

Jack Köper—Cape Town's man of sail



Jack Köper

know the first thing about rules."

In 1936 he came to South Africa, married a Dutch girl, and then returned to Europe at the outbreak of war and served with the Netherlands Government in London. In 1947 the Sprog sailing dinghy made its appearance on South African vleis, and Jack was asked by a friend to skipper a Sprog at Zeekoevlei. "We sailed quite successfully," he recalled modestly. What, in fact, happened was that he won the national yachting regatta at Knysna in 1950.

Shortly afterwards Köper, with an instinctive feeling for the best in sailing, was struck by a new design published in a

Dutch yachting magazine to which he subscribed. With others he sensed that the 20 ft. Flying Dutchman—now regarded as the aristocrat of single-hulled sailing dinghies throughout the world—could become an international class.

With the aid of another well-known yachting personality, Dr. Ken Warr, he arranged for the first batch of FD shells to be sent to South Africa. They arrived in Cape Town in April, 1952.

"Dr. Warr did a lot to propagate the class by discussing the merits of the FD while filling teeth," Köper laughed. "I tried to do it by building Flying Dutchmen as cheaply as I could. I built the first one

for R320. Ken Warr sailed the first FD at Hermanus, Gordon Burn Wood introduced it at the Royal Cape Yacht Club, and I had the first on Zeekoevlei. It became an Olympic class in 1956."

Meanwhile Jack Köper's family of two sons and two daughters were showing an increasing keenness to follow in the wake of their father. When Gerhard, the second oldest, was 14 he wanted his own boat.

"So I decided to design one myself. It had to be safe, easy for a young boy to handle, simple and cheap to build, yet fast enough to plane and provide real excitement.

"The result was the Dab-

chick, which I designed in six months. Underwater, the hull was V-type, yet it was totally enclosed and no water could get in in the event of a capsize.

"The size of the boat was entirely dependent on the material I had to hand. The largest plywood sheets are made 8 ft. by 4 ft. So three sheets would cover a boat 12 ft. by 4 ft. which are the overall dimensions of the Dabchick.

"Seven of these boats were built by pupils of Rondebosch Boys' High School under the supervision of one of the masters, Mr. Willem Diepeveen. The newly-published *South African Yachting* magazine also published the plans. In one year, we issued numbers to 250 Dabchicks.

"Now, ten years later, there are 2,100 Dabchicks, not only in South Africa but also in England, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and several African countries including Kenya and Nigeria.

"I understand that the yacht club to be formed by Coloured people at Princess Vlei will also start off with Dabchicks."

He designed the Dabchick, a craft sailed by yachtsmen in many parts of the world

BY JOHN VICTOR SCOTT

FEW men start a new career at the age of 55. Even fewer are lucky enough to do for a living what was formerly a hobby. Last year Jack Köper, South African yachtsman, sailing dinghy designer and backyard boat builder did both—he left the printing trade in which he had worked all his life, and became a professional sailmaker.

In his sail-loft at Paarden Eiland he now has a staff of six to cope with orders from as far as Canada and United States. They range from sails for the little "Dabchick" which Köper designed himself, to sails measuring hundreds of square feet for ocean-going keel yachts.

