

## 2006 NEWPORT TO BERMUDA RACE 600 Miles at sea with Doctor Fun

By Eric Sanford

Newport, Rhode Island, is synonymous with sailing. Everything about the place reeks of colonial American history and seafaring adventurers combined with nuevo-riche yachties sporting LaCoste shirts, topsiders and silver Jaguars. In 1906 some bored rich guy decided that a sailing race to Bermuda would tickle his fancy and thus one of the classic yacht races in America was born.

I arrive in Newport at 10pm after a long day on planes, buses and taxis. Liza Baldwin greets me at her local watering hole where we eat, drink and talk until midnight before heading back to her condo. Finally I crash and 'sleep in' until 8am, which really isn't sleeping in much since it's still 5am Hood River time. After a quick cup 'o Joe I head for the docks. I'm here to go racing, after all.

It wasn't always this way. A week ago I wasn't planning on being here. But sometimes life goes in a rather serendipitous direction and I always try to be ready for anything.

When my guitar playing friend Moe announced a few weeks before that he was going to play at the finish party in Bermuda for the 100-year anniversary of the Newport-Bermuda yacht race in mid June and why don't I fly down with him and party my first reaction was HELL YES! But then I thought about it for a minute: hey wait, I want to SAIL to Bermuda, not fly.

And so it turns out that Moe's sister-in-law, Liza, was chartering a boat just for the race and might need more crew. I call her immediately. Sorry, I have a full boat but if anyone drops out I'll give you a call. Darn! So I write off yet another great idea and head for Alaska on my motorcycle instead.

The day I get back I get a call from my friend Herb who is the former editor of *Cruising World* magazine. He just took a job on the west coast and had to drop out of the Newport-Bermuda race. Perhaps I'd like to take his place?  
"YEAH BABY! What boat?"

"Oh, a lady named Liza who just bought this custom 65' race boat; give her a call."

Yup, the same Liza. Talk about destiny..... Three days later I'm on a plane to Boston, sea boots and sunscreen in hand. Woohoo!!

**Van Ki Pass** is a stunning piece of work that was completed in 1992. Built over a six year period by marine designer/builder Vic Carpenter as his personal racer/cruiser, she was launched from Canada on Lake Huron and sailed there until 1999 when Vic had a stroke and could no longer sail. When it became apparent that he wouldn't be sailing

any more, she was moved to Newport, R.I., to be sold and there she sat under wraps for the next six years with only her 90' spruce spar visible to the world until a curious yard worker looked under the covers and.... HOLY WOODWORK, BATBOY!



Everything on the boat was perfectly preserved, from the incredible woodwork and finish to the brand new suit of Vectran sails and lines. There were no shortcuts in the woodworking: all the doors are one piece, made from solid slabs of Honduran mahogany. The inlay work on the counters, tables and even the transom, all done by Vic himself, is worthy of any art gallery.

Unbelievably for a boat constructed in 1992, **Van Ki Pass** is built entirely from wood, from her hull to her 1" thick decking constructed from three layers of laminated red cedar and mahogany. Vic didn't like fiberglass, so there isn't any. The majority of the metal fittings—from the milled and twisted aluminum toe rail to the intricately laminated wood wheel to the mast track that twists its way upward starting below the boom—were custom designed and crafted by Vic. The detail is more reminiscent of jewelry than a boat. No wonder it took six years to build.

The design is of a spartan racer cruiser (small galley and dinette, twelve pipe berths—no opulent master suite; two small heads without showers; no hot water, watermaker, autopilot, genset, inverter or other cruiser benefits; small water and fuel tanks, and a flush, utility deck plan with no comfy seats or shade). This is in stark contrast to the incredible finish work that abounds inside and out. The hull is 1 1/2" solid mahogany planking with several thousand laborious coats of varnish. I sure don't want to be around when it's time to refinish her.

Liza Baldwin is one of a family of seven that were born and raised in Newport, Rhode Island, the self-proclaimed sailing center of the universe. Apart from a twenty-five year stint in New York where she worked as a commodities trader (until 9/11 when she lost many friends who worked with her in the World Trade Center), she's lived here all her life. She knows everyone.



A veteran day-sailor, Liza has always wanted to do the Newport-Bermuda race, considered one of the 'triple-crown' for every serious short-hop (under 1,000 miles) offshore yacht racer: the Fastnet (England), Sydney-Hobart (Australia) being the other two. She has watched the fleet leave Newport harbor for over forty years: some day I'm going to do that!

