

CATS ON THE PROWL

by Capt. Gary P. Joyce

Ever since I'd swapped surfing lessons for some off-the-beach catamaran sailing, I'd been enamored with beach-cats and eventually all multi-hulls. While other sailors denigrated these speedy crafts, remaining almost Luddite-like in their dislike of them, I desperately wanted one.

Life intervenes, as it tends to, and that beach-cat never seemed to be in the cards. A variety of craft of all ilk passed through my hands one way or another, but never a cat. And then one day it happened; a well-used, but well-cared-for 20-plus year-old Hobie 18 happened to come up for sale at a time when I happened to have some spare green around, and I whisked it off. Finally, a catamaran.

Naturally life intervened again, and that cat sat covered by the side of the house for the better part of three years. Oh, every now and then I'd pull the cover, fix some odds and ends, but otherwise she languished there through all the poetic postal conditions. And then life intervened again. I'd blown the motor on my most recent powerboat, which I gotten considerable sea miles out of, and decided to wait out a season boatless. But wait ... I wasn't boatless! I had the Hobie.

A crash course ensued in which a good bit of cash was spent (Gee, there's a surprise!), but finally she was ready to roll. I'd chosen as her first test the Southold Yacht Club's (SYC) 20th Annual Around Shelter Island Race for Catamarans. It was, also, the 37th Annual Around Shelter Island Race for the Sunfish, billed as "the longest Sunfish race in the world," but that doesn't necessarily have anything to do with this tale.

Being that this was my first race, I was pretty impressed with all the nautical doings surrounding it. The SYC had a handle on racing, and everything was happening as it should, that is to say, calmly. Lest you think I'm a total idiot, I wasn't soloing the Hobie; I'd enlisted the help of an ace cat sailor I'd met through the Long Island Catamaran Sailors Association (www.licsa.org), Alex Friedman. Now Alex knows cats and was nice enough to agree to skipper my boat with me as crew — of a sort. I think he had an inkling of what he was in for, since we had sailed together — albeit briefly and in calm conditions several weeks prior.

I'd like to say we rigged up on the beach and put the cat in the water ready to race, but that would be a slight exaggeration. And — in the interest of journalistic integrity (and the fact that Alex will probably read this) — it also would be a bald-faced lie. Yeah, I'd done a lot of work on the cat, but — apparently — not quite enough.

Three hours later and thanks to the assistance of other LICSA members' muscles, spare parts and general knowledge, the boat was more-or-less ready to go. Although I'd replaced all the standing rigging, there was a slight problem with the mainsheet traveler — it didn't seem to want to travel, which really is its main purpose, and required Alex' sure hand and enormous skill to get it work-

ing with some degree of reliability.

"If we were serious about this race, we would not race with this," he pointed it out. "You should remember everything I say that has to be fixed for the next race."

Alex, by the way, is Russian, so everything he says to me — strictly due to his accent — carries all the gravity of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describing torture in the gulags. I think he knows that he sounds that way to me, because any time I look at him funny, he follows with, "That is a joke." Accent nonetheless, he is one able cat sailor, a good teacher and an all-round good guy.

Ready

For those of you unfamiliar with sailboat racing, the start of a sailboat race is a big deal. With mono-hulls, the object of the start seems to be to crash as many boats as possible into each other — or nearly — allowing the starter to have some riotous fun, considering that anyone volunteering to be starter — ours has a rather distinctive Aussie accent — pretty much ends up sitting in his boat for hours on end under the beating sun waiting for the race to end so he that can also be the finish line judge.

Cats, on the other hand, while sub-

ject to the same starting procedure as mono-hulls, don't seem to be quite so anxious to smash into each other. One reason is that cats do not turn as well through the wind as mono-hulls; on the other hand, once they do make their turn they accelerate faster by a factor of about 10. That may have little to do with our start, however. Where there looked to be over two dozen Sunfish in that class' start, there were seven cats, so there was plenty of room for maneuvering, and none of us had to kamikaze each other for it.

All of these near crashes serve to keep the boats moving around. They do this because they all must be in the water at a certain time and be ready

to cross the line at the split second the gun shoots or the horn blows. Although actually quite demanding of those partaking, it looks like a colossal ... well, it's sort of a rugby scrum on the water.

Set

Alex puts the boat through a bunch of maneuvers, which it seems to handle rather well. We tack a few times; he tells what he expects of me insofar as jib handling and is happy to see — I think — that although I'm somewhat stiff on land,

I can move back and forth across the cat while avoiding the boom, a major necessity in cat sailing.

There are sev-

eral types of cats in the fleet; most were being sailed double-handed, although two were being sailed single-handed, the breeze blowing about eight to 10 knots at the start. We finish running the boat through its paces and cruise past the start boat several times and are given a time remaining to the start each time.