Like many of his other

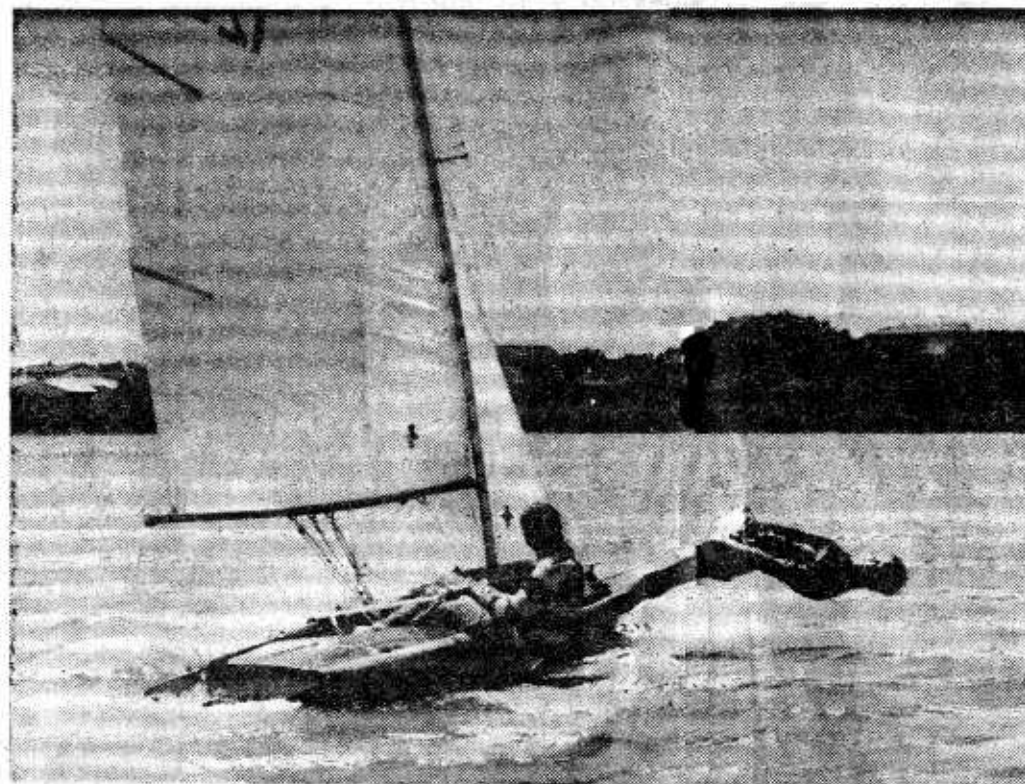
activities, Köper's sailmaking is self-taught—"through books and trial and error"—though before setting up as a professional, he went on a brief visit to England, Holland, Switzerland and Italy to study the latest methods.

"A lot has been written about the science of sail shapes and wind forces and so on—but sailmaking is still a creative art."

Jack Köper's first sailing experience occurred when he was nine, on a river near his birthplace, Haarlem, in Holland. "My father took me out in his 12-ft. dinghy, and I was dead scared. Water was coming over the bow and I thought we were going to capsize. I kept out of sailing boats for years afterwards."

About ten years later, however, he joined a rowing club, but was forced to give up this form of exercise because of health reasons.

"So at the age of 22 I started sailing again. I bought myself a 12 square metre sharpie and won the first race I ever sailed in, which was very encouraging. I didn't



Köper's latest creation is the Tempo (above) which is being sailed in Britain, Germany, Italy and the United States.



A Dabchick on Zeekoevlei.

The sale of plans for the Dabchick enabled Jack Köper to give his children a university education. Gerhard handled all the correspondence and made 50c on each plan. His younger brother Chris did all the handwork on the sails and virtually put himself through university with the money he made.

Gerhard had been national Sprog champion for three consecutive years. Chris sails a Finn, Lieda—oldest of the Köper children—crews for her husband, Mr. Peter Oldroyd, on a Flying Dutchman, and Marguerite, 19, the youngest, is crew on her father's Tempo.

The 15 ft. 6 inch Tempo, with its low-slung hull, rounded and superbly streamlined like a modern racing car, is Jack Köper's latest brainchild.

He said: "I thought there was room for a third boat between the Sprog and the Flying Dutchman. The basic design would be that of a Dabchick, but it would be far more sophisticated.

"It was to be a boat with sufficient comfort for adults, but built for speed. To capture public imagination, it also had to look fast in appearance and be utterly different from any other class.

"My idea was to use four sheets of 8 ft. by 4 ft. plywood, limiting it to a maximum length of just under 16 ft. It would have a beam of 5 ft. for

stability, and this involved careful cutting of the plywood. The boat would be narrower than 4 ft. fore and aft and the off-cuts would be used for the wider mid-section."

The Tempo took two years to design. After he had built it Köper launched it secretly at Hermanus in 1963 and sailed it there for six months before officially letting anyone know about the boat.

"I then sailed it single-handed in an all-class race and was soon far ahead of everyone else. After these tests I found it necessary to make it a bit stronger. I also added buoyancy tanks to the sides of the cockpit—it already had fore and aft buoyancy.

"Plans for the Tempo have since been published in yachting magazines here and overseas. In Holland, where there are now about 150 Tempos,

they are trying to make it an international class.

"Tempos are also being sailed in Germany, England, Italy and United States. At present 186 are registered in South Africa."

Jack is a popular guest on any yacht these days, from a 12-ft. dinghy to a 70-ft. ocean-going schooner. As a professional sailmaker, his advice on sailsetting is eagerly sought after. He has sailed a long way since the day he hand-sewed his first Dabchick jib.

Are any other yachts likely to come off the Köper drawing board?

"Not at the moment," he smiled. "But my wife feels I should design another one. If I do, it will be bigger than a Tempo—probably a keel-boat." Deep-water yachtsmen will look forward to that day with anticipation.