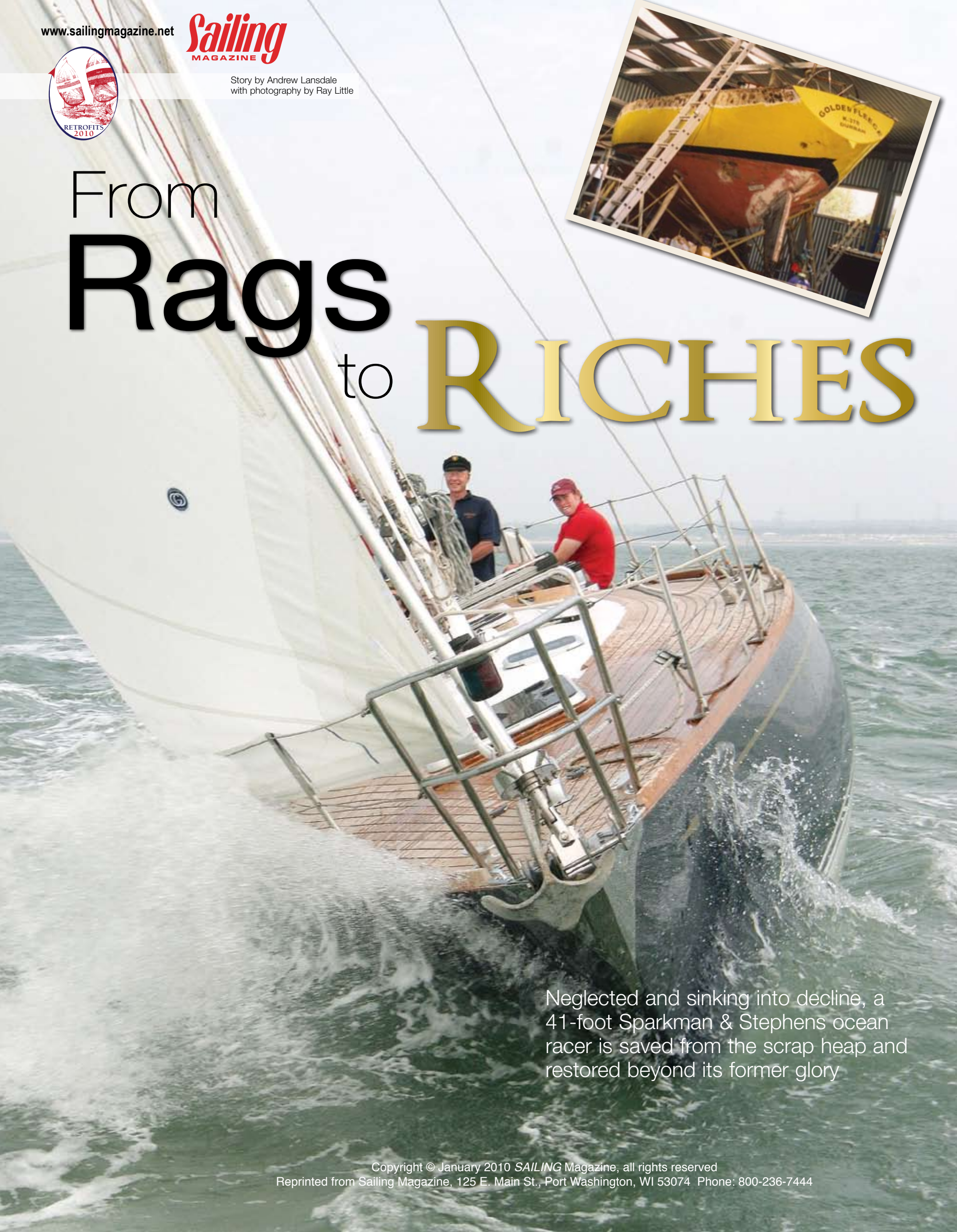




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with photography by Ray Little

From Rags to RICHES



Neglected and sinking into decline, a 41-foot Sparkman & Stephens ocean racer is saved from the scrap heap and restored beyond its former glory

Class will out,” the saying goes. And *Golden Fleece* has class by the locker-full. Even as a sadly neglected banana-colored

ex-campaigner in a previous life, her grace, lines and balance screamed Sparkman & Stephens. Built in Durban, South Africa, in 1974 for Gordon Neil, the commodore of the Royal Natal Yacht Club, *Golden Fleece* was constructed at his own boatyard and started to fulfill her racing pedigree immediately upon delivery. She competed in the annual Vasco da Gama race, 300 tough miles from Mozambique to Durban. In the same year she was entered for the Agulhas Race, a challenging “there and back” course around the South African coast: The 4-knot Agulhas current providing a substantial wind-against-tide element of excitement.

The next year, she represented South Africa in the Admiral’s Cup at Cowes and in the same year won the famous Rothmans Week competition in Capetown. Many other ocean races such as the Mauritius/Durban contest and Durban/East London have also been notched up.

But the fates did not smile on the thoroughbred in later years.

Golden Fleece’s current owner, Michael Wheeler, spotted her in a very sorry state in a marina in Durban nine years ago. But just as a classic beauty might in time lose her superficial looks, one can almost always see the structure of elegance under the surface.

Wheeler bought her against the advice of the surveyor. “There are other boats,” the surveyor had advised. There may have been a number of times since then when Wheeler’s thoughts might have reflected on those words, but no longer.

