

100 Years of Thrashing to the Onion Patch

By John Rousmaniere

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A quick look at the highlights of the Bermuda Race, written by John Rousmaniere and based on his book *A Berth to Bermuda: 100 Years of the World's Classic Ocean Race* (Mystic Seaport, 2002).

1. Tom Day Invents a Sport

If the Newport Bermuda Race is any one thing, it's historic. Founded in 1906 as the first ocean race for amateur sailors in normal boats, it has inspired other long-distance races, and has attracted almost 4,500 boats crewed by some 46,000 men



and women who have raced nearly 3 million miles to Bermuda. It's a blue-water obsession. More than 50 sailors have sailed at least 15 races, four have done 22 or more. The record is held by Jim Mertz – 30 races, two-thirds of the total. Asked after a rough race if he had enjoyed himself, a sailor snapped, "God, no, it was terrible! I'll be damned if I'll do it again until two years from now."

The very first Bermuda Race was an act of rebellion. In 1906, the Establishment believed that it would be insane for amateur sailors to race offshore in boats under 80 feet. Thomas Fleming Day, the feisty editor of *The Rudder* magazine, vehemently disagreed, insisting, "The danger of the sea for generations has been preached by the ignorant." Certain that an ocean race would be enjoyable and safe – and also develop better sailors and better boats – Day founded one on his own. The Brooklyn Yacht Club started the race in New York Bay, and down on the island paradise, the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club finished it off St. David's Head.

Critics predicted disaster. It was rumored that funeral wreaths were delivered to the fleet so the sailors would be prepared to make a decent burial at sea. Three boats 40 feet or smaller started that first race, and after days of beating into hard headwinds, two of them finished. Day was in command of the winner, a 38-foot yawl called *Tamerlane*. In second place was *Gauntlet*, at 28 feet the smallest boat in the race's history. In *Gauntlet's* crew was Thora Lund Robinson, the first of many women who have raced to Bermuda. There were four more races before sailors decided it was too much to ask that the race be held annually.

2. Triumph and Heroism

After World War I Royal Bermuda Yacht Club (RBYC) Vice-Commodore Eldon Trimingham went up to New York to stir up a revival of the race and found many American sailors who were of the same mind. After 22 boats started in 1923 at New London, Conn., there was hard going in the Gulf Stream ("The next time I come to

Bermuda it will be in a submarine," one soggy sailor announced in Bermuda), but every boat finished.

The winner was John Alden in his 47-foot *Malabar IV*, one of the able, handsome gaff-rigged schooners that he had designed along the lines of fishing schooners. These pioneering cruiser-racers dominated the race for years, and he and other *Malabars* won twice again, first in 1926 (the year the RBYC and the Cruising Club of America first teamed up to run the race) and then again in 1932. Other races were won by modern Marconi-rigged racing yawls designed by Nathanael Herreshoff. At the same time, the race organizers frequently established special demonstration divisions for boats that were otherwise illegible to compete because they were too large or small.



The Bermuda Race became a major national and international event with more than 40 entries, including boats and crews from Bermuda, the Great Lakes, Canada, and Britain. English sailors were so inspired by the experience that they went home and founded the Fastnet Race (Fastnet and Bermuda race veterans later founded the Sydney-Hobart).

Tom Day's dream had become an institution. "Bermuda Fever: A Malady that Usually Strikes Yachtsmen in the Spring of Every Other Year," ran a headline in a boating magazine. Management of that malady – including inspecting boats, arranging for trophies, and handling the start and finish – was (and remains today) in the hands of the organizing committee consisting almost entirely of volunteers who donate their time to make the race fair, and above all safe. In 45 races over a century, only two boats have been lost, one on Bermuda's reef, and the other in a deadly fire in 1932 that also claimed the Bermuda Race's only loss of life.