Randy West—a veteran race and charter skipper with many sea miles under his ever-widening belt—met Liza in St. Barts in 2005 when she hired him to skipper a 42' yacht she had chartered for a month. When Randy heard about **Van Ki Pass** (which was actually christened the incredibly tacky name of **Passing Wind**, perhaps to emulate her sister ship, the successful racer **Windward Passage**), he got in touch with Liza. You want to race to Bermuda? Well this is your boat.

One look convinced her that this boat was a true gem in the rough. Although not really that rough. She arranged to have a full survey and if it passed inspection (which it did) she would charter it for the Newport-Bermuda race. She hired a crew and for the next two months they worked full time to get the boat ready. Although Liza had never been offshore before, this was her chance. Trial by fire. Spin the wheel and hang on.

Liza is a gambler. She gets up early each day sits down in front of her computer where she logs in and begins her daily session of trading S&P 500 futures. This is a dangerous game indeed, but Liza is apparently successful. Successful enough that she's now planning to buy a 65' sailboat and hire a crew to race her boat on the east coast, Caribbean and Med for the next year. As she sits her computer making bets on minuscule



movements in the world economy, the crew is busy getting the boat ready at the dock just outside her waterfront



at

condo. She glances out the window and smiles, perhaps oblivious that the crew is spending money on last minute parts every bit as fast as she is making it. The daily haul from the local chandleries includes piles of \$400 snatch-blocks, spools of Kevlar line, emergency equipment, foul weather gear for the entire crew, three new sails and other assorted necessities for offshore racing. This is the real deal.

“You know,” says Liza with a mischievous smile and sparkling eyes, “we could win this thing. We really could.”

And she's serious. She doesn't just want to play the game, she wants to win. Toss the dice, take a chance, go big or go home. Woohoo!

As the days wind down before the schedule race start, we get the first weather forecast. Oh great, just great. The very first hurricane of the year has just formed in the Gulf of

Mexico and is headed right smack into us. Not an inch off. With sustained winds of 75mph, it isn't a whopper, but hurricane Alberto is just enough of an issue that it could severely impact the fleet. If the race leaves as scheduled and the storm continues north it will just leave ugly, choppy seas and light winds in its wake. If it grows, slows down or turns around it will hammer the fleet. We track its course as we busily ready the boat.

Our crew of thirteen includes eight professional sailors, three French girls who are the cooks, Liza and me. While I've been offshore a few times, I've never done any racing other than some casual "beercan" afternoons scooting around the buoys in the sunshine. I'm glad to have a bunch of veterans on board but worried that my extremely light racing résumé will quickly become apparent. "Which side is starboard again?"



The last few days on shore are frantically spent doing all the last minute chores and tweaks inherent in such an undertaking. Looking around the boat, and remembering how it took me two *long* years to finally get my boat outfitted like I wanted, I find it hard to conceive how we can possibly be ready in just three more days. My mental list of necessities quickly adds three more weeks of preparation. And we haven't even been out sailing yet as a team.



My second day in Newport we finally head out for a couple hours of late afternoon sailing. I look around at the incredible rats nest of lines and hardware, not to mention the winch farm of—no exaggeration—twenty-five winches scattered around the small cockpit. At least a dozen lines lead back into the "pit" where I am stationed doing a variety of jobs depending on the need. Since I'm surrounded by a crew of sailing pros who have spent the last two months getting the boat ready, it is assumed I know what the hell I am doing. Fat chance.

Listening to the discussion of the intended plan of attack for our first spinnaker set I am immediately aware that I have absolutely no business whatsoever being involved with anything at all having to do with control or responsibility for a million dollar, twenty-five ton yacht.

We spend three aerobic hours zinging around the bay. As soon as I'm comfortable with one set of instructions I am given another significantly more complicated and confusing

set to master, replete with all those arcane and bewildering nautical expressions such as spinnaker guy (is this a male spinnaker?), lazy sheet (what I sleep on when I've avoided work?) and topping lift (some sort of chocolate flavored sugar drink?). I simply put my head down, shut my trap and do what I'm told. For once in my life.



Every single yachtie on the planet has his own way of coiling a rope (oops, I mean a line) and this group is no exception. I try three of my favorite techniques and am admonished by someone for each and every one. I give up and just let the lines stack up in a pile. I watch as one person makes a coil and two minutes later someone else will pick it up, scowl indignantly, and recoil the entire line. Sailors, I have learned, are staunch individualists.

And macho.... did I mention macho? There is more posturing around Newport than in the gorilla cage at the zoo. Everyone is someone, or at least they pretend to be. Everyone *knows* someone, or at least they can drop names like I drop popcorn at the movies. During a race like this *everyone* talks sailing, even if they don't have the slightest idea at all what they're talking about (like me). I met one woman who had no idea where Oregon was

(somewhere near Colorado, right?) but insisted that she was a good friend of Dennis Connors (sic). I told her I was his nephew and did she know that he was actually gay?