Ignoring the naysayers, Wheeler snatched up *Golden Fleece* and in challenging conditions, sailed the boat to Capetown in mid-December 1999 and frantically prepared her for the Capetown to Rio race starting in January 2000.

With five friends and family they breathlessly made the start line. But after



Golden Fleece’s original mahogany beams were restored, while the rest of the interior underwent a major transformation to take the boat from abused ocean racer, bottom right, to a beautiful cruiser, top. Previous page, *Golden Fleece* of Mersea bears little resemblance to her previous incarnation, inset.

a few days, the full extent of the neglect started to manifest itself. Water flowed into the boat, both through the decks and through the hull. Five days into the race, they lost the electronics: no bilge pumps, radio, chartplotter or weatherfax and 3,000 miles to go.

So it was back to old-fashioned sailing. Buckets in a chain-gang to bail out the incoming water; flashlights to see the compass, handheld GPS to plot positions on a paper chart.

A lack of weather information led them to being knocked over on their beam ends twice in violent squalls. Then they were becalmed for two days in a South Atlantic

high-pressure system. They went swimming off the boat with 15,000 feet of water under their dangling legs. After 28 days, the race organizers were relieved to see *Golden Fleece* appear unheralded across the finish line in Rio de Janeiro and encouragingly toward the front of the field.

The boat might have been in a poor condition then, but the worst was yet to come. Wheeler left to fly back to England and left her in the hands of a marina whose management agreed to look after her on a mooring in Rio Harbour.

The bad news came a couple of months later. *Golden Fleece* had broken away from her moorings and run aground. She was





Her spacious saloon befits her classic style, above, a big change from what she looked like after some rough times, right. A roomy nav station is perfect for serious cruising, below.

lying ashore, partially submerged on her side, her battered hull covered in bird droppings. Determined to effect a rescue, Wheeler arranged for a delivery skipper to salvage her and get the engine and rigging in good enough repair to sail her to England. It was a task he anticipated would take two months. But the skipper preferred living high on the hog at Wheeler's expense and took *Golden Fleece* on a bit of a joy ride. More than a year later, Wheeler tracked his boat to Bermuda. Flying out to the Caribbean, he took the skipper by surprise and taking direct action, the man was quickly persuaded to sail to Falmouth in Cornwall. His vacation had abruptly come to an end.

Back in England, *Golden Fleece* was surveyed and Wheeler started looking for the right boatyard to restore her to her former glory. By February 2004, the battered and abused *Golden Fleece* was in the care of Tom Richardson from the Elephant Boatyard at Bursledon in Hampshire. The first step in her restoration was to dry out the hull. Several components and layers had to be removed before the rebuild could start. Rotted timber decking, hull panels and



beams were cut out. But as is usually the case, the more nasties that were revealed, the more nasties appeared and the larger the project became. The hull and deck had been built of three layers of 6-millimeter cold-molded marine plywood. Water had infiltrated the layers and compromised their grip on each other.

The original fitting out had been for that of an ocean racing boat with spartan living conditions. And for handicapping purposes, the engine was mounted amidships. But Wheeler wanted a comfortable, fast cruising yacht to emerge from the rebuild. The engine was replaced with a new Yanmar and moved right aft under the cockpit. The swan that was to emerge from the sieve had started to take shape. The refurbished hull and deck were painstakingly prepared and covered with an epoxy sheathing.

The new interior design provided a spacious double forward cabin, head and shower and a single sofa berth forward and to port in the main cabin. Opposite was a U-shaped settee with table that could convert to a second double berth. To starboard and aft two pilot berths and a fridge were built, while to port a fitted galley, icebox, chart table and navigation station were installed.

The original mahogany beams were retained to maintain the traditional look.



Some were found to have been drilled through from end to end and stainless steel rods inserted. Thereafter the beams were steamed and bent to an attractive bow shape.

The decks were then lovingly sheathed in teak and the topsides were finished in flag blue.

Finally, the original mast and boom, miraculously still sturdy after years of abuse, were refinished, standing rigging renewed and new sails made by Gowen Ocean Sails from West Mersea in Essex.

The whole task took five years, but the yacht that emerged from Richardson's rebuild was almost unrecognizable. *Golden Fleece of Mersea* was relaunched at the end of May. From the pontoon she attracts sharp intakes of breath, she is so spectacular. Down below, you run out of sharp intakes. Seasoned yachtsmen shake their heads in wonder. The swan has at last emerged.

Sparkman & Stephens was established as a company in November 1929. Drake Sparkman and Olin Stephens have now "crossed the bar," Stephens only last year. But they are sure to be gazing down to cast an eye over the success of their creations. When the sun rose again over *Golden Fleece*, they might have nodded to each other in a satisfied sign of approval and given the little ship a "thumbs-up."



Golden Fleece's deck and cockpit underwent a noticeable transformation.

Golden Fleece of Mersea, formerly Golden Fleece

Built.....	1974 Durban, South Africa
Designer.....	Sparkman & Stephens
Length overall	41 feet
Length waterline	31 feet
Beam	12 feet
Draft	6 feet, 6 inches
Displacement	19,969 pounds
Sail Area.....	755.5 square feet
Engine	Yanmar 54-hp Diesel
Propeller	3-bladed bronze
Berths	7 berths, 2 doubles, 3 singles
Capacity	
Water	46 gallons
Fuel.....	53 gallons