On the first night out, the crew of Bobby Somerset's English entry, the cutter *Jolie Brise*, spotted flares astern. Turning back, they found a competitor, the schooner *Adriana*, in flames. Despite not having an engine, Somerset steered *Jolie Brise* alongside the burning schooner. The other helmsman, Clarence Kozlay, courageously held position while his ten shipmates piled onto the cutter's deck. When Kozlay finally made his jump, it was too late, and he fell into the sea and disappeared. His and Somerset's heroism reminded everybody that this was more than a race.

3. New Boats. Hard Sailing

One of John Alden's crew members in the 1928 race was a 20-year-old yacht designer named Olin Stephens. Two years later Olin, his brother, Rod, and their father took second in Class B in the family boat, *Dorada*. A new breed of narrow, powerful cruising-racing yawls and sloops designed by Stephens and Phil Rhodes was soon beating the schooners. One of the most important advances was the *Dorada*

ventilator, which Rod Stephens invented to allow fresh air below while keeping the Gulf Stream out.

The stiffest test yet came in the 1936 race, the first started at Newport, R.I. Six hundred miles of beating into heavy winds made life hard on the 44 starters, but only nine dropped out. In one of the best performances in the race's history, the new 53-foot Class B sloop *Kirawan*, pressed hard by designer Phil Rhodes and his shipmates, beat every boat to the finish except two much larger Class A entries. Sixty-four years later, *Kirawan* sailed another Bermuda Race in the Classics Division under another owner.

Big boats often have trouble winning races, but not so when the first generation of maxi boats appeared. The Taylor family's 72-foot Sparkman & Stephens yawl *Baruna* was the first boat to take two races on corrected time when she won in 1938 and 1948. She was first to finish three times, often dueling with her near-sistership *Bolero*, sailed by John Nicholas Brown and a mostly amateur crew of 14 that included his sons and Olin Stephens. In 1956, *Bolero* (under a new owner, the Swede Sven Salen) was driving hard through a blow when the headstay broke. The crew quickly ran jib halyards out to the bow, and *Bolero* skimmed Bermuda's reef and broke the elapsed time record with an average speed of 9 knots.



4. *Finisterre's* Trifecta

It seemed that all that sailors in smaller boats could hope for were a few Dark n' Stormies in the friendly confines of the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club. But in 1952 Dick Nye and a crew of youngsters led by his son Richard won the race in their 46-foot Rhodes yawl, *Carina*. The most successful of the race's many family crews, the Nyes raced down 18 times in three *Carinas*, winning two of them as well as seven class trophies. Most sailors dream of winning even one cup.

An even smaller boat won the race in 1954, Daniel Strohmeier's 40-foot Concordia yawl *Malay*. And then came Carleton Mitchell and his beamy 38-foot Sparkman & Stephens centerboard yawl, *Finisterre*. When they won three straight Bermuda Races in 1956, 1958, and 1960, they set a record for the ages.

Every race was different. The first was a long, fast starboard tack sprint in fresh wind. The second (following a wild start) ended with a flat calm near the island, with all 111 boats finishing within 12 hours. The 1960 race was the slowest on record, yet over the final 100 miles the fleet was battered by microbursts with massive wind shifts that caught some boats aback. A 62-footer, *Djinn*, put her mast so deep in the water that when she came upright, Gulf weed dangled from the spreaders. Fortunately Rod Stephens had recently helped get lifebelts (the ancestors of safety harnesses) added to list of required equipment. A post-race questionnaire to owners asked, "Which gear was most important?" The answer again and again was "lifebelts," and sometimes "lifebelts!!!"

Throughout that blow of 1960, while other boats hove-to *Finisterre* never shortened down to storm canvas. One of Mitchell's steady crew said his main accomplishment

was "good admiralship." "My theory was that the time to get everything right is before you leave the dock," Mitchell once said. "And then, once you leave the dock, to be able to drive the hell out of the boat and never have to worry about something carrying away. And if anything did let go on you, the spares were on board with the know-how to put it back together." After his third victory, Mitchell retired *Finisterre* from racing and went cruising. Appropriately, the award for first place in the Bermuda Race Cruising Division is the Carleton Mitchell *Finisterre* Trophy, with a half model of the little yawl as a keeper prize.