Every night in Newport before a race is a big party. The place is abuzz with yacht racing activity and it is growing into a frenzy with this race. Big and small boats doing last minute preparations and sailing crew cutting loose the last night before they're on the alcohol-free program for a few days. I think there's enough residual booze in our crew to certainly last through the race. We're all trying to properly hydrate, you know.

On Wednesday five of us go to an all day 'Safety At Sea' seminar that covers everything from seasickness to helicopter rescue techniques. According to the seminar chairman only two boats have been lost and only one person has died in the one hundred year history of this race. And it has only been postponed twice because of weather. I passively consider the hurricane storm track that is coming our way as we learn about storm survival, on-board fires, hypothermia and other pleasant topics.

That evening we attend the 'Dark and Stormy' party that consists of twenty-five hundred sailors getting ready to head to sea interspersed with a few hundred hangers-on including a veritable flock of local ladies dressed to the absolute hilt looking for rich yachties to hustle. The party is located in one of the local boat yards. Now when I think of a 'boat yard' I think of dirty machinery, crumbling buildings and junk everywhere. But



we are in Newport and the nearest thing to junk here is a crooked street sign carved from rare Antigua teak. The docks of the 'boat yard' are filled with \$10 million yachts and right smack in the middle of the party, up on stands, sits **Rebecca** (160') that has to be worth at least \$20 million. It won't be in the race since it's getting its bi-annual refit (probably another \$1 million). The prop on this boat probably costs more than my home. It is a somewhat humbling experience just to walk amongst this forest of carbon-fiber, Kevlar and titanium gadgets.

The 120' racing cat **Orange** is sitting at the dock, getting ready to head across the Atlantic for a record-breaking attempt whenever the conditions look right. **Orange**, the size of a small planet, will do forty knots with a crew of just eight. I wanna go on THAT boat! There are another dozen

'experimental' boats, termed so because they have all the latest hi-tech innovations like canting keels, variable hydraulic water ballast systems, fore and aft rudders, rotating wing masts and other assorted engineering novelties that one day might find their way into the average mom-and-pop boat (which by that time will cost as much as a house does now).

Across from Orange is **Maximus**, a 98' graphite/Twaron/unobtainium masterpiece that will probably beat us to Bermuda by....oh....a month. And right behind her will be **Morning Glory** that looks more like a marine hardware display at a boat show than a yacht. Naturally all the lines are color-coded; the only thing is, there are so many that I think they ran out of colors.

One more day of prep and then we jockey for the start with 270 other boats on Friday morning. I sure hope it's a big starting line. That evening Marco arrives. Who is Marco, you might be asking. Yet another super-experienced yacht racer? No, Marco is our personal hair stylist who Liza has flown in from St. Barts to give us all a nice trim so that we look good at the start. Marco used to cut the Clinton's hair when they lived in that big house in Washington (although he still visits Hillary in New York occasionally when she flies him in for a quick buzz cut). So Marco sits each of us down on the dock and goes to work, scissors blazing and hair flying. The crews on nearby boats look on with a combination of awe, jealousy and indignation. I only want to know one thing: where the hell was Marco-the-barber-of-the-rich-and-famous when I still *had* hair? Now all he can do is cut an inch off my fading



ponytail. Hell, I could do that myself! Anyway, we all look MARVELOUS!

Captain Randy divides us into two watches of five crew with six hours on and six off during the day, three-on and three-off at night. Every day and night. Until we get there. The other watch captain is Tom Perry who skippered both Endeavor (120') and Shamrock V (129'), two of the largest classic J boats. Tom has over 250,000 miles of open ocean experience and will also serve as the navigator, choosing our route to Bermuda.



Choosing the route, I discover, is somewhat more complicated than the way I would do it: we are here and we want to go there....draw a line between the two and follow it.... any questions?

But Tom has other ideas. He factors in things that I have no idea about (I'm from the west coast, after all); things like the Gulf Stream current track, shifting warm and cold eddies, seasonal compass deviation and, for all I know, continental drift. Tom figures that we should head slightly south of the rhumb line

(a line of rum bottles left by previous sailors doing this race) so that when we hit the Gulf Stream it will carry us north. Then we aim for a cold eddy that is predicted to be in a certain place at a certain time by the weather forecasting gurus, we follow that counter-clockwise around until we can catch the southwest wind that he predicts we'll find on our third day, taking us straight to the trophy case. I ponder all this information and, genial lad that I am, I concur.

