

Consider destination races

Twice in the 13 summers since we bought *Preamble*, our Island Packet 37, Julie and I have taken the plunge and entered organized, offshore races. In 2005, we raced in the Marion-Bermuda Cruising Yacht Race with good friends aboard and with a fair amount of success. Most recently, we entered the 2009 Marblehead to Halifax Ocean Race, in which we were early dropouts after a bit of quick and easy mental calculus involving questions about why we sail in the first place. While we would never describe ourselves as racers, we definitely would argue that both races helped us to grow as sailors and boat mates. What remains to be seen is whether we will enter another such race.

We made the decision to race to

Bermuda one night in August 2004, while off Matinicus Rock, heading for Mount Desert and the start of our annual summer cruise. It was one of those cold, clear and beautiful summer nights, and we were reaching along under a broad and deep sky full of stars, the kind of sky that makes all of your dreams and ideas bigger by mere association. I don't remember which of us first voiced the idea, but the decision was fast and easy, and race preparations quickly became our focus.

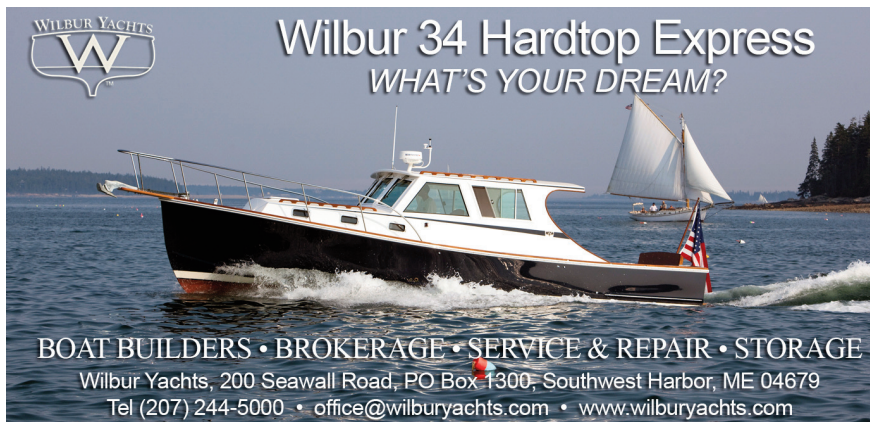
The Marion Bermuda Race is an ISAF Category 1 race, which is described as follows: "A race of long distance, well offshore, in large unprotected bays, and in waters where large waves, strong currents, or conditions leading to rapid onset

of hypothermia are possible, where yachts must be completely self-sufficient for extended periods of time, capable of withstanding heavy storms and prepared to meet serious emergencies without the expectation of outside assistance." As such, there are rigorous entry requirements for both the vessel and the crew. Meeting these requirements took some doing on our part.

After serving three years as our primary residence, followed by four summers of cruising, *Preamble* was very functional, but she also was in need of some overhauling. There were repairs and safety modifications to be made, and there was a lot of required emergency equipment to purchase and install, followed by an official inspection to make sure all had been done correctly.

I did the work myself. This has always been important to me. I figure that, when something goes awry offshore, I stand a much better chance of fixing it if I was the one who did the original work. When inspection day came, passing muster and the positive comments I received from the inspector gave me a nice shot of confidence in both *Preamble* and myself.

We also needed to deal with the matter of crew. Prior to this, our crew had always consisted of Julie and me and our then 13-year-old daughter Rachel. We decided to invite some sailing friends, Kim and Marie, to join us. We had sailed in tandem with them in the past, we knew they were up to the challenge, and we felt comfortable with the prospect of spending time with them offshore. We also decided to have Rachel fly to Bermuda and to make the return trip a family cruise. Both turned out to be good



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decisions.

The race itself was challenging, starting with a beat down Buzzards Bay in 20-plus-knot winds. This was followed up by two and a half days of 25- to 35-knot northeast winds and spreader-high standing waves in the Gulf Stream. Next, it was a light southwest breeze and a slow crawl to the finish. After making our way through the cut and into St. George's Harbour, we dropped the hook, popped some champagne, and went for a swim. The feelings of satisfaction were indescribable, and they were immense.

