



Racing to Bermuda in the 2007 Marion- Bermuda Cruising Yacht Race

A Tale of Two Competitors



By Roy Greenwald

The 2007 Marion to Bermuda race was the third for *Cordelia*, our Valient 42, and our crew. We thought we were as well prepared as ever. What we learned was: some things you can prepare for, and some you can't.

One of the unique things about Marion-Bermuda is that they encourage the use of celestial navigation. In fact, this year, those boats that were willing to dust off their sextants or buy a new one (yes, that's still possible!) enjoyed a two-percent credit on their corrected times. We've gone the celestial route all three races. With first, second and fourth place finishes under our belts in this division we've all gotten used to going where my wife, Gail, our navigator, points us. The two-percent credit seems to be keeping this ancient and worthy art alive, as the entries in the division increased this year, reversing prior downward trends.

PLOTTING THE STRATEGY

One of the most fortuitous coincidences for us occurred this year before the race even began. Our preparations took place at our homeport

Andy Shor, from Burr Brothers' Boats, delivers a new knotmeter minutes before the start, below. The competitors: *Cordelia*, opposite top; *Silhouette*, opposite bottom

yard, Burr Brothers Boats, in Marion, Mass., and we were rafted at the dock next to *Silhouette*, a beautiful Herreshoff-style Cherubini 44 ketch. Her captain, David Caso, was gracious enough to allow us to traipse back and forth across his stern while we took care of chores on *Cordelia*. Little did we know that David, along with his crew of six others, would take home a trailer-load of trophies after reaching Bermuda. *Silhouette* took home first in class, first in the electronics division, first overall honors and first two-year combined finishes for Marion-to-Bermuda and Newport-to-Bermuda. Although we never knew it, since our access to real-time data was restricted as a celestial division participant, *Cordelia* and *Silhouette* were neck and neck for two days of the race, before *Cordelia* flat ran out of wind.

The last time we chatted with David prior to the race was the evening before the start. We had both just attended Jenifer Clark's seminar on the Gulf Stream. As an acknowledged expert on this "river within the ocean" her pre-race seminar has become a standard, albeit paid, offering the night before the race. After that session Dave and I discussed strategy a bit, while holding our cards just a bit close to the vest. Our readings were very similar. The following two paragraphs come from an e-mail I subsequently received from Dave, and do a terrific job describing the course, along with the thought and tactics that went into the decisions made by the overall fleet winner. *Silhouette's* preparation was thoughtful and meticulous and her victory was certainly no fluke:

"The pre-race preparation includes route planning and weather planning. The Marion to Bermuda race can be broken into three stages. The first stage is getting out of Buzzards Bay, the second stage is getting

across the Gulf Stream and the third is crossing the Sargasso Sea. The Gulf Stream is a major feature due to the swift current running from Florida up the East Coast of the United States on its way to England. ...Jenifer Clark, saw no reason to chase any favorable current off of the rhumbline... Her suggestion was to exit the Gulf Stream slightly to the east of the rhumbline to avoid the adverse current so we plotted our course accordingly..."

THE START AND DOWN THE BAY

Sometimes it seems amazing to think that both electronic and celestial class boats can still complete head-to-head. This unique facet of the Marion-Bermuda race remains part of its allure. David, on *Silhouette*, was about as tricked-out as one could be. Again, he says it best:

"Although *Silhouette* is a classic sailboat, she has the best electronics available today. A tablet PC repeated on a screen at the helm runs Raymarine's RNS software that integrates all of the NMEA instruments and the autopilot. The PC also connects to the Internet via the Globalstar satellite phone. We downloaded weather files and the iBoat track leader board every day."

iBoat Track is a web-based electronic tracking system that captures data from transponders carried by all of the race competitors. It gives real-time data and projections during the entire race.

