

Big Mac Attack

A First-Timer's Account of
the Chicago Yacht Club's
100th Race to
Mackinac

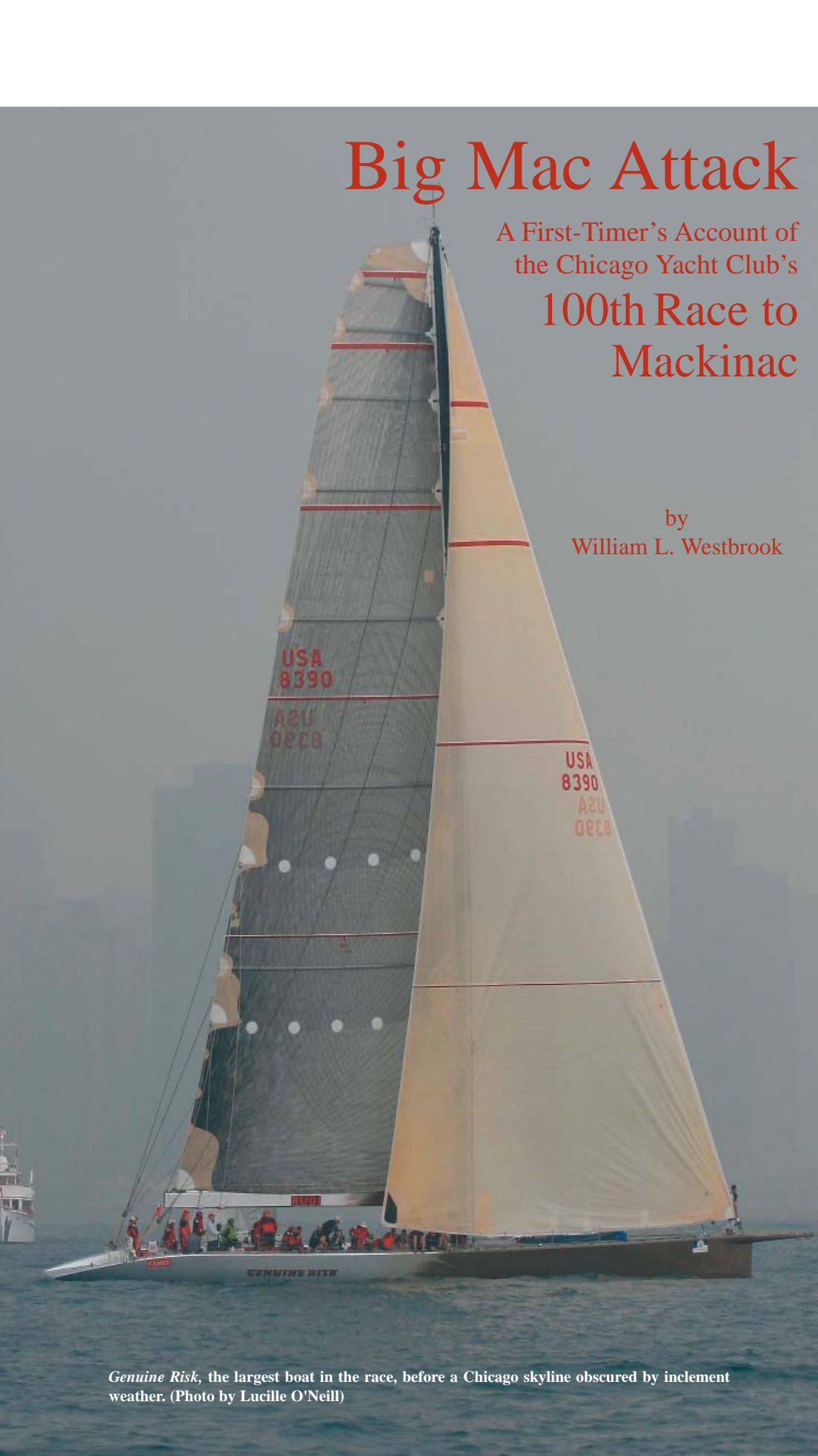
by
William L. Westbrook

Looking back at the logbook, it was sometime around eight in the evening on Sunday, July 20 when the visibility went from more than 300 hundred yards down to a mere 30. Not a great situation considering that night was falling, the wind was aft and building, and radar showed a handful of boats in our general vicinity. With our reaching spinnaker, we were surfing down the backs of Lake Michigan's mid-water rollers at eight knots, and weighing 17,000 pounds, a boat of our size could do a tremendous amount of damage if it plowed broadside into another sailing vessel.

