

First Time...Sailing

by Douglas Malat

I guess I'm a long-time sailor, but I was a long-time power boater as well. I can remember those days clearly - blue skies and seas as I headed out in my 42-foot Chris Craft, adding power to move her out and just watching for the moment when the bow would ascend into a plane. I would ease those throttles back a bit and listen for those engines to synchronize...that cool-sounding hummmm. What a feeling... "Heaven", until a pesky sailboat would get in my way. It would seem he or she would turn the sailboat to cross my path on purpose. I would turn away at times closely (not too closely) to show my frustration. But I was young in those days and didn't know any better. Most of those times, the sailboats had to turn (tack) to stay in deep water. Their drafts are four to five feet, so staying in the channel is a must for them. Plying the waters in Great South Bay in those days, you had to stay in channels...it was shallow!

I'd shoot out to Davis Park or Watch Hill on Fire Island (Long Island's barrier beach) for a cool weekend or go out Fire Island Inlet for some shark fishing, maybe do some trolling out there in the Atlantic. Tuna always sounds good. When I kept my powerboat on the North Shore of Long Island, I'd head out by Eatons Neck (Huntington Harbor area) to Long Island Sound. We would watch for the boiling water to get those bluefish! Casting in to snag a few bunker (mossbunker, menhaden) for bluefish bait, all you had to do was watch for their telltale "boiling" action on the surface. A chopper (huge bluefish) would in-

hale the bunker you snagged and would give you one hell of a fight. It was a sensation time after time.



Connecticut was always a tease. Its rocky shore always brought in great fish! I never noticed sailboats fishing with us. Matter of fact, I never saw them fishing at all. We would have fun get-togethers that lasted all weekend, either anchored or dockside. It was truly a

beautiful run being a power boater. There were times when the generator gave out or a motor sputtered to a halt, but all in all what a fine territory power boating is. Just turn the key, let the dock lines go, and hit the throttle. How much simpler can it get? What a pleasure!

At one point my wife Yvette and I had to move ashore. Reluctantly, my boating days came to an abrupt end. It's not like we didn't plan this. We kept getting larger and nicer powerboats to live on and then fixing them up and selling (wood in those days) to a point where we could put a down payment on a house when and if we needed to. That came sooner than later. With my new career and home keeping me busy, I did not think I would miss boating. By the end of the first year I was back on the water, but not exactly the way you think or I thought.

Truthfully, all I can recollect is strolling down a dock by a boat brokerage. There were tall rigs on these boats, but they were not outriggers. They were masts! I don't remember why I was looking for boats at this marina, the Internet was not around yet (at least I don't think so). I do recall stepping aboard this thing with a mast, bow first from the dock and continuing to the stern where the cockpit was. Sitting down and looking forward, I stared at this aluminum stick going skyward. "This is a sailboat, Doug!" I told myself. "What are you doing sitting in this?" I thought. "I don't know." Looking around it seemed simple enough. There was a tiller for steering and an outboard motor aft for

continued on page 13

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continued from page 10

propulsion. Still sitting there, I didn't feel repulsed. I stared at the beige and tan deck, noticing the sleek lines as my eyes moved forward towards the bow. The only thing that interrupted those lines was this big tall thing sticking out of the foredeck. My thoughts moved way back to a time my cousin and I went sailing. It was my first sailing experience. We were around 13 or 14 and he lived on the water in Seaford, on the south shore of Long Island. At times I would get to stay over weekends. Their huge wooden powerboat would be docked out back along with a 17-foot speedboat. This weekend was special because next to their huge powerboat was a new addition, a little wooden centerboard sailboat, maybe all of 19 feet. It was a "Lightning" with an open-cockpit. My cousin Barry had gotten a great birthday gift which included a training lesson scheduled for the next day. How lucky for Barry and me! His family were power boaters, making their ownership of a sailboat a bit odd. But at our young ages, we knew an adventure was about to begin! The morning didn't come fast enough. With breakfast out of the way, a chime from the door bell brought excitement.

In the past, my cousin Barry, his friends and I went zooming around on his 17-foot Four Winns in-board/outboard speedster. It seemed to be one of the fastest boats around. I would play with the carburetor and timing to extend acceleration and top end. I remember even back then that I had a knack for engines.

I learned waterskiing with him along with daring boat amusements like jumping waves and hard-sliding turnabouts. Looking at this new arrival, not knowing what speeds it could reach or anything else for that matter, made me very inquisitive and most anxious to begin the day.

Lifejackets were put aboard along with some lunch goodies. The sailing instructor looked around 20 years old and first gave us a lesson at dockside on the theory of wind and its effects on sails of a boat.

Armed with this knowledge, we ventured out with him, putting what he taught us to the test...our test! This went smoothly as we steered the boat to different angles in the wind and adjusted the sails. All this gave us forward motion. The more precise we got with the sail adjustments, the faster we went. Being close to the water in this small vessel made any speed seem really fast as the water alongside seemed to rush by. We did get to heel over (boat leaning over) and all of us moved to the high side. Boy, did she get up and go! He taught us how to head up into the wind to stop and switch the wind from one side to the other. Switching the wind from coming over the port side of the boat to the starboard side is called "tacking" if you are going into the wind. It is called "jibbing" when the wind is coming from aft (back of the boat). The instructor made all this seem effortless, which calmed our jitters. Confidence grew as we mastered the maneuvers. Our instructor just watched what and how we were doing things, correcting us here and there, giving us pointers. He seemed more like a friend.

What we didn't know was our big test was coming...docking!

As we came back to Barry's house, we had to dock the boat. Did I tell you the boat had no reverse! How come? That's easy. It had no engine. AARRGGHHH! We're going to crash! All we had was a canoe paddle and a big dock coming at us! Alas, what was that other maneuver? As young boys, luck was on our side. That other maneuver was "coming into the wind" (turn the boat head-on to the wind) and we ghosted right to dockside. Perfect!

Barry's Mom was complimented by the instructor on how well "these two young boys had done," and what seamanship they showed. I really don't know for sure what the instructor said, but it must have been better than good because we were allowed out again alone!

The only conditions were to stay close to home and not to venture too far, which we immediately agreed to heed. We couldn't contain ourselves. I think that his Mom allowed this because we would go out in the Speedster all the time, zipping back when the weather would turn. The day was still beautiful and out we went. It was downwind out the canal and we used a few tacks to get out into the bay. I remember being on a "broad reach" (wind coming over the side of the boat) for awhile before we realized the wind was picking up. My cousin Barry was very venturesome. He would try different sail settings looking for that peak moment. I think that is what he did in life, looking for and finding those peak moments. The boat was flying! We were proud of ourselves for going so fast. But that feeling soon evaporated as we looked overhead to dark skies coming in. If we had the Speedster, this would not be a problem. What we did not realize is that when sailing you can't just zip back!

Check next month for "First Time... First Storm!"

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