Of course virtually every other boat has a different theory and course that they confidently believe will lead them to victory. Sort of like religion. Which means, ultimately, that the race is 50% skill and 50% luck. And oh yeah, 50% money.

Speaking of luck, we have done everything nautically possible to incur the wrath of the sea gods. There is a long—a very long—list of superstitions that have evolved over the centuries by seamen who are looking for an excuse—any excuse—not to go to sea. Everything from moon cycles to menstruation cycles indicates impending doom. Some of the more common indicators of catastrophe include bananas on board (we have several bunches), wearing anything green (our entire crew uniforms are solid lime), and setting sail on a Friday (our exact date, of course). And this doesn't even count the fact that we have a crew of thirteen (!) or that the boat was launched on 6/6/06 (the day of the devil). Man, are we pressing our luck.

On race morning the harbor is alive with boats and crew. We're all issued our 'crew uniforms' that consist of more clothes than I have in my entire closet at home: two fleece shirts, long and short sleeve t-shirts, polo shirts, shorts, foul weather gear, caps and yes, green wool berets (presumably for throwing in the air 'graduation style' as we

cross the finish line). Everything is embroidered with **Van Ki Pass** (so when my soggy body is found floating in a few months they'll know where I came from, I suppose). The biggest decision of the day may not be what headsail to raise but rather what shirt to wear. We all must look quite dapper, you know.

Sleek ULDB racing boats slip past us at the dock, their crews also nattily dressed in matching uniforms. "Don't hit us," I yell. "You'll get splinters!" Ha ha, I'm a real crack up. Get it... crack up? Ah, never mind.



Last minute shore leave (sailor talk for standing on dry land wondering what the hell you've gotten yourself into) is used for updating wills and eating something quite colorful so when it comes back up in a few hours at least it will look pretty. I bequeath everything I own to my dog and eat a jar of yellow curry chutney washed down with a Dr. Pepper. I'm ready!

Because of the size of the fleet, the starts are staggered by class over a two hour period. Since we're in a division of faster boats our start isn't until 2:30pm. At 1pm the cannon goes off and the first boats sprint across the line. We mill around the starting area for an hour and it is indeed miraculous that we don't collide at least a dozen times. Over a hundred big racing yachts with full sails up fly back and forth just a few feet from each other, jockeying for the best start position (as well as showing off their sailing talents like figure-skaters warming up before a big competition). I'm sure glad this isn't *my* boat.

We make our final tack and head for the start. Blam! The gun goes off and our class bludgeons it's way across the line, twenty-eight sleek, stripped-down race boats from sixty to ninety feet, all with full professional crews. I am quite happy to report that we were the very last boat across the start line, a full minute back. The idea of dicing it up at the start, greatly magnifying the chance of crashing (and thus not starting at all) solely to gain a few seconds over the course of a four-day race, seems patently absurd.

The boats in our class are the real deal: sleek, light, professionally crewed racing sleds like **Hissar** (a Farr 60), **Bella Mente** (JV 66), **Pindar** (Volvo Ocean 60) and **Titan 12** (a bright red 75' custom RP). And that doesn't even include **Money Penny** (Swan 60), **Banbakou** or **Bright Star** (both TP52s). Our big, fat wooden boat seems woefully out of place in this crowd, kind of like a mottled duck in a pond full of swans. But that just means we have nothing to lose since no one expects anything from us.

So we head out to sea, chasing everyone. **Van Ki Pass** quickly leaps to speed with the full main and #2 jib and soon we're on a close reach at almost twelve knots. We're flying!



Sail trimming is like boat building: 1/3 science, 1/3 art, and 1/3 voodoo. Everyone has their own idea of what works and why, how the sail should look, and what the indicators are. I settle in at my position of jib-sheet trimmer in the pit. I am told to watch the tell-tales (a couple little pieces of colored yarn that dangle from the jib in various places) and to trim the jibsheet in or out according to how they are “flying”. Fine. What this basically means is that I grind the winch in to tighten the jib and someone yells at me, “No, let it out!”

So I let it out. Someone else then yells, “No, take it in!” So I bring it back to where I started and everyone is happy. It gives me something to do.

My first shift is from 6-9pm. There are five of us on my watch. The wind is strong and steady from the southwest and we are heading south, making for perfect reaching. The three hours goes by quickly and we eagerly dig into lasagna and salad at the end. I try to imagine that my warm blue Gatorade is actually a bold Chianti, just to complete the illusion of my luxury yachting vacation.