Cordelia, by design, was

sailing just about the opposite sort of race. Although we also are equipped with a fully integrated Raymarine set of electronics, once the celestial competitors are 20 miles offshore we are restricted to the use of our compass, log, knotmeter, and whatever we can download via the single sideband. We cannot take advantage of any subscription service—in other words, no Internet. For us that meant NOAA weather charts. As a result of this decision, our race got interesting right away—in fact, before we even crossed the starting line.

One of the challenges about sailing in general, and ocean races in particular, is that you can predict the unpredictable will occur. We call these "Holy Cow" events, and our first one occurred while motoring to the starting line. Gail nonchalantly declared "The knotmeter's not working." Leave it to the navigator to notice little things like that. Assuming something was fouled on the paddwheel, Dan Tocci and I lay on our stomachs and debated over who would pull the transducer and who would plug the fitting as a small portion of Buzzards Bay jetted up the through-hull fitting. After briefly congratulating ourselves on how dry we still were, our jaws dropped. I was holding in my hand a transducer with a nice clean paddwheel, but with one of its supporting forks





snapped in half. Holy cow! This was a huge issue for us because as a celestial competitor we were not allowed to use GPS for either position or speed-over-the-ground. We had visions of tossing pieces of bread over the side and timing their travel time to gauge our speed all the way to Bermuda. Although we had GPS for emergency backup, we had never considered an alternative to preserve our ability to compete celestially.

Fortunately, we were only about two miles out of Marion harbor. We made a cell call to Andy Shor, Burr Brothers Boats' resident electronics whiz, and asked him if he had a spare transducer. He knew he had it and promised to get it to us before the start. We had about 75 minutes to go. Sure enough, just as panic was starting to set in Andy came bounc-

ing into sight in one of the yard's workboats, handed us our package, and was just as quickly back off to the harbor.

The start that followed was fairly uneventful for *Cordelia*, as we started in the first class of five. It was a downwind start in about 20 knots of breeze, with most boats preferring to start on a starboard tack. About half of our class jibed over as soon as they started. As the starting guns continued to boom, the sight astern filled with multi-colored spinnakers on either side, while the wing-and-wingers took a straight shot down the middle of the Bay. We were in the latter group. The tide was slack so there was no real advantage to either shore for at least the next couple of hours. While we had these nice, flat conditions, lying on his

stomach with his head in the bilge, Dan made the knotmeter repair, and sure enough, we got our speed and log back. Phew!

