



That's The Spirit

Two brothers with a dream of uniting sailors worldwide.

Bob and Rod Johnstone at Symmetrix Composite Tooling in Bristol, where some of their J/Boats are built, including this new J/121.

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Rod and Lucia Johnstone, Bob Johnstone and a friend on Ragtime in 1976; (right) Bob and Mary Johnstone sailing in 1954.



The beauty in sailing is that it can be as relaxing as it is thrilling, and just as much a means of escape as a reason to gather. For brothers and Newport based J/Boat founders Bob and Rodney Johnstone, sailing began as a family activity that quickly turned to obsession. Sailboats drafted in the margins of school notebooks cruised offshore in their young imaginations, while paint dried on model sailboats in shop class. They both became avid racers, each competing for national sailing titles, but ultimately it was their contributions to sailboat design, and their devoted promotion of the sailing lifestyle that recently got them inducted into the National Sailing Hall of Fame.

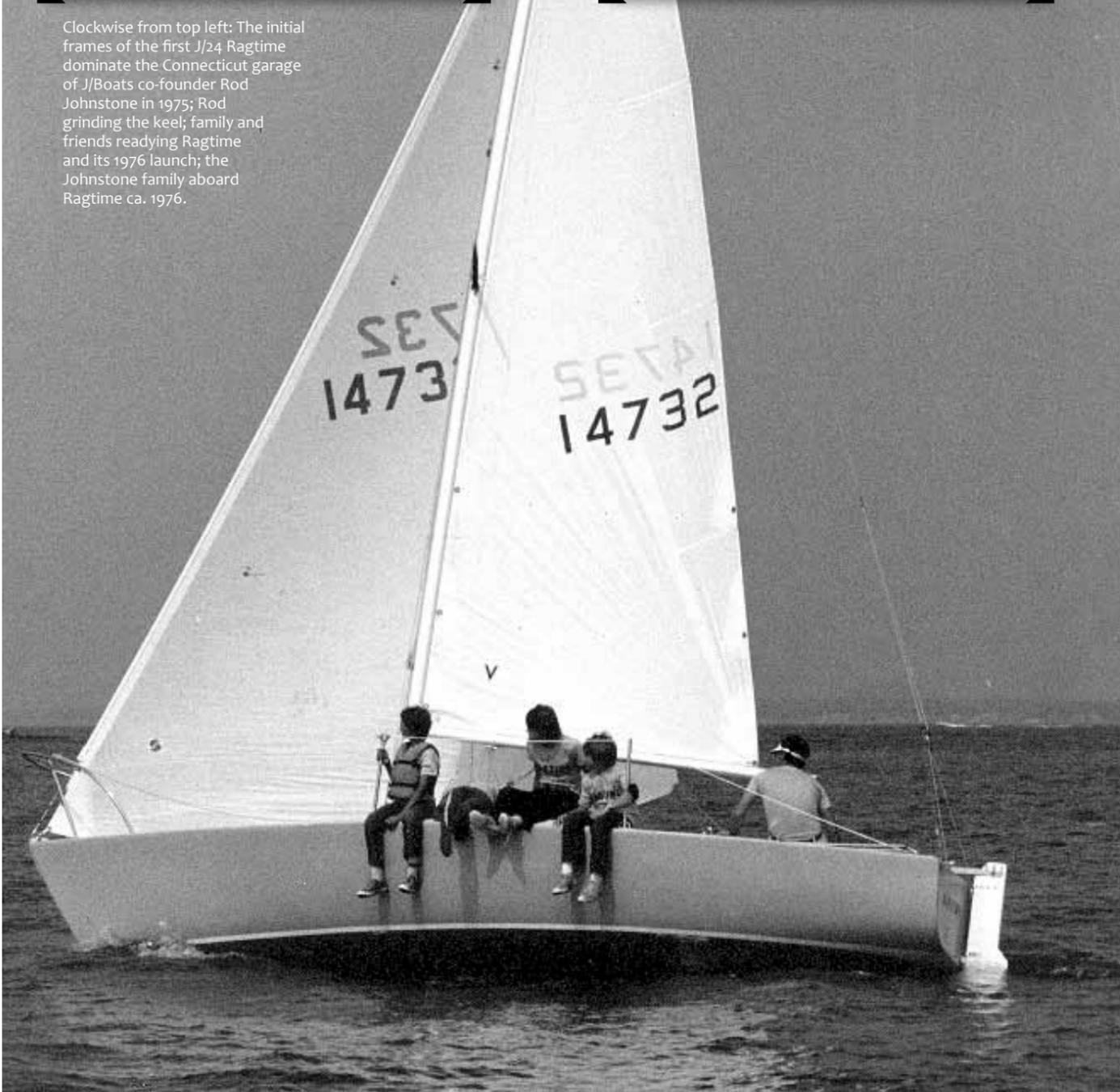
In 1975, with just \$400 worth of wood and fiberglass along with some rigging hardware left over from Bob's old soiling, Rodney began building a 24' sloop. Its ability to win races, while still being a beautiful and cozy family cruiser, would soon take the sailing world by storm. Inside the bay of a three-car garage in Stonington, Connecticut, Rodney

pieced *Ragtime* together on the weekends while selling advertisements for the sailing trade publication, *Soundings*, during the week. The boat boasted a simple design with no adjustable jib leads and a fixed headstay length, or as Rodney would say, "very little to fuss around with." She was fast, easy to handle, exciting to race and had a comfortable weekender cabin so he could take his wife, Lucia, and their boys Al, Jeff, and Phil along for adventures.

