From Bob Scott

Mitch Neff was a man of few words. When he used them, his tone was gruff, the words were short and "bristol fashion". The longest word I ever heard him say was "Getthisboatmovin!" He was the most intense sailor. While "Falcon" crew's attention faded in the light air of Maine summer racing, Mitch's focus never left the sails except to say, "point to the mark", or "Murph, gimme six inches...that was eight--out two inches--stop". One of our lads who had been studying Mitch for several years asked me if he could call sail trim. He emulated Mitch in word, tone and attention to the sails. Later we dubbed him "Mini-Mitch".

We have raced together as a crew of ten, mostly fathers and sons, in the Eggemoggin Reach Regatta for almost decade. The morning before Mitch's first race he went up the mast to inspect the rigging, make adjustments and make notes for future correction. The morning after that race he woke up, brushed his teeth, asked me for a chamois and wiped the due from the bright work. Mitch would not have a faded, torn or wrong size American Flag saying, "It must be yacht like". I teach all young crew members these lessons.

I met Mitch in the mid 1980's when he came on board Falcon in Coconut Grove, handed me a set of NY32 plans, and said, "I'm Mitch Neff from Sparkman & Stephens. Rod asked me to give you these". Rod Stephens had guided me in rebuilding the mast. Mitch and Rod had caused me to realize I, like so many others, was a member of the S&S family. To borrow a term Mitch coined describing someone else, I had been "Mitch Neffed". Mates, it's the best.

Re: [The Publisher] EIGHT BELLS: Mitch Gibbons-Neff [In reply to]

* From Walter Keenan: The sailing community suffered a tremendous loss with the passing of Mitch Neff. Everyone who came into contact with Mitch over his lifetime of dedication to the sailing community probably has a Mitch story to share, and no doubt all over the world, in many languages, sailors are remembering him as a "classic" in every sense of the word. Mitch had authenticity, because he had done and seen it all: ocean races, naval combat, yacht construction, industry booms and busts, rating rules, rock stars and most recently the revival of the Classics as a racing class. Over the years, Mitch made thousands of friends around the world and was loved and respected by everyone from European royalty to varnishing crews in the West Indies. Thanks to Greg Matzat for sharing some of his Mitch-isms, and I hope Olin Stephens writes in with his favorite Mitch story - there are enough to fill a very long and enjoyable book!

Re: [The Publisher] EIGHT BELLS: Mitch Gibbons-Neff [In reply to]

I met Mitch in 1983, courtesy of Don Macauley, then Publisher of SAIL. My wife and I were wanting to buy a Swan. I called Mitch, introduced myself and thereby began a wonderful friendship. While sitting in a bar in Annapolis discussing all the aspects of the 411 that we liked, Mitch interrupted and said...."Look all the stuff you are talking about is important, but first and foremost --do you like the way the boat looks in the water? Answer that question and if you do, then we'll figure out a way for you to buy it. If you don't, then let's move on".
From then on my wife and I loved how direct and to the point Mitch was no matter what the subject. We talked about him often and enjoyed being with him and his young family over everything from pizza in Darien, to dinners at our home. There are so many great memories.

Mitch took care of us as clients, friends, and boat owners. He advised, he suggested, and he made us feel special. He took care of us even ordering materials for Albireo at wholesale. He told me what to say to boat yards regarding repairs. His language was spectacular. "Tell them to just (do so and so) and stop trying to earn a college tuition out of this simple job."

One day Mitch suggested that I might like to join the NYYC. I said I would so he became my sponsor. Hanging out with him while he introduced me to my Seconds was a special joy.

We last saw Mitch in the Summer of '05. He drove to Vermont to visit us on Albireo on the Lake. We were considering selling her and he wanted to help us decide. As usual his advice was listened to and taken. We still own her and everytime we sail 'Albi' in the future we will think of our dear friend.

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I was crouched next to my boat taking a break from sanding the bottom of my Swan 43 early one spring at the boat yard, covered from head to toe in blue paint dust, when this unassuming guy walked by and said "ah, Swan 43, great boat, but you know you can make it even better if you went around the hull and shaved a ¼" of the hull laminate. It won't affect the hull strength and it will make her lighter. We (meaning S&S) were a little conservative on the hull laminate specifications for this boat!". Now I was thinking to myself who the heck is this guy?