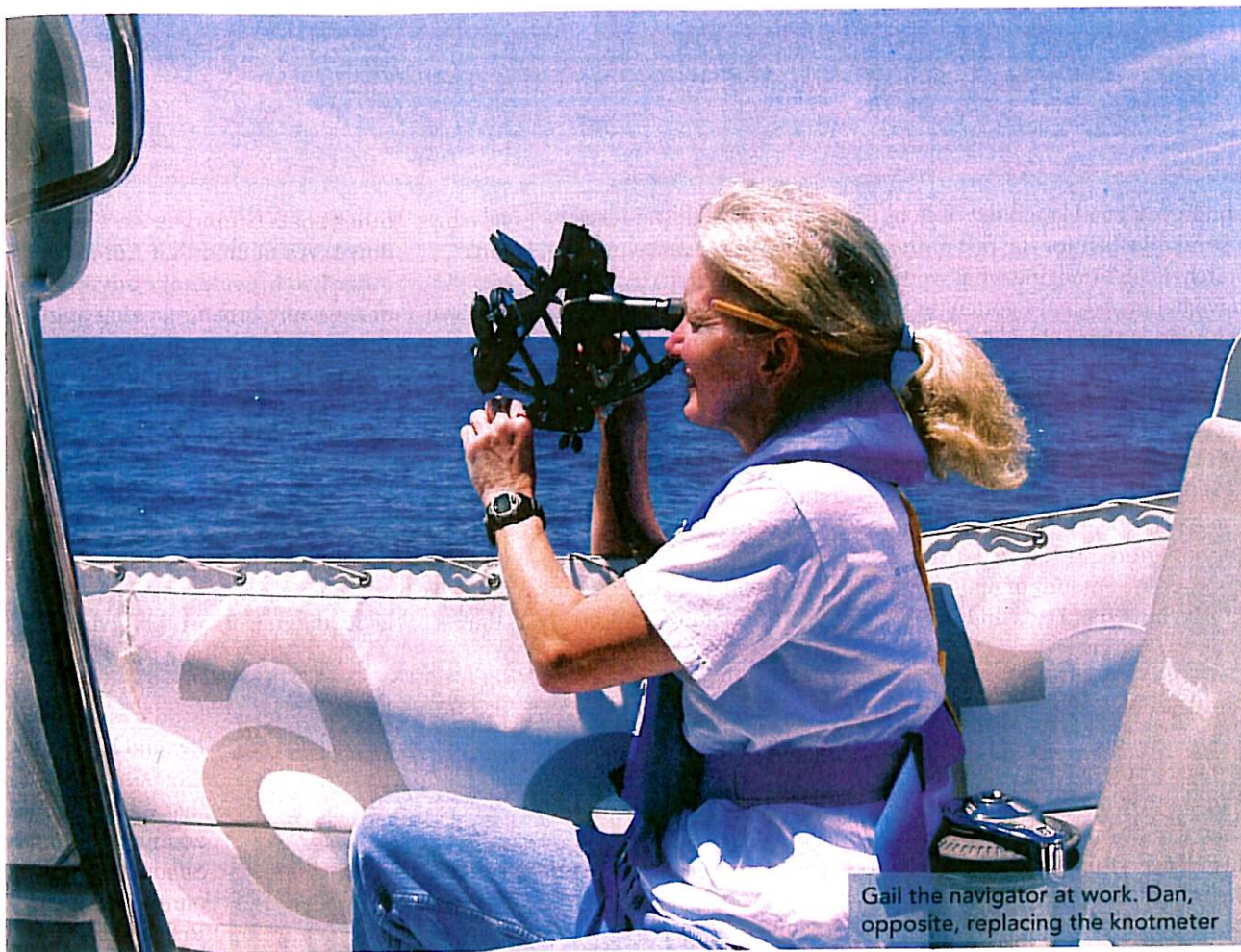
Meanwhile, *Silhouette* had gotten off to a great start as well. Back to David:

"At the start of the race the wind was astern. We planned to cross the line on starboard tack and hoist the spinnaker when we had some breathing room. We started behind a few other boats but we didn't make any mistakes... We had our spinnaker, mainsail, mizzen and mizzen staysail up all the way out of Buzzards Bay. By the end of the first day we had passed all other boats in the fleet but our brief lead vanished with the sunset. The wind turned to the southwest then went calm. As the night came upon us so did the rest of the fleet. Seventy-one green and red lights were creeping up on us..."

HEADING DOWN THE LINE

So, as David had put it, stage one was completed. We were headed for the Gulf Stream and Bermuda. As nightfall approached, I made my first evening walk of the deck checking for chafe points, unsecured lines and other potential problems. One last adjustment of the sails, and I headed below. I was standing a full watch, although I am usually up and down the entire race anyway. For now, I was off watch. As twilight faded to darkness, the hulls lost their shapes and the running lights began to wink on. Dana Oviatt manned the helm while Dan counted over 50 sets of lights visible that first night. Amazingly, as seems to happen every race, by daybreak Brian Walsh, my watch-mate, and I could see only two vessels, and those were not close enough to identify.

Day two was about as agonizing as it could get. The wind faded and shifted, filling in for short times in



Gail the navigator at work. Dan, opposite, replacing the knotmeter

differing directions. The sound of the sails slatting badgered us with how little progress we were making. It was agony. David shared with me that *Silhouette* actually made a 360-degree circle looking for wind that day. Gail was intent on avoiding a major unfavorable eddy north of the Gulf Stream, and had us heading west-northwest for a brief time—almost diametrically opposite from our desired course. Finally the wind filled in from the southwest, and we were able to head directly for Gail's preferred Gulf Stream entry point. We had been fairly certain the wind would fill, having studied the weather charts as well as the Gulf Stream tracks. We also made a rather unconventional decision, to sail a bit east of the rhumbline, chasing winds from some gales shown south of the Gulf Stream. Our plan was to get back onto the rhumbline at about 100 miles northwest of Bermuda.

