



Left, Strang (seated), Carl Kiekhaefer (glasses) and Ralph Evinrude at a press luncheon. Middle, Strang (helmet) before the start of a 100-mile race down the Hudson River. Early in his competition days, a teenage Strang (in boat) prepares for a race.

# Remembering an Industry Icon

Charlie Strang: 1922-2018

By Ben Sherwood

Charlie Strang was a marine-propulsion icon. To those who knew and worked with him, he was brilliant. A genius. He was just one month shy of 97 years old when he passed away peacefully on March 11, 2018, and he was remarkably keen-minded until his final hours. His wife, Barbara, said Strang walked and picked up the mail every day, including on March 11, when he went into the kitchen, had some tea, made and ate his lunch, and then washed his dishes.

He felt tired, so she suggested that he “go sit in your chair and relax.” So, he did. After 30 minutes or so, she found him with the sun shining on his face. She shook his arm to get him to change his position. No response. Strang had peacefully passed away.

He retired from Outboard Marine Corp. in 1990, when he turned 70. He retired then because of what many OMC veterans considered a foolish corporate policy that required board members to retire at age 70. What a shame (Strang admitted that he had been part of the board’s bad decision to set that age limit). OMC had been profitable under his tenure as president and, later, chairman of the board and CEO. The license plate on his car read ROI 15.

At the time of his retirement, Evinrude and Johnson had significant market share, and the OMC board appointed what many employees/personnel considered to be a series of four increasingly incompetent successors who artfully guided the corporation into bankruptcy in just 10 years. At least two were brought in from other industries and we felt they did not know the boating industry and outboard motors. One was referred to by many of the corporate staff as “Captain Chaos.” Another chairman just didn’t seem able to make decisions or tell the truth. By 2000, they had sunk the ship. As Strang said to me, “I don’t know how they got from a healthy 60-percent market share when I retired down to 9 percent in only 10 years. That takes some kind of talent.”



If the OMC board had just changed that mandatory retirement rule, Strang could have stayed on for many more years and kept OMC profitable — probably still going strong today.

Until he passed away, he was so incredibly sharp. When I called him in 2013 for an article interview, he was 92. When he answered the phone, he sounded 30 or 40. I wasn’t sure who it was, so I said, “Is Charlie there?” He said, “This is Charlie.” I was surprised he sounded so young and sharp. I asked him how his health was and he said, “It is excellent.” Then I asked how he sounded so young and energetic.

“My doctor asked me the same thing,” Strang said. “He said if he could figure out how I do it, he would bottle it and make a lot of money.”

Many folks who had seen and talked to Strang in the past year were amazed at how sharp he was. Strang had loved racing since he was a boy, and his mother bought him a boat when he was 15. Tad Whitten worked with Strang on several American Power Boat Association projects and came to regard him as a mentor. “Charlie LOVED racing, really any kind but particularly boat racing,” said Whitten. “He thrived on good competition.” Whitten continued to work with Strang to learn the APBA rules. They got to know each other and became good friends. Whitten called Strang the Wizard of Oz of the marine business and also racing.

Whitten said Strang’s passion burned hot well into his later years, including on his home waters near Antioch, Ill. “One time about four years ago when he was about 93, I saw Charlie out on the lake racing on a personal watercraft, grinning from ear to ear as he zoomed past at full speed,” said Whitten. He is a contractor to Mercury Marine. In 2007, stern drive engine at Skipper Bud’s on Chain of Lakes in Illinois. It was close to Strang’s home, so Whitten invited him to come check it out. Whitten let Strang take control and said, “Charlie was grinning ear to ear as he ran the boat at full speed.”

Earl Bentz was also a close friend of Strang’s, having worked for him for several years as president of OMC’s fishing boat companies.

“Charlie Strang was not only one of the kindest, sweetest men in this industry, he was also a quiet and humble genius,” said Bentz, who went on to fund Triton Boats after leaving OMC. “And he was a great mentor. It was a privilege to work for him. His admirable management style was to put capable, knowledgeable leaders in key positions in his team and let them do what they do best: run their department, whatever that may be, and was always there to offer them support when they needed it. Charlie was blessed with an abnormal amount of common sense and associated with others sharing the same gift. His no-nonsense approach to business was appreci-

ated and respected by all who had the privilege to work with him. He had a positive impact on so many people in the marine industry, those who were on his team and even his competitors. My life was blessed to know him, work with him and to have him as my friend.”

Bentz started working in the marine industry at Jenk’s Outboard in May, 1966, rigging boats, packing wheel bearings on trailers and tuning outboards. “I started my manufacturing career at Hydra Sports in June, 1975. Then I resigned and started Stratos boats,” Bentz explained. “Then I sold my Stratos Boat Company to OMC in 1987 at which point I started working at OMC for Charlie. Charlie was Chairman of the OMC board at the time and led the team.”

Bentz continued, “Under the OMC umbrella, I started Javelin boats, another bass boat company and purchased Hydra Sport. I stayed with OMC as president of their fishing division in both glass and aluminum in charge of Stratos, Javelin, Hydra Sport, Topaz, Quest, Lowe, Sea Nymph, Sun Cruiser and Grumman. After I resigned from OMC, I founded Triton Boats which included bass boats, center-console offshore boats up to 35’ aluminum fish boats, duck boats and pontoons. I sold Triton to Brunswick in 2005.”

Edgar Rose knew was another Strang fan and he knew Charlie longer than any of us, having served as vice president of engineering at OMC. They met in December 1947 when Rose was writing his master’s thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His thesis subject was lubrication so he went to the MIT lube lab. Rose met Strang, who already had his degree and was working there. Strang helped Rose finish his thesis in time to get his degree and they became good friends, going on to work together for Carl Kiekhaefer at Mercury.

