



EAST GREENWICH YACHT CLUB



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A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Proper Yacht: Paul Koch and Ponyo



Some boats are acquired. Others are accumulated, year by year, skill by skill, memory by memory. Ponyo belongs to the latter category. Member, Dr. Paul Koch's sailing story begins at our club in 1963, when Wednesday nights meant one hundred boats finishing in the cove just off the gas dock. "Years of racing dinghies and larger boats never distracted me from my affinity for gaff rigged classics," Koch says. That preference endured quietly through decades of sailing, waiting for the one thing most sailors never quite get enough of: time. Retirement provided it.

Rather than buy a finished boat, Koch chose a project that would occupy five years and reward patience. He selected a 1915 Crowninshield designed Camden Class Knockabout, which he describes simply as "the longest boat I could comfortably fit in my shop," and began building Ponyo between 2016 and 2021. The work was methodical. Plans were lofted. Fourteen station molds were built. The hull was strip planked in Spanish cedar, with laminated Honduran mahogany ribs and deck beams, and an interior ceiling of Alaskan yellow cedar. "I built everything except four items," Koch says. "The lead ballast keel, the stainless-steel framed rudder, the sails, and the spars." That level of craftsmanship tends to be noticed.

Ponyo was later featured in *WoodenBoat*, an acknowledgment that carries particular weight among classic boatbuilders. For Koch, it was less validation than completion. The boat had made the transition from private project to public object. On the racecourse, Ponyo has settled into a familiar rhythm. Each summer includes the Camden Classic Cup, not simply because the boat was designed for those waters, but because of the racing itself.



"There are a lot of similar sized boats up there," Koch explains. "Dragons, Spidsgatters, Dark Harbors. Some years we have so many daysailers we need to split into two classes. It's the closest racing we see all year." Narragansett Bay presents a different challenge. "So many of the classics are twice my size," he notes, which quietly reframes every tactical decision. Maine, however, has become the center of Ponyo's season. Boothbay and Camden offer what the boat seems to prefer: steady breezes, flat water, and regattas that balance serious racing with serious hospitality. "We can rig or derig in just two hours," Koch says, describing a logistics routine refined over time that includes Bristol Marine, Lyman Morse, and temporary storage at Artisan Boat Yard. The details matter because they allow the sailing to take precedence.

In alternate years, the Eggemoggin Reach Regatta enters the rotation, though this season Ponyo will instead sail in the NYYC Astor Cup. Charleston offered a sharp contrast. "The racing is always excellent, provided you love strong tides, currents, and hitting the shore to escape them," Koch says. Charleston Race Week, now three decades old, stages its social events aboard the USS Yorktown, where Ponyo stood out as the only gaff rigged classic in attendance. "We were considered the Belle of the Ball," he says, with a trace of amusement. The timing helped. With family in Charleston and school vacation week underway, the regatta blended into post-race day sailing with grandchildren. That continuity is intentional.

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Sailing, in the Koch family, is something handed down rather than scheduled. His son Paul Jr., now a film composer in Hollywood, completed the full GBSA program and later sailed more than twenty NYYC Cruise passages with his father. “He is the best sailing mate I’ve ever had,” Koch says. A son in law has joined more recently, learning quickly and fitting in easily. At home, restored Optimists and a Beetle catboat form a small, informal sailing school for visiting grandchildren. “Soon we’ll have three generations racing together,” Koch adds.

This season, Ponyo is briefly ashore for what Koch calls a spa retreat. The bottom is being converted from ablative to hard antifouling. The hull has been re faired for new paint. The brightwork has been taken back to wood, and the varnish will be rebuilt from scratch. New sails are on order, and the sail number will change to 42.

“The answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything,” Koch explains with a nod to Douglas Adams. Then the calendar fills again. Tiedemann. Boothbay. Camden. Herreshoff. Newport and IYRS. The NYYC Annual Regatta. The Astor Cup. Possibly Marblehead or the Vineyard Cup. And, of course, the EGYC Annual, the Hagglund, and a few Wednesday nights back home. “It’s a short season,” Koch says, Hitchhiker’s Guide in hand. “But we do what we can.”