The wind really piped up on day

two and continued on to day three. Keeping *Cordelia's* lee rail out of the water with as much sail as she could carry kept us moving at or above hull speed. Usually a short reef of the main in or out, or a brief reduction of our genoa, would keep us right on the edge. Life was good as Gail broke out a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. We used our satellite phone to check in with family. We had directed them not to share any information with us about our position, but it was obvious we were doing well. They couldn't stand not telling us. We later found out that for over two full days iBoat had *Cordelia* projected as the overall first-place finisher. David knew that quite well. Back to his view of the race:

"We also knew that we were in the running for a respectable finish. iBoat had *Silhouette* in third place overall behind *Cordelia* and *Chase* both trailing us to our east. We

owed both boats a considerable amount of time so we knew we had to gain about a mile an hour to beat both boats on corrected time. iBoat Track had *Cordelia* in first place and moving at 8.8 knots while we were moving at 9.2 knots, which is very fast for both boats. I could not believe with our amount of sail area that they were keeping up."

I didn't know the details, but I knew we were smoking. Standing in the cockpit with one foot on either cockpit bench, while holding on to the aft end of our hard dodger, was like riding a stallion. The power of the wind was obvious, while the spray would arc over the starboard bow and cross the housetop without so much as touching the deck. The wind was up and *Cordelia* was soaring. It was a ton of fun! That evening I was standing exactly in that position when an unseen flying fish blasted off my inflatable vest. Brian

and I got a good laugh out of it, but I stunk like fish for the rest of the watch. I can't imagine what would have happened had I gotten hit in the head at those speeds!

THE FINAL 100 MILES

As Brian and I came on watch the next morning we noticed that the knotmeter was reading less than 8.5. We had managed to average 8.5 to 9 for our entire prior watch. After an appropriate amount of abuse and insults hurled at Dana and Dan, we

took our turn at the helm. It was 6 a.m. on June 19. By 11 a.m. the wind speed had dropped to 6 knots. Brian and I tried everything we could think of to keep the boat moving. We knew that a high pressure cell was moving in from the southwest, and had known it was coming even before the race. We had

thought most of the fleet, including us, would beat it to Bermuda. If it landed on top of us, we could be fighting light winds the rest of the way. Fortunately, Gail had directed us back west of the rhumbline, so when the wind filled back in, we wouldn't be the last to get it.

The wind continued to die. At 5 p.m. I had a brief phone conversation with my father, Bud, who had been following our progress closely and keeping friends and family informed via e-mails. He was on his way out, and didn't have much time. The conversation was brief: "We've sailed into a hole," I said. "You're kidding, right?" he almost pleaded.

"No, I'm not. And it seems to be a big one. We're hardly moving. I think the high caught us."

"Oh, man. You're not going to believe how well you were doing."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know. I'll talk to you later." And we hung up.

Thoughts filled my head. "Maybe it will fill in;" "The other boats must have hit this;" "I hope the big boats aren't in yet." I checked with Gail. We were 67 miles from Bermuda by her calculations. We could still do well. What I didn't know was that

other boats behind us were slowing down. We figured that *Kathleen*, another ketch, could take advantage of the same broad reaching angles that were helping push us toward Bermuda. I told the crew that based on the standings we had a good chance of winning if we could finish before 6:30 on Tuesday evening. We finished at 6:15 EST in 15 knots of wind on a beam reach."

David was at the tail end of the boats that never lost their wind.

The big boats all finished with a good fresh breeze. I would later check iBoat and find that we were only 20 miles behind *Silhouette* when our wind began to fade while he carried his to the finish line. Oh, but the wind gods are fickle!