I nap from 9pm to midnight when it’s time to go back on deck. The sky soon turns from dusk to an inky black, alive with stars and the sound of water splashing against the hull. The wind is still eighteen knots and steady—absolutely perfect sailing. The night breeze is cool and our crew is bundled up. In the distance we see a bright light and soon it becomes a giant mass of lights as a big cruise ship makes its way across our bow. Minutes later we cross the wake and are blanketed from our wind by the thirty-story floating city. **Van Ki Pass** lurches violently as if to emulate a stomping, snorting stallion that has just been threatened by another horse.



Sailors need to know how to do everything. They need to be plumbers, electricians, carpenters, painters and machinists. Being a good cook, seamstress and astronomer helps too. And don’t forget meteorologist, chemist, mechanic, computer technician and of course, psychologist. Should you find yourself lacking in any of these skills, that will most certainly be the one you will certainly need. On my boat I seem to be all of these every single day.

By 3am I am wasted. We go off watch and I collapse into my narrow, canoe-shaped berth and fall into a deep sleep as the rushing water slips along the hull. 6am seems to come moments later. I stumble back out on deck into a glorious, warm, sunny, windy



morning. Some quick calculations confirm that we've sailed 138 miles in the last twelve hours; at this rate we'll be in Bermuda (634 miles from Newport) in under three days. But to hope for this just sixteen hours into the race is a bit absurd.

The day watches are six hours rather than the nighttime watches of three. Half way through we take down the #2 jib and go for the big #1. It's a real handful to put up, not to mention taking down the #2 at the same time. It's all-hands-on-deck for sail changes. Our speed continues to hold, averaging around ten knots and by noon we've covered another sixty miles. Woohoo!

What's strange to me is that we started with 263 other boats from one place at virtually the same time, following pretty much the same route, ending up at exactly the same place. And yet here we are all alone out in the ocean. Occasionally we'll see another mast far in the distance but basically we're completely alone out here. It will be interesting when we all come together again at the end.

In mid afternoon we put up our big asymmetrical spinnaker, another complicated and potentially disastrous operation. It's a brand new sail that arrived the evening before our departure so we haven't even had it up yet. Somehow the transition goes smoothly, the entire crew running around in a chaotic tangle of rope and Dacron trying not to screw up.

Now our speeds are increasing. 13 knots.... 14..... 16! As we gradually change our course we start surfing down the smooth swells as we head downwind. **Van Ki Pass** is smooth and stable. And fast!

As much as I enjoy the speed and versatility of our ocean platform, I have come to realize that there is absolutely no comfortable place on the deck of this boat. Every inch is either covered with hardware, hard as a rock, or tilted at a thirty-degree angle. There are no cushions or for that matter, seats of any kind. This is a work boat: you're either on deck in race mode or below trying to sleep. When a pile of wet rope in the corner of the pit starts to look inviting you know that this is no luxury liner. I try various positions in my job as spinnaker sheet trimmer and end up standing for my three-hour watch.



I have also discovered that the only similarity between cruising sailors and racers is water. And perhaps that each group thinks the other is nuts. Cruisers are content to set the sails, sit back and let the wind take them onward. Racers are constantly



tweaking every conceivable moving part on the boat in an attempt to gain another .001 knot. Cruisers are stoked when they find a used thirty-foot piece of line at a dockside swap meet for two bucks; racers start stressing if their running rigging is more than fifteen minutes old. Cruisers try to find ways to make things easier; racers always seem to be seeking a more difficult way to do something. Cruisers carry three of everything; racers load the bare necessities then leave half of it on the dock to save weight. And on and on.

I am happy to say that I don't think I fit into either group. I'm happy to set my sails, activate the autopilot and then go about tinkering with other things on my boat. But I also like equipping my boat with cool new gadgetry. It's interesting to associate with both groups from a rather voyeuristic and distant perspective, sort of like attending a Catholic church in the morning and a Mormon service in the afternoon. They're all nuts.

Thanks to our marvelous cooks, we eat well. And constantly. The only thing I find lacking is the coffee. In order to save water, we only have paper plates and cups on board (rather than plastic that needs to be washed). Now had this included some normal paper coffee cups things would be fine. But the cups are all wax coated. Have you ever poured hot coffee or tea into a wax-coated cup? The result not only quickly turns the cup to mush as the wax melts but also leaves a nice oily residue on the surface. We all joke about our newly waxed stomach linings. But I suppose that if this is the only thing to complain about I am lucky indeed. Well OK, one more thing: there's no masseuse on board.

Sleep on a race boat at sea comes in spurts and this voyage is no exception. Our nightly three-hours-on and three-off is deceptive. By the time we actually switch rolls up on deck, get below to undress, have a snack, unwind and crawl into our tiny bunks, a good hour has passed. Ninety minutes later it's time to start all over. I quickly become sleep deprived but manage to add up enough napping during off times to keep coherent. Barely.