Though there were nine of us onboard, only three had any real offshore racing experience. A fourth, Frank Kups, the owner of *En Pointe*, a German-made Dehler 39, straddled the middle ground between buoys and open water. He'd done a fair bit of bareboat sailing in the Caribbean, but his deepwater racing was limited to the odd 50-miler in and around the easy-to-navigate Lake Erie Islands. As for the remaining five, we were in the same boat, albeit with a lot less luxury cruising in the Caribbean.

The 100th Race to Mackinac had started for us some 31 hours before. Since the beginning, we had maintained four-hour crew rotations. On my watch was Frank, our watch captain and skipper, and Aaron Moore, a folksy, socialistic, rightwing liberal – if there can be such a thing. At times, his offbeat moralistic diatribes made him sound more like a libertarian running for president, but he was a good guy, a strong guy and useful around the cockpit.

Active duty for Frank, Aaron and me began at eight – 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM,



Genuine Risk, the largest boat in the race, before a Chicago skyline obscured by inclement weather. (Photo by Lucille O'Neill)

so we were now the guys responsible for driving through the fog toward Mackinac Island, which was still some 150 miles away. Frank was at the helm and struggling to keep the boat on course. Sailing downwind in the fog at night felt more like navigating in a vortex, as if we were bit players in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. At any moment, a mermaid could have jumped up on deck or a ghost ship could have appeared out of the gloom.

Working the Dehler's big wheel, Frank was confounded enough to laugh out loud and kept on repeating, "Guys, I feel like I'm going in circles." In reality, he wasn't, but he was having a hard time keeping the boat steady. Istvan Kopar, currently on reserve – the swami, the prophet, the veritable Che-like figure – stepped in to give Frank a hand.

A first-timer on *En Pointe*, Istvan was anything but a first-timer in all sailing matters. Born in Hungary, now living in Florida, Istvan had logged more than 100,000 miles of bluewater sailing. A celebrity of sorts in his home country, he had circumnavigated the globe twice, first on a solo voyage, then as skipper of a fully sponsored Tripp 55 in a Hungarian professional round-the-world race. A modest man in person, the stories he told captivated us. When he stood at the helm, he transcended our presence; he looked more like Pierre Fehlmann skippering *Merit* across the open ocean in the 1989-1990 Whitbread Round the World Race than a guy steering one of 400 or so boats across Lake Michigan in the middle of July. Istvan took the wheel from Frank, and we all settled into our second night of darkness on the race, confident the boat was in the most capable of hands.

In this, its 100th running, the Chicago-Mac has become a crown jewel of United States offshore racing. Arguably, only the Newport-Bermuda Race and the Transpac are more prestigious. At 289 nautical miles, it is the longest freshwater sailing race in the country. On July 29, a record 436 boats crossed the starting line



The author at the helm with Istvan, the swami, shortly after witnessing the race's second sunrise
(Photo by Brad Welch)

off Chicago's Navy Pier for this centenary event. The largest, *Genuine Risk*, was a 90-foot Oliver & Dubois designed sloop with a canting keel, one of the very first such boats with this high-tech appendage. Much had been said about this racer, much of it criticism for its lack of speed against similarly-designed boats. But with its sleek silver and brown hull and massive bowsprit, there was no debating its singularly awesome profile on the water. Only one other boat, *Windquest* at 86 feet, rivaled it in size. Predictably these two would battle for line honors in Mackinac Harbor.

We, of course, on *En Pointe* did not expect to witness their battle. They would start an hour and ten minutes after our race group, charge up through the entire fleet, and finish some 23 hours ahead of us. In the end, *Genuine Risk* would take line honors with an elapsed time of 35 hours, 8 minutes, 42 seconds – 48 minutes faster than *Windquest*. However, in a perverse twist of the handicapping system, *En Pointe* would beat both of them on corrected time, *Windquest* by almost two hours, *Genuine*

Risk by nearly two and a half.

On *En Pointe*, we knew that our race to Mackinac Island would last two to three days, depending on the wind. We also knew that over the duration, we would witness just about every kind of weather short of snow and ice. In this, we would not be disappointed.

Our race began in rain under a cloud ceiling of what seemed like 40 feet. The wind was blowing at exactly zero. At the start, we drifted over the line, drifted back behind the line, only to drift over the line again before the breeze finally filled to a gangbuster three knots, enough to get us on our way.