Finally the horn blows and we're off ... we cross the start line with several other boats and heading east towards Paradise Point, round that and into Shelter Island Sound. Well ...

They're Off

The Hobie gets a head of wind, starts to fly a hull and takes off just like I knew it would, and for a moment dreams of competing in the Tybee 500 seem doable. At about the moment my face breaks into a big grin, I move forward for some reason, hear Alex shout move back, and the next thing I know we have stuffed both bows into a wave and stood the boat on its nose like a ballerina doing a *grand plie*, launching both Alex and me like a *pelotas* out of a *cesta* in a *Miami fronton* ... if you'll pardon the mixed metaphors.

Cats, I realize can do this, and in some cases can do this with amazing regularity, although generally it's in high wind when the crews are pushing hard. Generally the boats end up with one hull in the water and one eight feet, six inches (or whatever their beam) above it, with the mast perpendicular to the water.

Righting a cat requires a combination of wind sense, strength and technique, all of which Alex has in abundance. Unfortunately, he's the only one aboard who does. My Hobie doesn't help matters too much, either. Instead of remaining in the hull-up position while we release the sails and ready the boat to flip back over, the mast fills with water and the whole boat goes turtle.

Try as we might — and we try for about 45 minutes — she won't respond to our weight, and I am no lightweight by any stretch of the imagination. Finally — thanks to a powerboater who was nice enough to toss us a line — we get her to one-hull-up position and then over she goes. We thank them; they shake their heads at each other wondering what in the world we do for fun and go on their way. I make a note to remember their boat's name but forget it about seven seconds later. Thanks to those folks anyway.

The rest of the race was uneventful, and I actually did learn a lot even though I wore three holes in my hand han-

dling the jib sheets because the cams that are supposed to lock from any direction and hold the sheets didn't, something else to add to the to-do list, along with a pair of sailing-specific gloves to replace the cycling gloves I'd worn.

Through all this for some reason, Alex, no matter how inept I am, never loses his cool and actually apologizes to me once for yelling something at me. If I were Alex, I'd have had me off the boat

continued on page 9



Alex Friedman and his *Mystere 4.2* at Orient Beach State Park



The author polishing hulls on his stripped-down Hobie 18

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continued from page 5

somewhere between Shelter Island and North Haven ... right about where the ferries run. Had he known my wife probably wouldn't have missed me until late Monday or Tuesday ... well, I'm glad he wasn't aware of that.

Anyway, we finish the race last in the cat division, but I think we beat one Sunfish (that had started an hour before us) with a broken mast ... barely. And we did get really nifty tee shirts out of the deal that say nothing about what position we finished.

Postscript

We tear the boat down in the SYC lot, go in and grab some chow and a cold one or two, and Alex tells me to relax. I guess that Euro *laissez faire - que sera, sera* attitude might be worth cultivating, since it sure beats hitting myself in the head with a figurative hammer for the rest of the day.

On the ride home the things the boat needs fixed keep running through my head. None are terribly intensive or expensive or any other kind of

"ive," though the fact that I hadn't even spotted them in the first place pointed out that I had a long way to go as a cat sailor.

There were three weeks until the next race, and I think I managed to fix, repair or replace all the problems and then some. But I'm sure the next race will tell whether that's merely my imagination or reality.

As for Alex? Well, he actually agreed to skipper again, although he "suggested" that perhaps we sail the weekend before just to "make sure everything is working properly."

Lesson learned? Be careful what you wish for. I always wanted a cat ... and now I have one.

For The Record

Steve Bellavia of Mattituck and Alex Kraebel of Southold finished in 2:05:35. They were followed by Harold Worwitz of the

Peconic Bay Sailing Association, who sailed single-handed, in second, and Rich and Bob Partenfelder of LICSA in third. Jack and Mark Masor of the Sea Cliff YC won Division B, with Doug Adam and Dan Bolunder of Shinnecock taking second. Milt Dinhoff, another single-handed sailor, finished third.

In the Sunfish class, John Condon of the Mattituck YC became the races' fourth three-time winner and was followed by Geoffrey Loffredo of the Southold YC, Bart Hale of the Southold YC in third, Sean Sullivan of the Southold YC in fourth, and Ryan Messina in fifth place, beating Andre Lekich of the Southold YC by one second. Anne Kochendorfer of

the Hempstead Harbor YC was the first female finisher.

At age 70, Joe Sullivan, of the Southold YC, placed seventh and was the first master over-50 sailor to finish; 82-year-old Dick Heintz, of the Seawanhaka Place Yacht Squadron, came in 10th, and Keith Lyman, 83, the oldest winner of the race (at age 79), came in 13th.



Saltwater, nylon line, the wrong gloves and malfunctioning cams equals blisters.



Alex Kraebel (left) and Alex Friedman at Orient Beach State Park checking wind conditions



The best part? Everybody gets a T-shirt that doesn't say how you placed!

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