During the summer of '76, *Ragtime* outclassed the competition in the local racing circuits. The Thurber Race is a two-day journey from Fisher's Island Sound in Connecticut to Block Island round trip. It was *Ragtime's* final regatta of the season and of course she was victorious. Rodney's son, Al – who is now J/Boats vice-president and chief designer – recounts a tale from the turbulent first leg. "We were certainly one of the smallest boats and lightest crews in the fleet and were getting bounced around and slamming into big square seas. There was Rod with mainsheet in one hand ready to dump at any moment, with the other hand tightly gripped on the tiller. His jaw was clenched and with each big wave he and Sandy would de-power the sails. I remember when a seriously focused Rod looked over at me, changed his expression
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Clockwise from top left: The initial frames of the first J/24 Ragtime dominate the Connecticut garage of J/Boats co-founder Rod Johnstone in 1975; Rod grinding the keel; family and friends readying Ragtime and its 1976 launch; the Johnstone family aboard Ragtime ca. 1976.



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to a forced smile and yelled out through his teeth, 'Hey Al, isn't this fun!' Of course, I thought he was nuts, [but] thinking back now at that memorable moment, I see my father, the committed sailor, braving the elements with unwavering confidence in his boat Ragtime, [just] wanting to share his joy with everyone."

Around that same time, Bob was working in Chicago as vice president of marketing for AMF/Alcort, makers of the popular Sunfish sailboat. He had been looking for a boat just like *Ragtime* for the company to promote as the next step for people who enjoyed racing Sunfish, but wanted a bigger boat to accommodate family and friends, without sacrificing speed or agility. Bob thought *Ragtime* was a great fit for his campaign, though AMF turned down Rodney's design claiming a conflict of interest.

The Johnstone brothers, both now in their 40s, didn't stop there. "Rod's design was up to date, and he had it laid out right," says Everett Pearson, of esteemed Rhode Island boat builder Tillotson Pearson. "Everyone we talked to said the boat was really performing well, so we agreed to build it."

Having Pearson onboard guaranteed a reputation of quality construction in a cutting edge factory that could handle the volume J/Boats ended up requiring. "It was Everett's ability to quickly ramp up and meet demand building and delivering a durable lightweight sailboat at a reasonable price that was the true backbone of early J/Boat growth, as well as the collective success of the network," Al Johnstone explains. "His factory and talented workforce helped to deliver 2,500 J/24s in those first few years, populating almost every harbor in the United States with the hottest new sailboat on the market."

J/Boats started a movement by creating a new category of sailboat they called the racer/cruiser and built their brand through the realm of performance sailboats and one-design racing. To own a J/Boat is really to become a part of the J/

Class community. Many J/Boat models have their own class associations complete with regular competitions and events. J/News weekly newsletter details race results and activity from owners around the globe. More than 14,000 J/Boats have been sold in more than 45 different designs ranging from a 22' keelboat to its new 40' Offshore Speedster, J/121.

"Year after year, Rod and Bob Johnstone have introduced innovative designs that sail swiftly, safely and comfortably," says National Sailing Hall of Fame President Gary Jobson. "It makes you wonder how they can keep improving? But, the answer soon sets sail. J/Boats are handsome and efficient on the water, and they've created a boat for every budget."

Sail Newport Executive Director Brad Read agrees. The non-profit has owned and operated a fleet of J/22 sailboats since the 1980s. "The reason we chose the J/22 was because it is a really good vehicle for learning," says Read. "They are the right size for four adults and they are comfortable to rent. We've had everything from young adults to people in their 90's learning to sail, and they are great for racing too."

No matter the destination, there is a J/Boat designed to reach it. "I get the biggest kick out of people living their dreams in our boats," explains Rodney. "I recently heard of a 70-year-old couple sailing around the world in a 53' J/160 with only one additional crew member."

The Johnstone brothers handed over the helm to Rodney's sons Jeff and Al in 1992, but continue to serve on the board of directors along with their other sons Stu, Drake, Phil and Peter. Today, J/Boats continue to dominate a number of one-design race classes, while pushing the imaginations of cruising sailors around the globe, all in the spirit of fun and adventure. "It was a great honor and a wonderful reunion of friends," Bob Johnstone recalls of their induction ceremony in October of 2016, noting attendees suggesting the association be renamed that National Sailing Hall of Friends because, "Sailing is just that," Bob says. "Friends you make for life." 🍷