And this doesn't count our sail changes that require all hands no matter whose watch it is. Taking down the spinnaker at 2am in the pitch dark on our second night proves to be quite an adventure. It's tough enough when you can actually see what the hell you're doing. First we hoist the big #1 jib in front of it, being careful to lead all the sheets so that they don't get tangled later. Then several of us leap at the flogging spinnaker as someone releases the halyard, dragging it on deck in frantic movements so that it doesn't slip into the water and drag us all in with it. This is a big-ass sail, and the sight of four deck monkeys madly grabbing at tufts of Dacron is pretty funny. Unless one of those monkeys is me. Which it is. At least it's dark so if I screw up I can blame it on someone else.

Our crew is a great mix of experience and ages. Gael is only twenty-one, which makes him perfect for sending up the mast to check a frayed halyard ninety feet up in rough seas. Perhaps it's in his blood. When his parents got married they bought an old motorcycle with a sidecar, hopped in and started riding. All through Europe, Africa, South America and into the U.S. In California they traded it for a 24' sailboat and headed across the Pacific, even though they had barely sailed before. They made it to the Marquesas where Gael was born, then headed to St. Barts where they still live.



On the other end is Terry Schank, an architectural photographer from Sarasota, Florida, who has sailed over 30,000 miles with Randy so he knows how to handle him: "Aye aye, captain. I'll get right on it. Whatever you say." Quiet and reserved unless there's something important to be done, Terry is always the first one on deck when it's time to get some work done. Unlike me.



Clarence Holman's story about being on board is almost as serendipitous as mine. Clarence worked with Vic building the boat, so he knows every inch up, down and under. He explains why there are twenty-five winches (Vic liked winches) and no gimballed stove (when you race, you race; you can eat later). He sailed on **Van Ki Pass** extensively after she was launched so he knows what makes her go fast (lots of wind, dummy). He's here at the insistence of the Carpenter's insurance company since the final papers selling the boat to Liza haven't been signed yet.

Another of the more experienced crew is James Langston. Originally he's from England but has lived in Newport for a couple years. I have a theory that in order to be a good sailor you have to have a three-syllable name: Chris Columbus, Francis Drake, Russell Coutts, Peter Blake, Tom Perry, James Langston. I miss the cut by one syllable. No wait: Doctor Fun! There, I make it!

Our third day at sea I awake to flat seas and calm. Damn! The sails are flogging noisily as **Van Ki Pass** inches forward at one knot while pitching wildly from side to side. We raise the spinnaker, then lower it. We raise the #1, then reset the spinnaker. We tweak the boom in a hundred different configurations in order to eek another .000001 knot of boat speed (meaning we'll arrive exactly seven seconds faster, or an expenditure of 9,250 calories per second; but that's racing, I'm told). I busy myself doing nothing, counting the seconds until my six-hour watch is over so that I can lounge around on deck looking busy doing nothing.



Our French cooks keep us fat and happy. Aude is from Paris where she helps in her parent's restaurant. Marion lives in St. Barts where she works on boats. Naima, originally from Morocco, now also lives in Paris. Between the three the boat stays clean and the crew gets fat. It seems, in fact, that we are always doing one of three things: sailing, sleeping, or eating. Life at sea is simple.

Finally there are Jules and Vincent, two jovial, easygoing, sailors from St. Barts. They are the perfect crewmates: funny, helpful, experienced and unflappable. They are constantly laughing and chattering in French about who-knows-what, but also joining in at my constant practical

jokes. They even look like suave French pirates.

The days start to slip by as we settle into a pattern. I'm up at 5:30 for my 6am – noon watch; eat, muck about on the boat, then a nap for an hour; next watch from 6pm to 9pm, get undressed, have a snack and fall into bed for another short nap before being woken up for the dreaded midnight to 3am watch. By this time I am fairly delirious with lack of sleep. Then start all over again.

As the winds get light on the fourth day our biggest chore is to move our 'movable ballast' back and forth from one side of the boat to the other as we change tacks in an ever unsuccessful attempt to chase tiny rivulets of wind that appear on the horizon, only to disappear whenever we get near them. The ballast consists of anything and everything that weighs more than ten pounds.



We start on deck, moving the huge #2 jib from one side to the other. If the wind is light, we move it to the lee side. As soon as the wind picks up, we move it to the windward side. Then we head below to wrestle with the two 80# life rafts, spinnakers, buckets of anchor chain and two other unwieldy sails that are strewn on the floor. Moving all this stuff in a gymnasium would be difficult enough; moving it around on a boat that is studded with obstacles is near impossible. Each watch turns into sweaty workout.

