

# SKIP NOVAK

DETAILS COUNT, RIGHT DOWN TO THE SIZE OF A SPLIT PIN...

Soon after the launching of *Vinson of Antarctica* I had to instruct the shipyard to pull out and reinsert all the split pins in the masts. This might have been construed as an over the top obsession with detail, but to be 'true to my school' I had to insist it be done.

All the split pins were too long and bent over into curly cues back around the clevis pin. We've all seen this done – I believe it is an aircraft specification, and understandably so for things that could fall out of the sky.

But how many times have we all been through a monumental struggle to extract split pins installed in this fashion? You start out with a pair of pliers and soon you have been down and back up from the workshop a half dozen times and are surrounded on deck with vice grips, plumber's pliers, screwdrivers... eventually resorting to the hacksaw and a punch set with a hammer, all resulting in bruised or grazed knuckles at the same time shocking bystanders with your expletives. It's a much harder job doing this aloft, say when taking down headstays to service furlers – though at least then the crew on deck and any bystanders are spared the rhetoric.

Those of you of a certain age will know who Olin Stephens is – arguably the most famous yacht designer of the last century. Only a few though, might remember his brother, Rod, who I had the pleasure of meeting back in the 1970s.

Rod was also a designer, but more of an engineer, and one of his jobs for the US design firm Sparkman & Stephens was to do a final inspection of the thousands of S&S designs built around the world.

He came on board the *Dora IV*, a beautiful 61ft sloop, before the 1972 Bermuda Race and nosed around dishing out advice to our young crew. His passion was rigs. Inherently wiry and strong he loved to go aloft, even into his 70s.

On *Dora IV* in Newport he soon focused on the split pins, a ritual he became famous for. He was not impressed with our set-up and gave us a good lecture on it.

He told us in no uncertain terms the length of a split pin had to be one and half times the diameter of the clevis pin. If they are too long you need to cut them

down to size. The ends need to be rounded off with a file so as not to snag on ropes and sails. The split pin should face down along the fork or toggle and not stick out beyond it. When opening the split pins each leg should spread by 10°, giving 20° symmetrically. The idea behind this is that if you have to pull that split pin out in a hurry, say on a dismasting, you only need to slightly close the legs and give the eye a pull. And rest assured readers, with a 20° spread it is not going to work itself out.

Although his lecture might have seemed over the top to some, it was not to me, as I already had my share of badly set up rigs in my boatyard days as a rigger in Clearwater, Florida, and the split pin problem was endemic.

Split pins are usually put in place in a hurry and given little thought. This is one of my many pet peeves – and that's something of an understatement.

Rod had more to say about all sorts of things in the rigs he inspected and I had the pleasure of having him on board on other yachts I was on where the split pins were 'just so'. I loved to

watch him give me the nod of approval when we got to the base of the shrouds.

I think we can take Rod's obsession with split pins as a metaphor for the detail that is required when setting up not only rigs, but everything else on board a yacht that is critical. One badly set up piece of equipment will eventually lead to another problem and in quick time you have a serious set of circumstances on your hands.

While on the topic of rigs, how often do you go aloft and do a thorough inspection? Before each voyage, after a voyage or both? Do you search out cracks in the welds of masthead cranes and spreaders? If you have simple

1/19 stainless steel wire for standing rigging do you closely check each terminal whether they be compression fittings or swaged? (you need a magnifying glass to check for cracks on swages). Are your shroud rollers easily lifted to inspect rigging terminals, turnbuckles, toggles and chainplates? If you have to unscrew them from collars they are not. Is there any evidence of loosening screws on mast tracks and pole car tracks?

Final question: does a rig inspection take five minutes or 30? I know the right answer. Do you? ■

## 'The split pin problem was endemic'

