

Racing to Bermuda

Story and photos
by
Chip Barber

Every two years, on the Friday before the summer solstice, an assemblage of adventurers in small boats sets forth from Rhode Island bound for the small island nation of Bermuda, some 635 miles to the south. They number in the thousands and have been performing this ritual for 100 years. This is the Newport to Bermuda Yacht Race.

This past June marked the centennial running of this, the most famous offshore sailing race. Over 2,400 men and women raced in 265 yachts ranging in length from 30 to 100 feet. The conditions were relatively benign, but that didn't dampen anyone's spirits or take away from the experience they all enjoyed.

I have been racing to Bermuda for over 25 years. This is certainly no record (the late Jim Mertz of Rye, New

York, holds the record of 30 Bermuda races), but it allows me to have a perspective on the race that many haven't earned. I've finished "out of the silver" many times. But I've also packed the Saint David's Lighthouse Trophy for First-in-Fleet honors home from Bermuda in my sea bag. I've raced to Bermuda in agonizingly light winds and calm seas, but I've also raced through the Gulf Stream in the raging fury of a nor'easter. This begs the question of why so many men and women continue to place themselves at the mercy of the sea every two years to race small boats from Newport to Bermuda.

My experiences this year, for the centennial race, may help explain why so many men and women return again and again for the "Thrash to the Onion Patch." This year, I was navigator aboard a vintage wooden racer, *Black Watch*. A 68-foot-

long yawl, *Black Watch* was designed by Olin Stephens and built in New York 68 years ago. She raced her first Bermuda Race just months after her launching in 1938. Having just overseen a seven-figure historic restoration as project manager, I knew the boat as well as anyone and felt that this historic yacht had the potential to excel against even the most modern ultralight racers. I knew that the handicap system (racing yachts of different sizes compete against each other as equals using handicaps such as in golf or in polo) would treat *Black Watch* fairly and that if the winds blew from the direction and speed typical of an average Bermuda Race (a close reach in moderate wind velocity), we could be expected to do exceptionally well. But every ocean racer knows that the conditions are seldom "average"; we are all constantly subject to the vagaries of



Black Watch power reaching after the star of the Centennial Newport to Bermuda Race (Photo by Hans Zimmer)

King Neptune and Mother Nature.

I had been looking forward to this special opportunity for months!

But this year, the vagaries of nature would consist of “tedium.” The hundred-year “average” of moderate winds turned out to be atypically light, and

from the worst possible direction. As navigator, my job included monitoring and downloading the weather forecasts and the position of the Gulf Stream. As each new forecast arrived by HF radio and internet (via satellite phone), it became evident that this was not to be a good year for *Black*

Watch and the other large yachts. In fact the wind conditions favored the small boats so much that the podium finishers were all the best sailed among the smallest boats in the fleet.

There was no great drama this centennial year. There was no storm (like

the Fastnet Race in 1979), no hurricane such as in 1982 when the Bermuda Race was postponed in Newport for two days so that a tropical storm could race by just north of Bermuda. (We did watch Tropical Storm Alberto very closely as he passed between New England and Bermuda just one day before the race start this year.) The Gulf Stream was relatively benign, and the pre-race briefings by talented oceanographers predicted its location perfectly for us.

Our crew consisted of both amateur and professional sailors, of men with considerable Bermuda Race and blue water racing experience and men with little experience. (There was a combined total of 49 previously sailed Bermuda Races among the 15 men aboard.) The youngest was entering graduate school, and the oldest was in his 70s. This was a wonderful cross section of American socioeconomic culture—from a fortune 500 CEO to a New England boatwright. The conversation during the night watches was always spirited, housekeeping chores were completed without issue, and most importantly, all of the crew contributed tirelessly to changing and trimming sails to make *Black Watch* perform better than anyone could have imagined during the five days we were at sea.