We chatted for awhile when this guy introduced himself as Mitch Neff, President of S&S and he was just passing by looking at boats in the yard while his kids were at soccer practice and noticed my old Swan. After that initial meeting I would bump into him at various events, restaurants, Bermuda Race, or I would just call him regarding some boat listing and he would always remember me and ask how my Swan was doing. I’m just a little guy but Mitch was always very kind to me.

I will miss him very much.

Hiroshi Nakajima

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I only met Mitch a couple of times, but he made an indelible impression on me.

When we first met, I was 22 years old and walking the docks at the 1984 Swan Atlantic Regatta in search of a ride. Lucky for me, Mitch was in the
process of rounding up a crew for a Swan 57 that he had recently sold to a neophyte owner and would be skippering for the series.

I don't know how many out there remember that regatta, but we had a nor'eamer one day, and the windward mark off Bretton Reef literally blew off the course when the fleet was half way up the first beat. We saw gusts to 57 apparent.

Well, right after the start, Mitch was driving and the boat was way overpowered carrying the Number 3 and a reef main. Being the industrious young gun, I suggested that we change down to the 4 and started to head down the companionway to fetch it. Mitch, knowing what I did not (that the owner had not sprung for any sails smaller than the 3), politely said that the 4 was "still at the loft" and suggested that we press on as we were.

At some point, someone suggested that we secure the leeward runner to the leeward chainplate, as the slack runner was rubbing against the leech. Well, down to leeward I went, just as we got hit by a serious gust. The boat rounded up and got half knocked down, and next thing I know 3 feet of Block Island Sound grey/green water is rushing down the deck at about 10 knots sweeping me off of my feet and leaving me hanging horizontally from the shrouds. This being 1984, and me being 22, I was not wearing any safety gear at all, just my Line 7's and a pair of those old orange and blue Elvstrom deck boots.

Hanging from the shrouds as I was, I looked afloat to see if anyone was aware of my situation. Well, I saw Mitch at the wheel calmly trying to get the rudder to bite and get the boat back under the rig. He and I briefly locked eyes, and he let out a whoop and a laugh and yelled for me to hang on. This was clearly fun for Mitch, and I decided that I was in pretty good hands. Seemed like forever, but the boat came up, my feet hit the deck again, and we were back on our way.

After the race was discontinued (no windward mark to round), Mitch gave me a slap on the back and an "atta boy" that I still cherish as much as any silver that I ever won, before or since.

More than a dozen years later, I took a job at a firm in NY that shared the same address with S&S -- 529 Fifth Avenue -- and one day Mitch walked into the elevator with me. He did not recognize me, but when I explained how we had met before he invited me up to his office and we spent the next hour talking about boats, and particularly what I should be looking for in my first raceboat. What a genuinely nice guy.

I'm truly sorry to hear about his passing. My sympathy to his family and friends.

From Paul Buttrose: Almost thirty-five years ago while hustling to finish a Swan 48 for hand-over in time for the Bermuda Race, Mitch Neff said, “we gotta make this right for the owner” and then spent most of the night doing so. This constant mantra was modified a few years ago with the addition, “Hey, what can I tell ya? We care about the owners; we’re dinosaurs.” In September, Mitch sailed his last regatta with his ideal crew, Olin Stephens, his sons TM and Paul, and an owner about whom he cared. Even Mitch resorted to foul weather gear in the heavy conditions, but he never looked happier onboard DORADE, a boat he was instrumental in ushering back to US waters, where in his words, “she belongs.” Mitch… you were a good dinosaur.
* From Peter Cassidy: One of the biggest honors in my life is when Mitch Gibbons-Neff accepted my invitation to be one of my Watch Captains in the 100th anniversary of the Newport Bermuda race onboard my S&S New York 32 "Siren". He hesitated only a moment indicating that he was concerned about the time he could commit to boat preparation for the race. I assured him that I could handle that aspect of the project and he assured me that I was under estimating it in his typical fashion. Sure enough he was right, but who was there to pick up the slack, Mitch Gibbons-Neff driving 3.5 hours to and from my boat in Marion, Ma from his home in CT. He spent several weekends of his free time and about 20 trips up and down my rig to make sure every shroud was tuned, every cotter pin taped and no halyard would suffer from chafe. No job was too big or too small, Mitch and I wet sanded the bottom of the boat, with bottom paint dripping from his elbows he stated "she looks fast". When we arrived in Bermuda, Mitch dawned his swim suit and proceeded to shower with a hose on the dock..."this is the way it use to be". I will miss you sir.