As every sailor knows, however, a breeze like this is rarely your friend, and the early afternoon hours of July 19 were maddening. Our start was a good one, crossing the line the second time ahead of most of our 24-boat section. But one hour on, with what little breeze there was coming from the west, boats just 100 yards nearer the Illinois shore marched right past us. It was as if the wind gods had only



Sea of color in Mackinac Harbor (Photo by Kim Welch)

enough of the good stuff for the windward line of boats, and we were not among them.

In that first hour of drift, we saw a handful of crews peel off and motor back to shore. The Bloody Marys back in their various harbor bars that afternoon probably tasted great, but down deep they must have regretted their decision. Not two hours later, true wind speed had risen to 11 knots, and with main and jib, our boat was making a steady six-five. It even began to clear, briefly, until the haze crept back in.

A wonderful thing about this

year's Mac was the satellite tracking system the organization had installed on every participant's boat. On the first night, the time we first checked the tracking system, we were nineteenth in our 24-boat fleet, a bit discouraging considering our good start. By the next morning, we had moved up to seventeenth, then later fourteenth, then eleventh. By Monday morning, we had passed another boat and were in tenth. Encouraged by the trend and with great boat speed, we began to believe a flag, awarded for first, second, or third place,

was possible. We had 80 miles to overtake at least seven boats.

Where the experience of being out to sea set the mood in the early part of the race, now competitive fires took over. The sky had cleared, the wind was strong, and as we powered north to round the turning buoy that marks the entrance to the Straits of Mackinac, there was an anxious, excited feeling among the crew: a feeling that we might be on an ass-kicking run, front-page players in a story of David poking a stick in the eye of a handful of Goliaths.

As night fell, our anticipation grew. We could now clearly see the lights that illuminate the Mackinac Bridge, a massive structure, the third-longest suspension bridge in the world. And with nightfall came storms, the worst we witnessed during the race. Wind gusts of 35 knots made rain feel like needles on our faces. Frank was at the helm and realizing a dream, a dream of not only completing his first Mac, but doing it by driving his own boat under the bridge and across the finish line. He was impervious.

I, however, was not. The more the rain pelted down, the wetter and colder I became. My foul-weather gear had reached its saturation point. For me, the approach to the bridge and the last five miles of the race after it had become an intense, personal



Rain and fog makes for a ghostly feeling passing the Second City's northernmost crib. (Photo by William Westbrook)



The Beneteau 36.7 fleet in pre-start maneuvers (Photo by Lucille O'Neill)

struggle to beat back hypothermia. Frank and Istvan ran the boat from the cockpit. Seven of us sat on the rail. The rain and wind pounded down on us and, like a metronome, every few seconds a drop of water dripped down my neck, into my neoprene collar, past my chest, and was absorbed by the clothing around my mid-section.

After an hour, my base layers were soaked, and we were still more than 45 minutes from the line. The bridge came and went overhead, the rain was relentless, but I was no longer sailing. I had slipped into a trance. My thoughts were of warm, familiar places: Cairo – the city by the desert where I used to live, of cattle herders on the Serengeti, of the midday rush in Mumbai. Psychologically this was the only way I

knew to get through the coldest, most miserable two hours of my life.

At 11:17 PM on Monday, July 21, Frank Kups and crew sailed *En Pointe* to its first Race to Mackinac finish in an elapsed time of 58 hours, 17 minutes. Later at the dock, we learned that we had not passed anybody in our fleet during what we thought was our late-race charge. Tenth place in Section 5 would be our final finishing position. This, however, did nothing to dampen our spirits. Tenth out of 24 competitors is a more than respectable result for a crew made up largely of first-timers.

An hour later at the Pink Pony, the island's dockside bar, it was all smiles, exuberance, and camaraderie. After a couple of drinks, Frank raised his glass for a toast.

"Here's to Newport-Bermuda in 2010!" We all seconded it. The next morning, upon reflection, we amended the toast. "Here's to the Mac in 2009!" We haven't ruled out Newport-Bermuda, not by any means. It's just that we know now where we'll be come July next year, sailing in the greatest fresh-water distance race in North America.

William Westbrook is a writer-photographer who lives in South Russell, Ohio. He has written on a diverse range of sports and outdoor pursuits. He has also translated into English several French books on European professional cycling. When not writing or shooting, he typically can be found walking his black Lab in the woods, with a rod in his hand, on the deck of a sailboat, or on some distant road riding his bicycle.