In 1950, at the American Power Boat Association National Championships near Winter Haven, Fla., Strang had a brief first meeting with Kiekhaefer, who accused the race judges of making an unfair call on one of Kiekhaefer’s drivers. Kiekhaefer heard how Strang handled the situation and thanked him for his support.

The two later met again at the APBA annual meeting. Strang asked Kiekhaefer why Mercury didn’t build a bigger-horsepower outboard. Kiekhaefer responded, with, “If you are so damned smart, why don’t you come and build it for us?” In June 1951, Strang went to work for Kiekhaefer as director of research at the in Oshkosh, Wis. Shortly after that, Strang convinced Rose to come to Oshkosh and work for him. Strang eventually became executive vice president of Mercury, second only to Kiekhaefer in the company.

## Strang Milestones

Charlie Strang will also be remembered for many achievements and awards.

- He created the concept of the sterndrive while at MIT.
- He had about 3 dozen patents.
- In 1998, eight years after his retirement, Bill France, one of the two owners of NASCAR, announced that Strang would be the National Commissioner for NASCAR, a position he held for 10 years.
- At 95, Strang was still in the boating game as National Commissioner of the APBA (American Power Boat Association).
- 1989 Strang received the American Success Award from President George H.W. Bush
- Elected to the National Marine Manufacturers Association Hall of Fame.
- 2006 Vice President of the Union Internationale Motonautique,
- 2007 elected President of UIM
- 2011 elected to the UIM Hall of Fame.
- 2015 inducted into the MOPAR Hall of Fame.



From left, Strang, Jeff Brewster and Edgar Rose at the APBA annual conference last January.

“Charlie Strang was one of the few people who could get along with Carl,” said Rose. “And Charlie was always concerned about other people.”

A few years ago, I asked Strang why he left Mercury. He said, “In 1961, Carl Kiekhaefer sold his company to Brunswick but continued to manage the business. At that point Carl just couldn’t accept the reality that he had sold Mercury and it was no longer his.” That led to continuous conflicts between Carl and Brunswick that continued to escalate. It is a long story but it ended with Charlie resigning in 1964.

After leaving Mercury, Strang did consulting work. Ralph Evinrude had him do some projects for Doc Jones, an Evinrude distributor in Colorado and Arizona. Jones had Strang designing high-speed gearcases for OMC outboards. Strang later learned that the deal he had was set up by Evinrude. He wanted to hire Strang but wanted to make sure he had no loyalties to Kiekhaefer. So, Strang ended up working for OMC. Evinrude made him head of marine engineering. About a year afterward, Strang brought Rose on board in the engineering department in 1967.

Strang became OMC’s president and general manager in 1974; president and CEO in 1980; and chairman of the board in 1982. Rose became vice president of engineering, a position he held until he retired in 1991 at age 65.

“Charlie was a damned good engineer and always extremely fair to work for,” Rose said. “He was a very logical person, which always appealed to me. And Charlie was never driven by corporate politics. He was just interested in getting results.” Edgar and Charlie remained good friends.

Craig Cermak, who married Charlie and Barbara’s niece, said Charlie always thought outside the norm.

“In the ‘50s, Charlie was approached by Lou Fageol (of Twin Coach Company) about options for supercharging his radical twin-engine, Porsche-powered road race car,” Cermak said. “Charlie worked with Lou to adapt a McCulloch chainsaw engine to drive a centrifugal supercharger for each engine — a trick he had used in boat racing. This allowed Lou to spool up the superchargers mid-corner so the car could exit the corner under full boost.”

Cermak continued, “Charlie told me this story in the mid 90’s and, at the time, I could not find anything on line about the car. A few years ago, I was telling a friend the story and I Googled the car again and I found a couple good stories about the car. Just today, I Googled the car and found a very detailed story from 2015 that actually mentions Charlie.”



Strang (in hat) was a fixture at APBA races throughout the country for decades.

But Strang was more than just the subject of a good story. “Charlie always had a good story to tell, and he told them well,” said Cermak. “He also was a great listener. I would tell him about a challenge I was dealing with at work — I am an engineer for a medical device company — and he would always follow up with me about the challenge the next time he saw me, which was often a year or two later. One time I was discussing a problem I was having with magnetic properties of SST tubing. In his customary way, he said, ‘Oh yes, Carl looked at purchasing an SST tubing company years ago, and I think I know what your problem could be.’ As he described the manufacturing process he observed 45 years earlier, it became clear he did indeed know what the problem was. He was simply extraordinary. I last talked with Charlie

around Christmas. He was still sharp and clear. I will really miss him.”

Strang also focused on keeping dealers and customers happy. Henry “Skip” Hegel, who was director of service at OMC, remembered Strang stopping at his office one day and saying, “I want you to make sure that you treat every customer who has a problem with first-class care.” Hegel said Strang told him, “Treat them like you would want to be treated and that is what we really tried to do.”

But to those of us who knew Charlie Strang, he will simply — and greatly — be missed. ■

Ben Sherwood, a 50-plus-year veteran of the marine industry, was head of sales and marketing at Johnson and Evinrude during the years when Charlie Strang was chairman of the board of Outboard Marine Corp. After retiring, Ben was a marine trade magazine columnist for more than 20 years. He wrote the book “How to Succeed in Marine Retailing.” He can be reached at [ben@bensherwood.net](mailto:ben@bensherwood.net)