



By Stewart Thomas

From Spirit of Bermuda On the Marion Bermuda Race

Day 1:

We start the race in 5 hours. As the crew wakes up on mainland soil for the last time, the weather is terrible - and perfect. It's 50 degrees, raining, and very windy, with gusts up to 25 mph.

This is great for Spirit of Bermuda: Spirit is a big boat, with lots of sail area in its 5 sails held up by 3 masts, a big keel, and lots of crew. Spirit loves a stiff breeze. And she responds with speed and finesse. Our crew has divided into two shifts, and we have made some good-natured bets on which shift can get Spirit going at top speed.

We are ready. We are experienced sailors, and we are taking this race seriously. Yesterday, some of the crew drove to Newport, RI for some last minute provisioning: new foul weather jackets, pants, boots, gloves, etc.

We are prepared: our navigator has circumnavigated the globe numerous times, our sail master knows Spirit like his own child (and treats her like a spoiled daughter), and our captain and crew know every aspect of this beautiful yacht.

Yesterday, we took our shakedown cruise. The entire crew assembled for the first time on the foredeck. After introductions, we received extensive safety briefings (always wear safely harness when on deck, man overboard drill, etc.). And then we motored out of the harbor, set the 5 sails, turned off the motor, and set sail. We tacked, jibed, practiced crew shifts, and took turns at the helm.

We returned to the Marion harbor in time for the Skippers Meeting, final weather briefing, and then enjoyed a final crew dinner on the beautiful lawn of the Beverly Yacht Club, whose hospitality has been overwhelming.

Thank you Marion! With your numerous United States and Bermuda flags flying throughout town, and your friendly hospitality, you have taken great care to make us all feel welcome.

Finally, we turned in early last night, and had fitful sleep anticipating the day we have have looked forward to for so long.

And its finally here. Day One: Marion to Bermuda Yacht race.

We are ready.

THE START

The start is scheduled for 12:05 AM. The Spirit crew assembled at 10:00, where we received bunk assignments, stowed our gear, and got ready to set sail. Because of our large number, we are "hot-bunking" (persons from different watches sharing the same bunk). Space is tight, and we brought lots of gear -- not because we overpacked, but because this race demands it. The first 36 hours are set in the cold Northern Atlantic still remembering its cold winter. The water is cold, and the wind is chilly. Full four weather gear, compete with boots and gloves, are required. Especially today, because its raining.

After we motored out of the shallow Marion harbor into open water, we started the process of raising the 5 sails. Even with our nmerous crew, this process takes an hour. First the Mizzen Main, the sail furthest aft. Then the Fore Main, mounted on the front mast. Then the inner jib, then the Mainsail. And finally, as we screamed

down to the starting line an a broad reach, we unfurl our outer jib, which sports a huge Bermuda crest.

As the cannon sounds the start of the race, we cross the starting line under full power doing 12 knots! Amid hoots from the spectators' horns, we high-five and declare that finally, after months of planning and anticipation, we are now racing to Bermuda!

We scream south down Buzzards Bay. We pass New Bedford off to starboard, Wood's Hole to Port, with Martha's Vineyard visible through the hole. Cuttyhunk Island is finally left to port, and we are in the North Atlantic.

THE FIRST NIGHT

The sea is confused.

That precious low pressure system, which gave us the lovely strong breeze, passed over us, leaving a terrible, beautiful summer day in Buzzards Bay. And Spirit slowed down.

The seas, however, did not. With little wind to provide it direction, the North Atlantic turned into a washing machine set on high agitation. Even Spirit, weighing 120 tons, got tossed around like a wine bottle cork.

At one point, we stopped completely: 0.00 knots. But this is not to say we were not moving, what we lacked in forward progress we made up in movement up and down, pitching for and aft, and rolling side to side -- not what we wanted. We are hoping that every other yacht in the race is experiencing the same thing.

Finally, a hint of a breeze begins to organize out of the north. Growing steadily, the breeze gets us up and going again. After a slow jibe over to starboard tack, we ride the heavy seas down toward Bermuda, well passed all sight of land.

The shortest route to the finish line is to sail straight on compass heading 164 degrees. This is called the Rhumb Line. But the strategy of this race is to know when to deviate from the Rhumb Line to gain an advantage.

The most common strategy is to sail to the Gulf Stream and ride its favorable currents and warm breezes toward Bermuda.

The Gulf Stream is a huge body of warm water that flows north out of the Gulf of Mexico, up the coast of the Atlantic, until it finally veers out to the Northeast along Nova Scotia. But The Stream is constantly moving, changing, and shifting, requiring constant monitoring to catch it precisely. This is the primary focus of our navigator Larry Rosenfeld, who is regularly downloading updated color maps and charts showing the Stream's current position.

By sundown, we have settled in to our routine. Chef Ben serves a delicious spaghetti prima vera, with fresh chopped parsley and grated parmesan cheese.

Our shifts go down to 4 hours, and those off shift head to the bunks or a quick rest. Now begins our task on learning how to sleep amid loud noise and constant movement. Some of us are better at it than others. But we manage.

The sun sets, a half moon rises out of the southeast, countless brilliant stars present themselves, and the Milky Way reminds us of our tiny place in the universe.

Phosphorous plankton illuminate our wake, and the occasional dolphin surfaces to greet us and escort us on our way.

DAY 2

It's a crystal blue day. Wind is a steady 10 to 12 mph, with an occasional whitecap.

