

# MILLY'S NAVY

AS AGING ONE-DESIGN FLEETS STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN THEIR NUMBERS, MILLY BILLER IS CHAMPIONING THE CAUSE FOR A BELOVED OLD DESIGN.

STARTING LINE  
ONE-DESIGN BY JOE BERKELY



**THE INTERNATIONAL 110** originated in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in 1939, and today it is experiencing a rebirth, 3,000 miles away from its East Coast origins, in the even smaller seaside town of Inverness, California, which is located at the gateway to Point Reyes Peninsula, with two parks — one national and one state — that are populated by more elk, mountain lions, whales and dolphins than sailors. The town's population of 1,304 people live surrounded by natural beauty.

There's also an immigrant population of 110s, led by 62-year-old Milly Biller, who has been at the

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helm of a 110 since she was 5 years old. That's when her father, an astrophysicist, took her sailing one day, and then dove into the water, leaving her alone in the boat. Instead of feeling alarmed, Biller felt liberated and excited. She was hooked.

Biller's older sister, Laura Alderice, says that their father was preoccupied with his work, and one day while he was lost in thought, young Biller handed him a typewritten piece of paper and asked him to sign it. He did, not



With its 24-foot length, narrow 4-foot beam and 300-pound fin keel, the planing International 110 is said to be the world's first sportboat.

Photo: courtesy Milly Biller

**“IN A 110, WIND AND WATER COME TOGETHER WITH HULL AND SAIL, SKIPPER AND CREW, TRIM AND ANGLE, WHEN THE BOAT LIFTS YOU, LITERALLY, TO A HIGHER PLANE.”**

realizing his young daughter had created a deed transferring rights to the 110. Biller named the boat *Big Pink*, after the home where The Band composed their debut album. With a bright pink topside, it's easy to spot on any starting line.

One-design fleets elsewhere in the country are shrinking, but not Biller's. She built hers from two boats to 23, one boat at a time. Recently, 10 members of the Inverness YC, all of them artists, donated watercolor paintings to the fleet. Once the paintings were sold at auction, there was enough money in the kitty to host nationals in 2016.

With proceeds from other fundraisers, Biller purchased boats that needed work. Using skills she acquired from a career restoring homes nestled in the woods of Inverness, she's rebuilt at least one herself. There are plenty of fleet members who offer to help, however. “This fleet is such a tight group,” says Biller. “If I asked anyone for a mast or a boom, I'd probably end up with three.”

Will Laidlaw, a landlocked 110 sailor from Berkshire County, Massachusetts, has been with the class for 35 years, and says Biller's attitude has done much to boost participation nationwide. “Some people can be off-putting when they try to recruit you,” says Laidlaw. “Something about Milly's approach really makes you want to do it.”

As president of the 110 class, Biller is always seeking ways to grow the fleet. New fiberglass boats are available, but the 110 DIY spirit prompted some members to explore a kit boat. Ross Weene and Eli Slater — yacht designers and co-skippers of the 2013 National Championship team — are creating CAD drawings of the 110 that can be programmed into a CNC machine to cut the parts out of wood. “If that comes to fruition, I would probably be one of the first in line to build one just for the fun of it,” says Biller.

Such dedication warrants dubbing the unconventional double-ender a “cult boat.” Kurt Fleming, of Marblehead, who won the National Championship with skipper Jack Slattery in 1981 and 1982, was so moved by Biller's mix of enthusiasm and persuasion that he recently made a pilgrimage to Inverness to sail with the fleet.

“Milly greeted us warmly and with a knowing smile, and promptly told us: ‘Go for it! You're gonna love it. The first time is free,’” says Fleming. “We set off in the fully rigged ‘teaser’ boat. The cult, and the charismatic leader, always promises to bring you nirvana. Yoga and meditation retreats, vintage car-track days, golfing the great courses — all strive to bring you to this higher mind-space.”

In a 110, wind and water come together with hull and sail, skipper and crew, trim and angle, when the boat lifts you, literally, to a higher plane. Effort and challenge come together until all at once, things go quiet — satisfyingly quiet, until somebody says: ‘Whoa, yeah! That's the stuff.’ It is the chakras aligned with a bright flash, the vintage car hooking up perfectly out of a turn, the perfect golf shot ... that flash-of-light moment that keeps you coming back ... Milly is guiding me in from this addiction jag. Whoa, that's the stuff.”

Another once and future 110er, Peter Huston, from Put-in-Bay, Ohio, also is headed west to visit the 110 Mecca of Inverness. Biller will be ready. “We will definitely party him big time,” she says with a laugh. ▲

The tight-knit 110 class, led by Milly Biller (middle), has grown from two to 23 boats at the Inverness YC. Club members credit Biller's enthusiasm for the design as the driving force behind the expansion. With 58 years at the helm of a 110, it's no surprise Biller is all smiles when she's aboard.

Photo: Jim Laws

