Bangkok in 1979 equals nearly USD2,200 in 2012 terms, well over twice the 2012 price.

Not all countries could attend every year. Morocco, for example, attended in Spain in 1970 and Bermuda in 1974 in St. Moritz.

The championships were not without their problems. In Malente near Kiel in 1971 accommodation was in army tents and the food and the weather were, according to the British team-leader, grim. An ongoing problem which was to recur was that the few girls often had to share with members of other teams. The 1973 Worlds scheduled for Rhodesia/Zimbabwe had to be cancelled due to security and perhaps boycott worries. In St. Moritz in 1974 a day was lost to requests for redress and protests. In La Baule in 1978 the French insisted on almost unlimited ‘open’ entry resulting in 226 sailors participating in the single Prins Bertils race.

A major problem was identified in the 1980 report from Dieter Roos, president of the German DODV: *“A very important cost element is the dinghy transport expenses. We think these expenses are avoidable if the dinghies would be provided for all competitors and if possible only dinghies of the same manufacturer.”*

Charter boats were in fact generally available but the quality was unknown and any team in a position to do so transported their own boats. For Thailand in 1979 eight of the 13 non-Asian countries did so. Those which did not, such as Spain, complained that some of the locally built Thai boats were reportedly up to 6kg over-weight. The following year in Cascais the Irish team reported that the charter boats literally fell apart. In Howth in 1981 the Falsled charter boats, while of excellent quality, were a model which had recently become outdated by developments described elsewhere. The problem would only be solved by developments in GRP boats and charter arrangements in the next decade.

Scandinavia, and in particular Sweden, continued to dominate the championship

World Championships 1970-9

	Venue	Countries	Champion	Team
1970	Arenys	ESP 14	James Larimore	USA SWE
1971	Malente	GER 12	Heiki Vahtera	FIN SWE
1972	Karlskrona	SWE 15	Tomás Estela	ESP ESP
1973	Cancelled due to problems in Rhodesia			
1974	St. Moritz	SUI 20	Martín Billoch	ARG SWE
1975	Århus	DEN 23	Hans Fester	SWE DEN
1976	Yarimka	TUR 19	Hans Wallén	SWE SWE
1977	Koper	YUG 22	Patrik Mark	SWE DEN
1978	La Baule	FRA 25	Rikard Hammarvid	SWE SWE
1979	Pattaya	THA 17	Johan Petterson	SWE SWE



Malente, Germany - 1971



St. Moritz, Switzerland - 1974



Yarimka, Turkey - 1976

The first continental championships

The earliest was the South Americans, created in 1973 shortly after Brasil had started with Optimists. Three of the first four sailors at that initial event were to go on to represent Argentina at the Olympics: Gonzalo Campero in the Finn, Martín Billoch in the 470 and, most successfully, Santiago Lange who has sailed in five Games and won two Tornado bronze medals. The second edition was won by a USA sailor, Richard St. John, but this would not happen often in the future. Uruguay joined in 1976 and hosted the event in 1978.

South American Championships 1973-9

	<i>Venue</i>		<i>Champion</i>	<i>Team</i>
1973	San Isidro	ARG	Gonzalo Campero	ARG
1974	Rio de Janeiro	BRA	John King	BRA
1975	San Isidro	ARG	Hugo Castro	ARG
1976	João Pessoa	BRA	Eduardo Melchert	BRA
1977	San Isidro	ARG	Guillermo Baquerizas	ARG
1978	Puerto Buceo	URU	Gustavo Warburg	ARG
1979	Capao de Canoa	BRA	Mariano Castro	ARG

In North America the first truly international Optimist North Americans seems to have been organised in 1976 at St. Petersburg Y.C. by Richard Merriman. Participants included sailors representing Bermuda, Venezuela, and Canada which by this stage had Optimists in both Toronto and Quebec. The USA sailors were from Florida (St. Petersburg, Miami and Fort Lauderdale) and racing was provided for what was described as the 'Optimist pram' as well as the 'Optimist dinghy'. While all the USA sailors in 1976 were from Florida, by 1979 when the championship was hosted by the Royal Canadian Y.C. in Toronto it was recorded that "about a dozen USA skippers from Connecticut and Florida participated". No results sheets have been found but it is believed that winners included Rick Merriman (?1976) and Mike Funsch (?1979) both from St. Petersburg Y.C

The Evening Independent - Jan 17, 1976

KATE STOWELL

Scene Editor

If you happened down by the St. Petersburg Junior Yacht Club last weekend, you would have been embroiled in a tangle of activity. Beginning Friday morning, young people between the ages of 9 and 16 were hard at work preparing sailboats. And on Saturday, they got their chance to sail those boats in a first-ever championship.

It was the North American International Optimist Dinghy Championship, and it brought together young people from St. Petersburg, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Bermuda, Canada and Venezuela. The championship was a first, explains Richard Merriman, junior activities chairman for the St. Petersburg Yacht Club, because it was the first international event in the dinghy class.

"The International Optimist Dinghy Association is an international association," explained Merriman. "We sent invitations to all groups. The world championship is held in Europe. Only kids 9 to 14 may participate. And strangely enough, there are more of these boats (Optimist dinghys) in the world than any other sailboats."

The two types of boats sailed on Saturday included the Optimist dinghy and the Optimist pram, which originally was designed in Clearwater. Many of the participants brought their own boats, but others borrowed from non-participating clubs such as Bradenton.

So when the wind kicked up brisk and breezy Saturday, championship participants were ready to tackle the sails in hopes of taking home a winning trophy. But most of them were more interested in racing simply for the experience, rather than for winning. "It teaches them to make their own decisions and it builds self-confidence," explained Merriman.

The contestants themselves spoke of the Olympic course, 5-mile race a little differently.

"This is my first international event," explained Christopher Bardgett, 13, of Bermuda. "I've been sailing for three years. Last year I was supposed to go to the world championship but it was canceled. It really doesn't matter if I got a trophy, because I participated. My dad has sailed for 30-odd years so I want to see if I can follow in his footsteps."

Viggo's Legacy

Thus by 1980 Optimists were firmly established throughout Europe, even if little was known about the 'East Block'. Outside Europe there were several significant fleets and obvious potential for further growth in Asia and South America.

On the technical side IODA was moving towards the transition, difficult for all Classes, from wood to GRP construction.

Viggo may have been in Paul Elvstrøm's mind when the latter famously wrote: "It is easier to design a new boat than build a sustainable Class organisation". As a businessman Viggo had looked at realities and shaped policies around them. He had reservations about GRP boats, about the need for the title 'world champion' and even, according to Nigel, about the usefulness of the IYRU, but he had been willing to negotiate all of them.

Clark had built a boat. Viggo had built a Class.