As the day dragged on, we crept about *Cordelia*, careful not to dump our

precious wind. The off-watch lay on the rail helping to maintain the boat trim. We began telling jokes that got worse and worse as the day wore on. Danny won the best joke award while keeping it generally "R" rated. Dana suggested that we conduct a "blessing of the winch handle." With the entire crew gathered in the cockpit, he chanted in tongues, and poured what he claimed to be enchanted water over one of our winch handles. It didn't work.

At about 9 a.m. on Wednesday we calculated that we would not be in Hamilton until after nightfall, and still had no idea when the wind might fill in. We listened on the VHF as several boats approached the fin-



the big boats would never lose their wind. Picking back up with David on *Silhouette*:

"We had put up and taken down the mizzen staysail at least 10 times to tailor the sails to the conditions. At 100 nm from the finish line, Bermuda Harbor Radio was forecasting light winds from 8 to 12 knots for the rest of the race but we continued to experience 15-knot to 18-knot winds... By Tuesday, we were flying our spinnaker and mizzen staysail and the crew was trimming both on each wave... We had checked the Internet on Tuesday morning and felt that *Kathleen* was now our biggest concern...all



The race boats are dressed to impress after the finish in Bermuda. *Cordelia's* crew and spouses at the awards party, opposite

ish line. The time it took them to go from Kitchen Shoals, five miles from the finish and a radio check-in point, to the finish line was ludicrous. We heard several boats drop out. On *Cordelia* we even began to ask the question of whether we might throw in the towel. The crew all had family meeting them on-shore and hoped to do more than just join them at the airport for the flight home! We elected to make no decision and postponed further discussion on the topic until 9 p.m. By noon, the captain made another important decision. While offshore, alcohol is usually off-limits on *Cordelia*. However, to keep the crew in line, an age-old tradition was implemented—grog for all! Beers made their appearance above deck.

Fortunately, and finally, the wind began to fill in at about 2 p.m. First it was patches and puffs, as we scanned the horizon for ever-larger swathes of ripples to chase. Next we had a steady Force 2, which was enough to keep us moving. Finally it picked up to about 10 knots and *Cordelia* was on her way. At 5:33

p.m. with the full crew on deck, we crossed the finish line, pretty confident we had still been able to claim first in class, which proved to be true.

SHORE-SIDE BERMUDA

Starting this year, the organizers of the race really outdid themselves. On Saturday afternoon there were shuttle buses up to the Governor's estate for the awards ceremony. We were treated to an unmatched panorama of the westward reefs of Bermuda and the entrance channel toward Hamilton. There were plenty of beverage stations and all the Dark-and-Stormy's one could possibly want. Prior to handing out the trophies the governor, who had sailed the race himself, shared some brief welcoming comments with the racers. He also offered this rather bold advice, tongue firmly implanted in cheek, "For all of the smaller boats who ran out of wind, I would like to suggest that next time you try something different...Sail faster!" He was roundly and good-naturedly booed.

Following the awards the shuttles again took the crowd back to the

Royal Hamilton Amateur Dinghy Club for a final evening gala dinner. This event was inaugurated in 2007 and was truly special. Under a large tent the race organizers thanked the participants, and the participants thanked the organizers. As the balmy evening wore on the canopy of stars gradually came into focus outside the tent. A throng of drowsy sailors danced to the music of a live band while farewells were said, handshakes were exchanged and a host of "see-you-in-oh-nine's" were traded.

I looked around for David once more, but was unable to find him. My last words to him in Bermuda had been at the awards ceremony. While he was loaded down with trophies waiting to have his picture taken yet again, I joshed, "I'm sure glad I don't need to lug all that stuff home with me." David just kept on smiling and said, "I'll bet you are."

Well...not really. ~

The 2009 Marion-Bermuda Cruising Yacht Race starts on June 19. For more information, visit their website at www.marionbermuda.com.