Breakfast is pancakes, bacon, and eggs cooked to order. Spirit is cruising on at around 6 to 8 knots.

We wish we had more wind: Spirit loves a stiff breeze to get her up and going. But there is not a cloud in the sky. And recent weather reports show nothing organizing on the horizon. So we set our course for the nearest entry point of the Gulf Stream and peel off the foul weather pants and jackets. We now bask in comfortable sunshine in shorts and shirts, lazily cruising toward Bermuda.

DAY 2 CONTINUED

Day 2 continues with our search for a favorable entry point into the Gulf Stream. With multiple color maps and projections, our navigation team pours over various scenarios to plot how to take

advantage of the Stream's favorable current. The experienced crew knows that the race can be won by the yacht which best solves the puzzle of the Gulf Stream.

Unfortunately, Spirit is finding this puzzle tough to crack. The projected "knuckle" of the Stream that was to extend north into our waypoint never materializes. We sail on.

The weather is beautiful: not a cloud in the azure sky. Wind from the northwest blows at 10 to 15 mph. The northern Atlantic is deep blue and clear, with calm and steady seas.

The spirits on Spirit are high. As the crew gets to know one another better, and the shifts settle into their routine, we share good-natured humor and cheer. Someone mentions a desire for fresh fish, so we throw out the fishing line. No bites.

Chef Ben prepares a delicious butternut squash and curry soup and a savory onion soup, both of which we quickly devour with appreciation. We all agree this is the best-fed crossing we can recall.

Quarters are tight. Meals are served at shift changes, so all at once, 12 tired sailors come down from their watch, peel off their harnesses and "foulies," and scurry about below while at the same time, another dozen bleary-eyed sailors crawl out of their tight bunks, clamber about getting dressed and using the head, and scarf down their meal in the tight galley before scampering up to take their shift.

We have begun to settle in to sea life. Those prone to seasickness are feeling better, and we all move about the ship more nimbly. We are developing our sea legs.

The Gulf Stream is identified by its warm water and warm breeze. And if we can enter it in the right place, the Stream can give us as much as 2 extra knots of current to push us toward Bermuda. But while our water temperature goes from 63 to 70 degrees, we cannot quite find the sweet spot of warm water and strong pushing current.

We spend the afternoon lazily sunning on the foredeck. Some read, others listen to music. We talk in groups of 2 and 3, telling tall tales of home, of family, of friends, and prior voyages.

After a hearty dinner of bean chili over rice, and the organized chaos of another shift change, we enjoy another beautiful sunset and continue to look for the Gulf Stream.

DAY 3 - Sunday June 16, 2013 - Fathers Day

The night is beautiful and uneventful. Shift changes go smoothly without a meal service to negotiate at the same time. And because we are now in the Stream, the warm breeze means less foul weather gear to put on and pull off.

The stars are again out in full force. The Milky Way presents its massive presence off our starboard bow, causing all who sit on bow watch to stare in awe at the vast number of stars and possible galaxies that comprise it.

Daybreak, breakfast, and another crew shift. We are now on the back, eastern side of the Gulf Stream. Dolphins appear on the bow and playfully ride our bow wake, providing a reassuring escort as we cruise toward Bermuda.

A Saudi tanker appears, first on radar, then visually, off our port bow. Using the extensive instruments in the Nav room, we determine we are on a collision course. So we adjust our waypoint to pass behind the tanker. This causes us to bear off the wind and lose speed, but no one complains of this prudent move.

We pass safely behind the ship and resume our course for Bermuda.

Assuming this beautiful weather continues to bring mild winds, our current projections have us crossing the finish sometime Tuesday evening.

Day 4 - Monday June 17, 2013

It's 3:00 AM. Starboard watch has relieved Port watch and has sent its 2 crew to the bow for bow watch. Light cloud cover veils the otherwise brilliant stars. Wind is a steady 12 mph, and Spirit is cruising along on calm seas at 9 nautical miles per hour.

Yesterday afternoon was fabulous: the best day yet. The sun passed across a nearly cloudless sky, and the wind freshened up to 15 mph, crossing directly across Spirit's beam. This provided optimal conditions for us, and we took advantage. Spirit clocked over 10 knots on a beam reach for almost 24 hours, providing us the distance and speed we had hoped for.

In the afternoon, we sighted a huge US Navy ship passing to our stern. The dolphins paid us another playful visit, and we sighted many man-o-war fish floating passed our yacht.

The Gulf Stream and its elusive currents are a distant memory. Thankfully, with yesterday's favorable conditions, we are now predicted to arrive at the finish line sometime Tuesday morning, much better than earlier forecasted.

The sun rises gloriously amid light clouds that diffuse the rays onto an expansive sky canvas with hues of red, orange, yellow, blue, and green. Unfortunately, the wind lays a bit as well, and Spirit slows to 6 kns.

But the crews' spirits remain high. We are getting to know each other pretty well by now, with all the hot bunking, close quarters living and eating, and regular shift changes. And as our familiarity with one another increases, the laughs are louder and the conversations more meaningful.

Often, the conversation turns to estimates of how much longer until we arrive in Bermuda, what time of day it will be when we cross the finish line, and what we plan to do first when we hit dry land. A tasty adult beverage is a popular second choice, since we have all been without any alcohol since Thursday night. Showers are the unanimous first choice.

Stewart Thomas

Aboard Spirit of Bermuda 157 nautical miles from the finish line