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Nov 14, 2017

The Start

Shearwater came upright, pointed into the wind, continued through onto a starboard tack, and leaned over under the wind.

“Bring her in as tight as she’ll come!” called the helmsman.

Don and I bent over the twin “Coffee Grinder” winch and pedaled our arms furiously. The Genoa became taught, quickly filled with wind, and Shearwater leaned further, stopping when her port gunwale went under water. Don and I grinned at our result. This was one good day for a race!

Blue sky overhead, blue water below, air temp 85 degrees, wind 15 knots. I grinned again. We were going to be hitting hull speed and be on our ear all afternoon.

John Miko, the helmsman and a second-class cadet at the US Coast Guard Academy, stood at the windward side of the twin-masted yawl’s wheel. An experienced small boat sailor, this was his first race skippering a boat as massive as Shearwater. He stood there, right leg bent and resting on the seat, left leg braced against the steering post, flexing like shock absorbers as the boat pitched and rolled. Shearwater plowed through waves that were five feet tall and ninety feet apart whose crests had been pushed by the wind into whitecaps.

I could tell from how John swiveled his head fore and aft and then windward to leeward he was fixing the other boats in his mind, reckoning their direction, and gauging if he would have to exercise his “Right-of-Way” as a result of being on starboard tack. Shearwater jarred slightly as the bow ran into a wave, causing all of us to rock forward, but the rising bow caught us as the boat parted the sea. John ducked his head as the spray, inevitably created by such a meeting, was flung skyward, caught the wind, and rained down on his head and back, sun-bleached and tanned from three weeks continuous sailing.

“Mark!” shouted John.

“Mark,” said the timekeeper next to John, “Five minutes to start.”

“Boom,” the sound of the starting cannon reached my ears. I realized John had cried “Mark” when he had seen the signal flag lowered.

“Ready about!” he shouted.

“Ready forward! Ready aft! Ready winches!” the crew replied.

“Helms a Lee!” he shouted, spun the wheel to starboard, and we all jumped into action. The jib man let loose the inch-thick triple-braided jib sheet and the 6000 lbs of pressure created by the 1360 square foot jib ripped the line from his hands. The foredeck exploded in a wild orchestra of banging sails, slapping ropes, and jingling fittings.

Don and I made love to our winches. In seconds the discordant chaos of the maneuver resolved into the harmonious wind and water noises of a port tack. The starboard gunwale was now under water.

“Nice job, classmates!” John shouted, “We came around in under 10 seconds. It’ll be a standard start; signals at five minutes, three, one and go.” We will go out and back for five, three, and go.”

We raced away from the starting line at over 10 knots. Commander Wilks, the safety officer and USCG “Adult” on our cadet summer cruise, asked John to restate his strategy and the rules of the road that were applicable at the start. He had been leaning against the back wall of the cockpit observing the operation. I saw him lean forward to hear John’s answer.

“Sir,” John’s sentences were clipped. “Strategy: Close-hauled. Starboard tack. Lined up for the windward buoy. Rules of the Road: Close-hauled and starboard tack give us right-of-way. Have to keep a lookout for Barging. No buoy room unless they are forward of the beam.”

“Who’s your serious competition?”

His answer was immediate, “Dennis Connor in Robin.”

“John, 10 seconds to turn,” interrupted the timekeeper.

“Ready About!” he commanded, and Shearwater deftly shifted left to right and we headed in again on starboard tack.

As we rested from the exertion of the tack, I looked at Don. He was grinning again as he spoke. “Jim, that’s what every skipper wants to do ...” He paused for effect. “And they all want to do it at top speed at the moment the gun goes off.”

I knew the potential for harm, damage, and destruction this presented. Boats often bumped at the start. If one skipper miscalculated badly during the melee, several boats, their crews, and their equipment would be crushed, torn, or dismantled in yachting’s version of a NASCAR pileup.

“You are right,” I replied, “and we’ve got 18 boats all trying to squeeze into the same 50 foot section of the line.”

Don’s grin widened. “It’s gonna be a hairy start!”

John's "Ready About!" rang out once more and we put Shearwater back on a port tack. We had made the run out and back to the starting line in exactly 2 minutes.

"Three minutes to start," said the timekeeper.

"Very Well," replied John. "Turn us around at minute-thirty."

Commander Wilks stood up again. "Give me your assessment, John."

"I've taken the windward end of the line," John said. "We'll be on starboard tack and everyone will be below us. We are tacking well and we timed that last leg perfectly. We should get to the line on time at the windward mark."

"Any sign of Robin?"

"No Sir," he replied.

"Minute-Thirty, John."

"Ready About!"