The trip home was a milk run. Bright sunshine, calm seas and light breezes made for an easy trip. Rachel stood a four-hour watch each midday. Dolphins played in our bow wave. We fished and read books and ate good food. We made landfall in time for July Fourth in Newport, and then spent another week cruising around the Vineyard before arriving back in our then

home port of Hull, Mass., tired but feeling very fulfilled.

We ended up finishing 8th overall, after the hand-capping voodoo was done, much better than we had ever dared to dream. More importantly, we had sailed our boat across a significant piece of water, through some nasty conditions, and gained quite a bit of priceless experience and confidence along the way.

Our second foray into the world of offshore racing was quite different. The Marblehead-Halifax Race is an ISAF Category 2 race, slightly less rigorous in its requirements for both boat and crew. Having done Marion-Bermuda just a few years previous, the preparations were a bit easier to make. *Preamble's* normal summer cruising commission needed only slight modifications, and we decided to enter in a doublehanded category, alleviating any crewing decisions.

The race started in 15 to 20 knots of wind from the

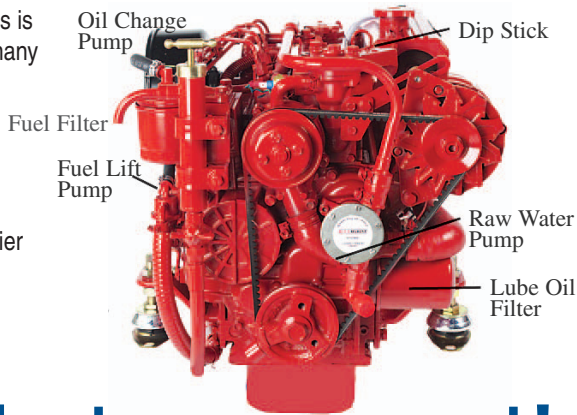
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northwest, the backside of a cold front that was quickly exiting the area. We popped out the asymmetrical as we crossed the line and enjoyed about an hour of hull speed before the wind died completely. Over the next 15 hours we managed to eke out a further 12 miles.

The forecast called for nothing above a spotty five knots for the next three days. As I relieved Julie on deck at four in the morning, she vocalized the night's unspoken thoughts with a simple "your call," and headed below for some rack. I mulled it over, checking forecasts, projecting boat speeds and distances, and, at about 0630, I fired up the diesel and sent off an email, officially retiring from the race.

The MHOR committee ended up extending the race window by 48 hours. Still, many boats either dropped out or did not finish. As *Preamble* is not the most nimble light-air boat, I doubt we would have gotten in on time. Instead, we motored north and, about 25 miles south of Monhegan Island, found a nice westerly sea breeze by three that afternoon. Without regrets, we spent the next two stolen weeks traipsing around our favorite cruising grounds, still managing to find new harbors and anchorages even after so many years.

The big question now is whether or not there are more destination races in our future. I imagine that sometime in the next few years we will look at another

race and weigh the minuses and pluses.

The way I see it, there are two major factors on the downside. First, there is the expense: These races can be quite costly to gear up for. We spent over \$10,000 preparing for the Marion-Bermuda Race, and \$3,000 to \$4,000 more for Marblehead-Halifax. Second, when racing, you can't pick your weather window. Both of our races were in less than ideal conditions, albeit conditions at opposite ends of the spectrum. In both cases, I am sure we would have looked for better departure windows had we been cruising.

On the upside, there are many reasons to race again. Planning routes, learning about currents, and studying weather patterns all appeal to my scientific side. Sailing to new destinations is interesting and fun. It is great to spend time with friends, both new and old, in such an energy-charged environment. But, most of all, I enjoy knowing that my boat and crew are in good, fighting trim, prepared to meet the challenges that routinely arise whether racing or cruising.

Bob White, a high school chemistry teacher, holds a USCG Masters License (50 tons coastal) and is an ASA certified sailing instructor. He and his wife Julie are relocating this spring to the Penobscot Bay area, a long-time favorite cruising ground for them and Preamble. They are excited to spend even more time exploring the waters around their new home.



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