

Riding out a marital storm

A good old boat saves a good old marriage

by Robert Yagelski

The decision to buy a sailboat happened suddenly, in the midst of a marital storm. For years, Cheryl and I had talked of owning a sailboat, but with no sailing experience, two growing sons, and demanding careers, a sailboat could never be more than a daydream. Now, in our late 40s and approaching our 25th wedding anniversary, we unexpectedly found ourselves trying to realize that old dream.

It had been a rough year, our most challenging as a couple, and it didn't always look like we'd weather the storm. Sometime in early spring, still a bit unsteady but resolute after a hard winter that at times promised to be our last together, we decided to plan a second honeymoon to celebrate our approaching silver anniversary. It was a risk. We weren't sure we'd make it to the fall, when we hoped to take our trip.

As I prepared to book our flights, an email from a relative mentioned a sailboat for sale. I looked at the boat in the attached photos and something clicked. I knew nothing about this sailboat, but somehow the idea of it seemed just right. I showed the photos to Cheryl and soon we scrapped our vacation plans. For the money we would spend on a second honeymoon, we could own a sailboat. What better way to celebrate our 25 years together: a new boat, a new hobby, and maybe a renewed journey together?

We spent the next three months learning as much as we could about sailing, sailboats, and the used-boat market. We felt like newlyweds again, eager to hoist our sails

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in favorable winds. Seldom had we shared such a clear sense of purpose in recent years, and I began to feel that confidence we once had together, a confidence we would eventually learn to feel in the cockpit as the boat heels in a fresh breeze.

I began studying an old copy of John Rousmaniere's *The Annapolis Book of Seamanship* that Cheryl had bought me one Christmas long ago, and we visited sailing websites and read ads for used boats. We signed up for sailing lessons. On weekends we inspected boats for sale



and on Sunday evenings discussed the pros and cons of the promising ones we'd seen. Meanwhile, we continued to tack through the headwinds of our aging marriage, struggling at times to keep our course. But the goal of finding the right sailboat somehow helped us steer out of trouble. When we finally bought a sailboat in late spring, it felt like many new beginnings at once.

Sailing every chance

Two months later, our 1983 O'Day 23 was swinging at her mooring on Lake George in upstate New York, and we were sailing every chance we got. We quickly learned that there was much more to that old boat than the smooth lines and cozy cabin that first attracted us to her. She required constant attention, from tedious cleaning, waxing, and polishing to finding leaks and re-bedding deck hardware. But we were also learning that we enjoyed maintaining our boat almost as much as we loved sailing together.

We had days when the breeze was just right and the boat glided effortlessly over sparkling water. And we had those days that every novice sailor knows: sloppy tacks, a balky tiller, and uncertain communication between helmsman and crew. But we were actually in familiar waters: we had been sailing together through the changing weather of a long-term marriage. And we were still learning to set a course through uncertain conditions.

As our first sailing season wound down, our attention turned to our sailboat's name. We loved the boat, but we weren't so much in love with her name, *Pandemonium*. Bob, her original owner, told us the story of the boat's name. He had bought her when his two daughters were toddlers. With no sailing experience, Bob and his family had had their share of misadventures on their new boat. When they finally decided to name her, someone suggested *Pandemonium*, which seemed to describe their time on the boat perfectly.

PHOTOS BY ADAM YAGELSKI

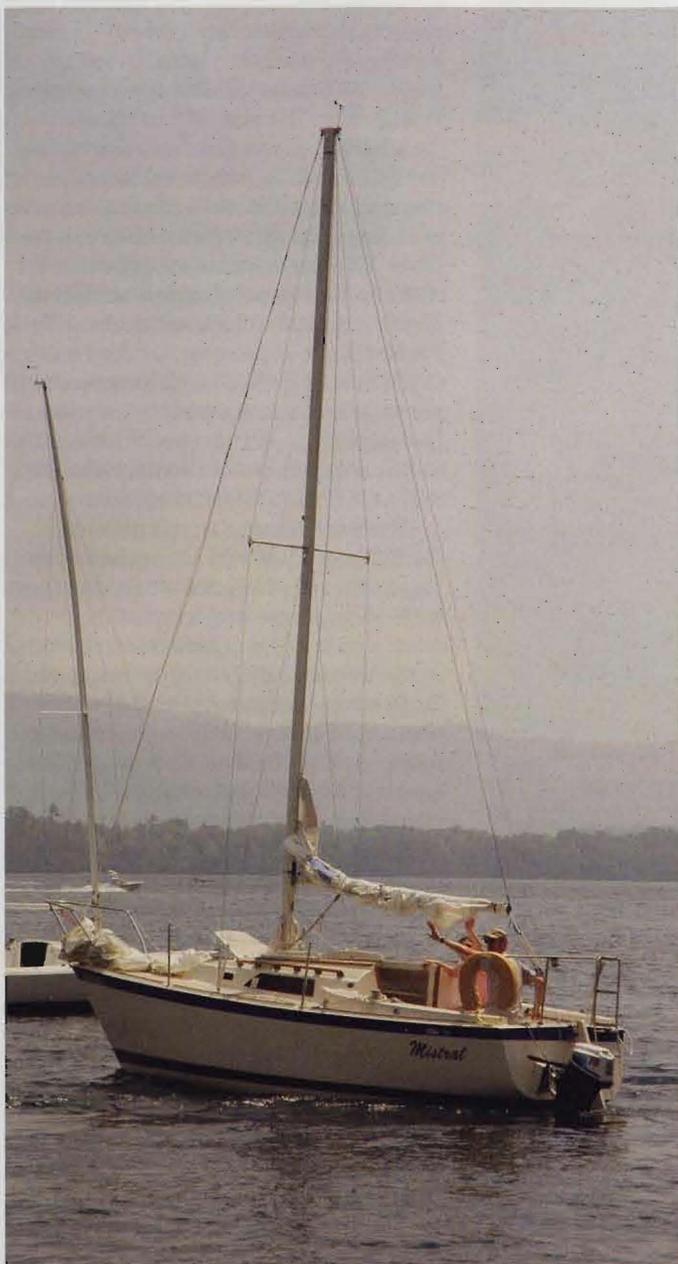
Bob and Cheryl Yagelski, facing page, getting ready to re-christen *Mistral*, below, on Lake George, New York.

As a new sailor myself, I appreciated the name. But it wasn't right for us. Cheryl and I had had enough pandemonium in recent years.

We learned from experienced sailors about the superstitions associated with changing a boat's name and about complicated renaming rituals. So we took the prospect of renaming seriously. Still, we wanted to give our boat a name that would capture our sense of her steady character and her

role in our continuing voyage together. As we launched her for our second season, we still hadn't found the right name. Sometimes, on one of those perfect days, when the sailing was smooth and the boat felt like part of us, we'd add a name to our list. Often, exhausted after a day on the water, we discussed the names on the list, inspired by the day's challenges and our growing appreciation for our sailboat.

We're in no rush, though. We've learned through hard experience that when the time is right, we'll know. But if we were to name our sailboat after our marriage, we might call her *Resilient*. 



Bob and Cheryl Yagelski re-christened their boat Mistral on the day these photos were taken. A mistral is a wind that annually blows from the Alps into the Mediterranean Sea, which makes it a kind of mountain breeze. That name appealed to them because they sail in the mountain breezes that blow from the Adirondack Mountains onto Lake George in upstate New York. And "Mistral Wind" is a song that was a favorite of theirs when they dated in college. "It took us two years, but we finally found a name we think is just right for the boat," Bob reports.



Before

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