So why do we continue to race to Bermuda every two years? An obvious reason is the chance to compete against some of the world's best sailors and yachts over a course that is ever changing. The sea is ever changing, and every Bermuda Race presents a completely new challenge to skipper, navigator, and crew. Another reason is that Bermuda presents a wonderful and unique destination for an ocean race. Certainly Bermuda is a better place to wind up after four or five days at sea than Tasmania or Plymouth, England! (These are the finishing locations of the Sydney to Hobart race and the Fastnet Race, respectively.)

For me, this year's Bermuda race



Adjusting the sails for speed, a constant task aboard a racing yacht.



Navigation station with computers, radios, and instruments matches that found aboard the most modern racers.

will always be remembered for two reasons. The first is the beauty and special feeling of sailing a stunning vintage wooden-hulled racer in the celebration of the centennial. There is no more wonderful feeling than looking out over the golden teak deck and listening to the creaking of the masts in the partners as this powerful

Sparkman and Stephens yawl reached over lightly swelling seas in the warm waters just north of Bermuda. But more inspiring to me is the remembrance of the camaraderie and friendships made during this 635-mile race. These can never be taken away.

The Prize Giving Ceremony is



Peter Rebovich's Cal 40, *Sinn Fein*, won the coveted St. David's Lighthouse Trophy for First-in-Fleet (ORR Handicap). The smaller boats did exceptionally well in this year's race.

Royal Bermuda Yacht Club has hosted thousands of racers for over a century.

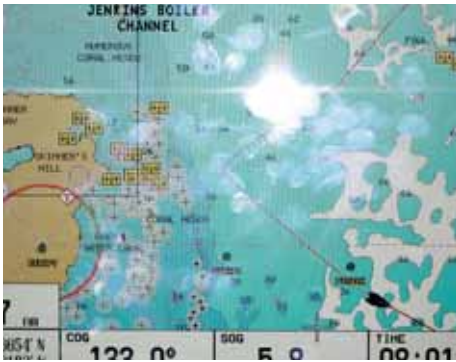


HRH Princess Ann presented awards.

always hosted at Government House, the home of the Queen's appointed Governor of Bermuda. This year in addition to the Governor, Her Royal Highness Princess Ann was in attendance to present trophies to the winners. Princess Ann told the crowd that she has always been known as a horsewoman, but that recently she, too, has come to love sailing. She did comment, however, that she has never felt seasick on the back of a horse.

In his opening remarks to the assembled sailors, the Commodore of the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, Andrew Cox, mentioned that in the 100 years since 1906, some 40,000 men and women have raced 4,200 boats more than two million sea miles to Bermuda. What numbers! Why do we continue to race to Bermuda? The personal challenge of sailing against any conditions nature can throw at us and of sailing against the very best international competition, the camaraderie, the yachting tradition, and the warm and beautiful destination that awaits us every two years inarguably make this the best blue water race in the world.

But there may be another reason.



Black Watch's chart plotter documents our finish off of St. David's Head, Bermuda.

It may be that this question was best answered way back in 1906 by race founder Thomas Fleming Day when he said, "Sailors simply want to get a smell of the sea and forget for the time being that there is such a thing as God's green earth and the universe."

The next Newport to Bermuda Race will be sailed in 2008. I'm already signed on to navigate *Black Watch*, in the year of her 70th birthday, for the "Thrash to the Onion Patch."

Charles Barber is a veteran sailor of over 40 years. He was the Director of Sailing and Commodore of the Naval Academy Sailing Squadron. Chip was the coach on board the Naval Academy's 48-foot sloop *Constellation* in 1992 when she won the coveted St. David's Lighthouse Trophy for First-in-Fleet in the Newport to Bermuda Race. Upon leaving the Navy, Chip founded an international yacht management service and provides administrative management and special project management for high-level racers as well as for long-distance sail and powerboat cruisers.



Black Watch after the start (Jib draft was being adjusted for reaching.)
(Photo by Hans Zimmer)