

# Classics collide at Newport regatta

*None of the sailors were injured, but a 102-year-old New York 30 wound up on the bottom*

By Douglas A. Campbell  
SENIOR WRITER

This much is undisputed: When the 94-foot classic yacht Sumurun and Amorita, a 102-year-old New York 30 designed and built by Nathanael G. Herreshoff, got to the green-and-red windward buoy on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay during a July 7 race, there was a splintering collision and Amorita

went straight to the bottom.

All else — and particularly who was at fault — appears to be in question. And almost all parties in any way connected with the incident are not talking.

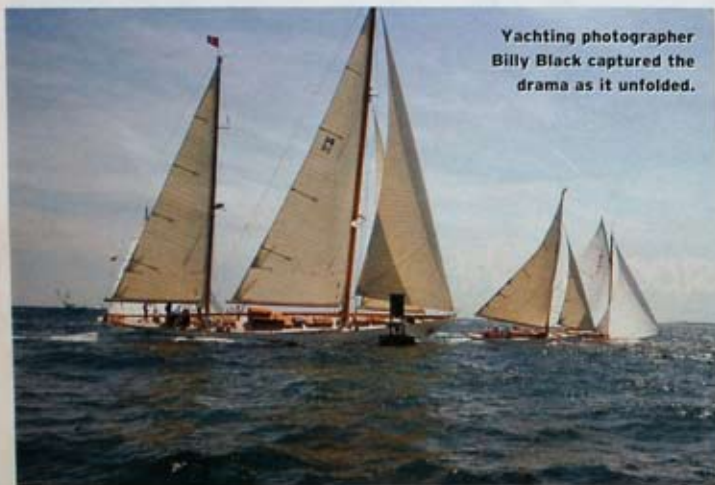
"That's under appeal and it's a lawsuit, and the answer is I can't talk about it." That's the rapid-fire response when Noel Field, one of three judges who ruled at the scene that Sumurun was at

fault, answers his home phone. "Good luck. Bye."

The office of A. Robert Towbin, owner of Sumurun, refers calls to Philadelphia lawyer Michael McCauley, who has no comment. The Museum of Yachting, which hosted the Robert H. Tiedemann Classic Yachting Weekend regatta, sends those with questions to US Sailing, which certified Field and

the other judges. US Sailing says the matter is in the hands of the Narragansett Bay Yachting Association, which has no comment because its committee hasn't reported back on the incident.

That leaves those who would like to interpret the photographs taken on scene by sailing photographer Billy Black with one option: the owners of



Yachting photographer Billy Black captured the drama as it unfolded.



BILLY BLACK

Amorita. Jed Pearsall and Bill Doyle — both New York Yacht Club members — do, in fact, have something to say. They say they have heard numerous versions of the events and want to set the record straight.

The opinions of Pearsall and Doyle certainly aren't the only ones firmly held. First, there are the judges. In its press release the Museum of Yachting states, "An independent protest committee of certified US Sailing judges [John Bond and Peter Gerard are the others] convened to determine the circumstances of the collision. Their decision resulted in the disqualifica-

tion of Sumurun, a 94-foot 1914 William Fife design, and the exoneration of Alera and Amorita, both 43.5-foot Herreshoff-designed NY-30s."

The appeal by Towbin, another NYYC member, indicates he believes he was not at fault. But at this time, neither he nor his lawyer will explain that position publicly. That leaves Pearsall and Doyle, who were interviewed on speakerphone for this story. What follows is their joint explanation of the events that led to the loss of Amorita.

That Saturday provided "perfect sailing conditions," they say. The

wind blew 15 knots, seas were flat, and visibility was perfect. Moreover, extensive precautions were taken by the race committee to assure a safe race. At the skippers' meeting before the race, the committee announced that there would be an extra five minutes between the starts of each class to further separate the classes, each of which had no more than a half-dozen boats. And the smaller, slower boats were to start first to clear them from the starting line and reduce congestion.

"The regatta was set up not to be cut-throat racing, [a] gotta-be-first-no-matter-

what race. It was not really an aggressive race," Doyle says. "It was mentioned at the skippers' meeting by the committee to alert everyone to these precautions to keep a safe distance."

