

The Swanson Brothers: Innovators in Australian yachting history

(Pic compliments Afloat Magazine)



Ron, Ken and Jim Swanson were one of Australia's most renowned and successful boat designers and builders from the 1950s until their retirement in 1985. Their success was not only based on the performance and construction of their classic wooden boats but also on their ability to adapt to changing times. This was mainly the use of fibreglass for boat construction and rating rules that affected designs. The Swanson's were one of the few boat designers and builders of that time trained in both yacht design and shipbuilding having taken on apprenticeships in the trade as teenagers. Ron also worked with the yacht designer Wally Ward later collaborating to design the famous

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"Carmen" class of yachts. By the 1960s the Swanson brothers were known as "yachties who could not only sail but also design and build boats" (David Bray).

The Swanson brothers were best known for their classic wooden double ended, full keel, yachts. Their boats have been described as "sea kindly, medium to heavy displacement with balanced hull designs".

In the 1950s they built their first 2 boats, 20ft Cygnets, in a family member's back yard. The Brothers then moved to the Spit on Middle Harbour and in 1963 they commenced working out of their factory in Dee Why. The Brothers also owned premises in the Wyong area where during 1970s they started building fibreglass vessels. These premises were available for amateur builders to hire moulds and space and to build their own boats under supervision.

The most renowned of their racing designs were Carmen class yachts and the one ton Swanson 36. Over time these and other Swanson designed boats have won a number of major races in Australian waters (some

authors claim they had a win in at least one of all of the major races). They also had boats they either designed, built, crewed and/or skippered compete internationally.

Their most famous successes in yacht racing include: 3 consecutive seconds in the 1963, 1964 and 1965 Sydney to Hobart races. The 1966 race was won by the Carmen class “Cadence”(Pictured). “Cadence” had previously won the 1964 Inaugural Sydney to Brisbane race. In 1967, “Matika” their first fibreglass Swanson 36 took third placing in the Sydney to Hobart race.

In 1965 the Swanson built and skippered yacht “Camille” was part of the Australian Team to contest the Admirals cup with “Camille” coming 6th in the Fastnet Race and the Australian Team coming second in the series.

The Swanson boats continued to perform in Australian races, taking out the first three places and line honours in the 1967, 500 NM, Sydney to Brisbane Race. The Swanson 36, “Mister Christian” taking first place after having won the Brisbane to Gladestone race the previous year.

In the 1967 in the Montague Island Race, Swanson built yachts took the first 5 places overall with the Swanson 36 “Matika” winning line honours. The Swanson Brothers also designed cruising boats, the most well-known being the 28, 38 and 42 double enders. Ron Swanson also designed the Arends 33, a shoal draft yacht designed specifically for Australian waters.

The key difference between the racing designs and the cruising designs was the increased volume for accommodation and capacity for carrying supplies, they remained sea kindly, well balanced with easy to manage rigs. These cruising boats and other Swanson designs such as the Swanson 36 and the Carmen class boats have cruised extensively and successfully throughout Asia and the Pacific with a number having also completed successful circumnavigations. Testimony to the design, strength, and seaworthiness of the Swanson vessels was the survival by “Carronade” a Carmen class yacht after being “rolled” off Cape Horn in 1967.

As well as racers and cruisers the Swanson brothers also designed and built the Dart, a 22 foot day sailer. The Dart remains popular with those who have retained their love of the sailing but no longer wish to engage in offshore cruising and long passages.

Swanson designed and built boats retain their reputation as sea kindly, well balanced, safe and easy to handle whether they be at sea, inshore or day sailing and continue to be part of Australian yachting history.

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