

The history of the Marion Bermuda Race is that since our start in 1977, we've always been a Corinthian sailing event. If you've ever wondered about the origins of this word and how it relates to sailing, you're not alone. Many avid sailors and readers of Scuttlebutt had the same question, which was discussed in their online forum and addressed in their May 9, 2011 edition, by yachting historian, John Rousmaniere.

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WHAT THE HECK DOES 'CORINTHIAN' MEAN?

A question about the meaning of 'Corinthian' was asked last week in the Scuttlebutt Forum. "I've done all the Internet searches I can think of, done the OED, the library at the San Francisco Maritime Historical Park, and consulted the many reference books I own," noted Tony Johnson. "I've contacted the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club, where the concept got its start according to their website, and the Corinthian Yacht Club in Tiburon, CA. Nothing has been of much help."

When it comes to questions like this, few are better prepared to answer than yachting historian and author John Rousmaniere. Here is John's response:

The word "Corinthian" seems vague and harmless today, but it's been controversial for 2,000 years. The first Corinthians were residents of the ancient Greek seaport of Corinth. A typical port town, Corinth was described by A. N. Wilson in his biography of St. Paul as "a place of proverbial wickedness, energy, riches, noise." Paul's chiding first letter to the Christian Corinthians in the New Testament portrays them as a little unruly but fully capable of improvement. Paul was not one to waste golden words like "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love" on hopeless reprobates.

The notion of the Corinthians as hearty fellows with hearts of gold carried on for centuries. In Henry IV Part 1, Shakespeare has young Prince Hal (then a rowdy but a future great king) describe himself as "a Corinthian, a lad of mettle, a good boy."

A Corinthian, then, was a spunky, robust guy or gal. This nickname would have appealed to the young American sailors of the 1870s who were challenging the yachting establishment by sailing their own boats. Until then most yachtsmen had just one well-proven ability, which was to write big checks. When three 105-foot schooners crossed the New York Yacht Club's starting line in the first-ever transatlantic race in 1866, two of the owners watched from spectator boats and the third, James Gordon Bennett Jr., sailed as a passenger, deferring to his professional skipper, the aptly named Samuel "Bully" Samuels. Among the nicknames for traditional yachtsmen was "the splurgers."

The new alternate definition of "yachtsman" as an amateur ("Corinthian") developed in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century and caught on in America. New Corinthian yacht clubs had fleets of small boats, and the rules required that they be raced only by Corinthian sailors who did all the work, had all the fun, and were paid not a nickel. The old establishment initially responded by slinging mud, and when the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club was ridiculed for "aping English ideas," the envy is as thick as the

mud itself. By the 1920s, the average American yachtsman was a Corinthian "lad of mettle." Good on them.

Forum thread:

<http://forum.sailingscuttlebutt.com/cgi-bin/gforum.cgi?post=11786>