Amorita was in the fourth of six classes to start. In the same class was another NY-30, Alera, the first one built. Both had been restored to original condition. Amorita's beauty had put her on the cover of several boating magazines, including Soundings.

The race course was the standard one used for many Newport races: around Conanicut Island, a distance of about 18 miles. The starting line was



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east of the island in Newport Harbor. The first leg was sailed to the southwest, toward the Atlantic and into the prevailing wind.

Amorita and Alera were sailing in tandem an hour into the race when they reached green-and-red bell buoy NR at the southern end of Conanicut, the windward mark. Amorita was perhaps a boat length ahead and to windward of Alera on her port side. Both were on a port tack. The schooner Fortune, entered in the same class, was the nearest boat, but she was some distance behind.

"It's all navigable water [around buoy

NR]," say Amorita's owners. "It's not a tight mark rounding. You ease around this mark for miles."

The sound of breaking wood was the first indication that Amorita's owners had a problem. Doyle and Pearsall spun around in the cockpit, which they shared with crewmember Brian Sweeney, to see the curve of Sumurun's bow ride up on Alera's transom. "The sound of the crunching of the boat is something you will never forget," Doyle says.

"When we heard the noise of Alera being struck, I looked around and said, 'My God, they're going to get killed!'"

remembers Pearsall.

What happened next took less than five seconds they estimate, giving "no time to react." Sumurun, which started 15 minutes after the NY-30s and moments before had not been a factor in the calculations aboard either Alera or Amorita, had hit Alera squarely on the transom, according to Pearsall and Doyle. The force of the impact spun Alera to port, out of Sumurun's path but toward Amorita. "The acceleration [of Alera] was phenomenal once they were struck by Sumurun," Doyle says.

Amorita's bowman, John Larson, was standing on deck near the mast when

the veering Alera, its mainsail ripped by some part of Sumurun's hull or rigging, made contact with Amorita. Alera's forestay caught Amorita's boom and drove it and the mainsail into the wind, spinning Amorita to starboard and into Sumurun's path. Then Sumurun broke free and hit Amorita between the mast and the cockpit, close to where Larson was standing.

"It split the boat essentially apart," says Pearsall. "There was no choice [but] to abandon the boat because the boat sank beneath us. Bill and another crewmember [Sweeney] were picked up instantly by Alera. Myself, I was picked up by Billy Black. [There was] a period of time when we thought our other crewmember [Larson] was lost. That time period seemed like an eternity."

In fact, Larson climbed from the cabintop of the sinking Amorita straight up onto Sumurun's deck. There were no physical injuries, either on Amorita or Alera, which stayed afloat after the collision.

"The images of that day play in our minds," Doyle says. "When it all happened, people's first reaction was that nobody was killed. It's hard to accept that. We lost a big part of our soul and our heart that day."

"That part of our life is over," says Pearsall. But he adds that "within five minutes, we had decided we were going to do everything we can to save the boat."

Divers found Amorita "smashed on the starboard side all the way down to keel," Pearsall says. "The port side is a third of the way missing. She will require extensive rebuild. When you look at her starboard side, you can see the shape of Sumurun's bow."

Amorita was raised from the bottom. Her cabintop was torn away completely. "But some of her window panes were not broken. They sank down gently," Doyle says.

Sumurun has been involved in at least one other similar collision. That one was captured on videotape, which sailing commentator Gary Jobson included in a documentary of the event. It was during the 1994 New York Yacht Club sesquicentennial in Newport.

"[A] J-120 ran across Sumurun's bow and didn't make it," Jobson recalls. "Sumurun doesn't maneuver easily. It hit the boat just forward of the helm, and the bow [of Sumurun] kind of sunk the transom [of the J-120] down and it broke the backstay and it [the J-120] popped up." Jobson says there were no injuries in that incident either, and the actual damage was minimal.

"Here's the issue," says Jobson. "It's very difficult for boats of dramatically different sizes to be on the same race course at the same time. When you get to the older, classic yachts that are very heavy, they don't maneuver. That's a big thing. I think it's a mistake to get boats of dramatically different sizes on the same race course." ■

**A COLLISION OF CLASSICS**  
**"IT SPLIT THE BOAT APART" PAGE 24**

**EXCLUSIVE REPORT: fuel additives, winterizing and ethanol Page 64**

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