After the tack, Don and I did not take our hands off the winch handles. The last leg of a start is adrenalin charged and full of shouted commands, sail adjustments, and course corrections. The stress levels caused by the close proximity of tons of fiberglass, aluminum, and stainless-steel bobbing and horsing under the forces of wind and water wind, become evident in the rising pitch of each skipper's commands. I knew we needed to be ready for anything.

Shearwater was back up to 10 knots and overhauling every other boat in the fleet with a clear uncontested shot at her spot at the windward mark. In 90 seconds, she would cover the remaining 500 yards and cross the line ahead of the fleet.

I glanced up at John just as his gaze stopped scanning and focused on a point to windward.

"Robin Ho," he cried.

"Where Away?" asked Wilks.

John's right hand pointed toward Robin while his gaze shifted back to Shearwater's sails and her direction of travel. "He's gonna play chicken and try to beat us to the mark."

"What are the Rules, John?"

"Sir. He will be abaft our beam, so we have clear right of way. Starboard tack. Close-hauled. He's gonna want buoy room and he's gonna try and force us off our line."

Commander Wilks leaned back against his spot in the cockpit.

“Take us across the line, John!” The higher pitch in his voice betrayed his relaxed demeanor.

John began what I call the “Skipper’s Dance.” It would occupy him till we crossed the line and emerged safely on the other side. He ducked down low to scan the port side under the mainsail to verify the action in the sea to leeward. He stood up, swiveled forward, and raised his eyes to take in the set of the sails from the masthead, ninety-one feet above the deck, down to the twenty-three foot-long boom at the bottom of the mainsail that blocked his view to port. His eyes finished this run looking forward to see if Shearwater was in danger of running down any other boat. Almost like a ballerina spotting her spin, John’s head rotated aft to see if any boat was overtaking him. He completed the last step of the dance by looking to windward to reaffirm the speed and direction of the wind and verify that a quick tack in that direction was the best escape route if Shearwater was threatened in the melee. In time to the music of the wind and waves, John repeated the dance.

“Ahoy! Coast Guard Academy. Give me buoy room.” The request came from Robin to windward, but sounded demanding. I glanced ahead. We were aimed so we would bring the starting buoy down our starboard side within two feet of our gunwale. Clearly no room for another boat to squeeze in.

“Come up, Robin. Come Up,” was John’s reply as he added another step - glancing between the buoy, Shearwater, and Robin - to his Skipper’s Dance. John’s response informed Robin that they should alter their course to windward which would bring Robin “Up Closer” to the wind’s direction.

“Shearwater. Give me buoy room!” came the reply, louder now because they were closer and wanted to be heard above the noise.

“Come Up, Robin. Come Up!” John yelled above the noise. His “Skipper’s Dance” was now reduced mostly to glancing between Shearwater, the buoy, Robin, and Dennis Connor.

Robin was now 50 feet to windward. We could hear the water rushing past her hull and the wind roaring as it was funneled behind the main sail by her oversized jib.

“Skipper, give me buoy room!” came the demand again. We could see Dennis Connor had locked eyes with John.

I looked forward again at the fast approaching buoy. This was no three-foot diameter blow-up orange beach ball attached to a thin cord and anchored by a coffee can filled with cement that Robin could run over if she needed. This was a sixteen-foot tall, ten foot wide, steel constructed, USCG Bell Buoy weighing over 3 tons and anchored to the bottom with a 20,000 lb sinker. Ramming the buoy alone would seriously damage Robin. Being caught between Shearwater and the bell buoy would sink her.

Dennis’ gaze broke from John and went to the point of impending doom.

Don and I were transfixed. “Why is he doing this, Don? We are twice as big as he is!”

John’s answer called Robin’s bluff. “Hey Dennis, It’s YOUR boat.” He drew out the “your” making the statement pregnant with meaning and consequence.

Connor took one more look around and shouted, “Ready About!” With a flick of his wrist he spun the wheel to starboard and Robin leapt away from Shearwater, pirouetted through a tack and jibe, and settled back on her original course and direction 30 yards behind Shearwater.

“Boom!” roared the starting cannon. A second later Shearwater bounded over the line, followed close behind by Robin. The noise of the melee quickly faded into the distance.

“Ready About,” John spoke.

Ready forward. Ready aft. Ready winches,” the crew replied.

“Helms a Lee!”

Deftly, Shearwater flopped onto a port tack and began clawing up wind for the windward mark.

Author Biographical Sketch:

James Burd Brewster was raised in New England and summered on Lake Champlain which gave him a love of sailing and a sweet tooth for Maple Syrup. He sailed one summer on Kialoa at the United States Coast Guard Academy, which served as the basis for this story. His interest in writing came to fruition as a result of attending a creative writing class with wife, Katie, to the awe and admiration of their progeny; Ben, Luke, Rachel, Andrew and Sam.