When our dream of arriving in Bermuda in under four days fades into the darkness of our fourth day, everyone is still in good spirits. The practical jokes start becoming more frequent and of course escalate. When I find six bottles of water under my mattress I kindly reciprocate with a pineapple in the suspects pillowcase. It goes downhill from there.



By this time I'm part of the working crew and I now pepper my conversation with all sorts of nautical terminology. "Hey Tom, do you want me to move the vangtang from the baberhaul to the cap shroud while I'm checking the shiv on the starboard genoa halyard?" Of course I have absolutely no idea what all this means but it seems to make my cockpit banter more convincing. At least to me.

My watch crew deteriorates into a gaggle of giggling schoolboys. We banter and joke virtually non-stop and at least three times on each watch we are all reduced to tears over some inane joke, observation, ethnic accent or simply looking at each other and bursting into uncontrollable laughter. Perhaps it is just a function of sleep deprivation but everything somehow becomes hilarious. Somehow I truly doubt that anyone on any other boat is having more fun than us. For every serious moment there are four hours of non-stop laughter.

As the end gets near on the afternoon of our fourth day two things happen: first, we start to see other boats. Just one or two at first, but gradually they begin appearing on the horizon, slipping out of the sea like ghost ships. Within a few hours we have a half-dozen boats in view on either side of us and the race is on as we all converge on Bermuda. The other noticeable difference is that several in our crew are now more competitive: the race is on!



Every movement on deck becomes meaningful, to the point of lunacy. When I point this out to James he quickly retorts, "You've obviously never been in a yacht race before."

"No," I reply, "I don't believe I have. Is there one you can recommend?" And we all burst out laughing.

Seventy miles to go. When the wind turns from light to almost non-existent I'm told to move about the deck very slowly lest I upset the delicate balance of this twenty-five ton vessel. Excuse me? We have fifteen cases of booze in the bilge and all 140 pounds of me will make a difference?

When the wind picks up I'm told to stay low so as not to disrupt the wind flow on the deck. I reply that this is certainly the very first time in my life that I'm accused of being too tall. But I do what I'm told, no matter how silly. If I don't and we lose the race by

three seconds I'll be blamed. Not that this couldn't happen but somehow I don't see my stature as relevant to slowing down a boat with a ninety foot mast sporting over three thousand square feet of sail.

The days are now much warmer as we near Bermuda. On the first night we huddled in all our fleece and foul weather gear; now it's shorts and t-shirts, night and day.

When another boat appears on the horizon (a 60' ex-Whitbread racer) we all buckle down to business. She inches ever closer, pinching hard to weather, until she is within hailing distance. I walk to the bow, cup my hands to my mouth and yell, "Excuse me, do you need assistance? I say again, DO YOU NEED ASSISTANCE?"

The entire **Van Ki Pass** nearly passes out with laughter. To top it off, unable to keep speed while trying to cross in front of us, their crew gives up, bears off and crosses behind us. I retreat to the stern as they pass. "Excuse me, do you have any Grey Poupon?" Again we're all reduced to tears. Such is the life of a serious race crew.

The excitement begins to build on the fifth day when it appears that with any luck we'll make landfall by early evening. The changing of watch groups disappears as we all stay on deck, straining our eyes for any sight of land as well as carefully watching the boats around us. Now it's a drag race to the finish.

Around 5pm there is a dark cloud on the horizon. Not figuratively. Within thirty minutes there's a solid black squall line a few hundred yards in front of us even though it is almost glassy where we are. First a few spits of rain then within minutes there's a deluge as water pours from the clouds and the wind whips up a frenzy on the water. Twenty-five knot gusts pound the boat as we struggle to get the #2 jib ready.



All hands on deck as we fight to keep full power in the sails without blowing something out. If we can milk this squall for a half hour and catch the lift we can make a huge time gain. I'm the mainsheet trimmer which, for better or worse, makes me critically important. I have to keep just enough power in the huge mainsail to enable the driver to keep heading into the wind without disaster. If I screw up and don't sheet out in the gusts we could be in big trouble.

I struggle to look up into the sail and masthead windex to anticipate the gusts as water gushes down from the clouds and cascades down the sail into my face. It gets darker and lightning explodes in the sky making the entire scene both exhilarating and surreal. We are in the middle of an open ocean tempest, flying along at twelve knots into the deepening darkness of the storm. Yaaaahoo! Now *this* is what I'm here for!



Half an hour later we reach the other side of the squall and emerge into a strangely serene and still ocean. The golden twilight rays and deep blue of the sky is reflected on the glassy surface. We sit looking at each other on deck, dripping wet as the stillness returns. Did that really just happen?

Randy checks the latest positions of the fleet via the sat phone GPS hook-up. We've

picked up over an hour on the boats that were in front of us and now we're in third place. Amazing! We actually have a shot at winning this thing. We jump below to change the sails back to the other side of the boat for the fiftieth time in hopes that a minute breeze will catch our sails in the correct position. We milk every tiny puff as the giant main sail slams back and forth, making the entire boat shudder. With each sway in the boom **Van Ki Pass** moves a few feet forward. The GPS continues to indicate forward progress through these frustrating doldrums as the sky darkens with the oncoming night—1.2 knots.....1.5 knots.....1.1 knots....



At 9pm the final orange rays of sunlight are gone and we settle into a deep blue dusk. The wind has returned to a fairly steady ten knots and we are beating hard into the wind at six to seven knots. Tom is concentrating at the chart table, planning our tacks to the finish line. Everyone is on deck, excitedly straining their eyes for the first sign of land. There it is! A light on the horizon! We all leap up and cheer as a small twinkling light appears far ahead.

We tack the boat and suddenly we're not heading in the right direction. Damn! Our tack takes us 30° off from the rhumb line to the finish. At this rate it will take us at least three more hours to sail the seven miles we have to go if we could head straight there. But the end is near!

We tack three more times. Perfect, crisp, coordinated tacks where the four people on the winch posts grind in a blur of movement and the jib snaps around the forestay in one smooth flow. We are heeled over hard, flying forward at eight knots as the ocean slaps at the hull and the phosphorescence in the water sparkles behind the rudder.

At 11:51pm we cross the finish line. Big white spotlights hit our sails from the committee boat to illuminate our sail number. We shine flashlights up as well, making sure they get it right. Nothing like racing for four days and having the race committee miss your finish. We hoot and holler and slap high fives. We made it!

We slip through the narrow passage into the bay at St. George and anchor for the night. Luckily it's not very windy since our ground tackle is marginal at best: small, light anchor, only forty feet of chain and one hundred feet of rode for a 65' boat in thirty feet of water. Racers, after all, are not concerned about anchoring.



Now it's time to celebrate. We crank up the music and break out the champagne. Lots of champagne. The first ten bottles disappear within an hour. I head below to sleep around 3am and the party is still going strong. I collapse in exhaustion.

At 8am we're underway again, heading to our berth in Hamilton, an hour west.

Everyone busily tidies up the deck and gets the boat ready to dock. We tie up bow-to at the Hamilton Princess Hotel, next to a dozen other big, high-tech race boats. We've hardly landed when another case of champagne appears and a pile of friends and well-wishers appear on the dock, glasses and bottles in hand, to help us celebrate. "You won! You won!" they scream.



"We won?" asks Liza.

"Yes, you won your class and the entire big boat, pro crew division! You guys did it! Woohoo!!" Someone from Newport pulls out the latest issue of the Newport Daily News showing Liza and **Van Ki Pass** on the front page: **Banner day for 'Newport Girl'**. Liza holds it up for the crowd and shrieks with delight. A half-dozen corks go flying and Gael sprays everyone with a magnum of expensive champagne quickly turning my \$10 t-shirt into a \$50 sponge.



A couple hours later we head down to the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club where the crowd is gathering as boats are crossing the finish line in a constant stream of flying sails. The current results flash on a big plasma screen and indeed there we are: first place in our class and division, thirty-first place overall (behind all the really big carbon race boats, but not by all that much).

The celebration continues well into the night. Actually, completely through the night. From

end to end. Enough 'Dark and Stormys' (black rum and ginger beer) were consumed by our crew to fill a swimming pool. Thousands of sailors and sailor-wanna-bes crowded the Yacht Club as the band played and the crews of various yachts celebrated. It was mayhem times ten, like a giant frat party for millionaires.

The awards party, a full-dress gala affair complete with Princess Ann giving out the trophies, confirmed our winning status and the only thing that made it even better was when one of the big, young-buck grinders from the boat we had passed came up to us, puffed out his chest and said, "What the hell was that needing assistance crap all about? We didn't need no frigging assistance. What is you guys, some sort of wise guys or something?"



"Just trying to help," I answered. "But we really *did* need that Grey Poupon"

Over the next few days as the parties and celebrations wound down, things in Bermuda returned to 'normal'. One by one the big yachts headed out, sailing north back to Newport, south to the Caribbean, or out into the ocean for far away places and new adventures. **The Van Ki Pass** would stay in Bermuda for a few more days, then head north for the summer, her bright wood hull slicing cleanly through the ocean, her smart golden sails carrying her easily forward. Vic would be proud of his creation.

end