Finisterre's sensational success – widely publicized by her writer-owner's magazine articles – combined with the development of fiberglass construction to make the Bermuda Race one of the largest, most watched events on the sailing calendar. The fleets grew to over 120 boats, the majority smaller than 45 feet.

5. The Age of Variety

Thanks to the CCA rating rule and to the race's irregular conditions, race victories were well distributed among boats of all types and sizes. In 1962 DeCoursey Fales' 34-year-old, 59-foot *Niña* took advantage of a mostly reaching race and became the first schooner to win since the Alden era. (At 74, Fales was and remains the oldest winning skipper.) Two years later the top boat was the 37-foot centerboard yawl *Burgoo* – the smallest winner ever, and the first made of fiberglass.

The next three winners could not have been more different – the light-displacement Cal 40 *Thunderbird*, a heavy 50-footer cruiser designed and sailed by Ted Hood, and Dick and Richard Nye's first-generation IOR sloop, *Carina*. The Nyes' second victory came in a race with a new course, with a turning mark west of the island. The idea was to make it more of a beat to windward, but the mark was hard to find and the experiment was not repeated.

Meanwhile, the race conditions continued to be entertaining, even maddening. "I've been in 13 of these races and have never seen one like it," someone said of the 1970 race, with its mix of light air and gales. The toughest race ever was sailed in the tail of a hurricane whipping across the record 178-boat fleet in 1972. "It was like driving a truck into a stone wall three times a minute for two days," one sailor said afterwards. Twenty-seven non-U.S. boats competed against the Americans in the Onion Patch international team race series, and ended up doing very well, taking five of the 18 class cups. The overall visitor, the English *Noreyma*, was the first (and to this day only) non-U.S. winner of the Bermuda Race. Her crew in part credited their victory to a pair of goggles worn by helmsmen to keep the stinging spray out of their eyes.

Great Lakes sailors began racing to Bermuda before World War I, but never won before 1974, when Chuck Kirsch's *Scaramouche* from Michigan enjoyed the first of many victories by boats designed by German Frers. Five of the top six places on corrected time were taken by fresh-water boats. The Class A winner was Chicago-based *Dora*, owned by yet another sailor with a family tradition of thrashing through the Gulf Stream to "the Onion Patch." Lynn Williams first raced to Bermuda in 1928 in his father's Alden schooner. *Dora* returned many times as Ted Turner's *Tenacious* and Warren Brown's *War Baby*.

6. Taking Chances

As sailors learned more about weather and the Gulf Stream, they started taking big risks. "We used to swing for the fences quite a bit," was how Richard Nye explained his family's many successes in their *Carinas*. In the light-air 1976 race, Al Van Metre's Virginia-based *Running Tide* ventured 200 miles east of the rhumb line to avoid a big cell of high pressure, tacked for Bermuda, and came barreling in. She would have been second overall if the Australian 53-footer *Bumblebee 3* hadn't made the mistake of cutting Kitchen Shoals buoy near the finish line. Her crew caught on tardily that they were breaking a race rule ended up blowing 35 minutes, and by the time they untangled themselves, they lost to *Running Tide* by a mere seven minutes.

Things are always changing, always surprising. As the saying goes, "You never can tell in a Bermuda Race." After the MHS (later IMS) rule was developed, the fleet was split in two divisions and in 1976, Burt Keenan's *Acadia*, from New Orleans, topped the IOR fleet, while an almost ancient wooden Concordia yawl, Arnie Gay's *Babe*, won in MHS. (Concordias are still racing to Bermuda today – and doing well.)



Another wooden boat won in 1980 thanks to pushing hard and excellent tactical navigation. Richard Wilson, the 30-year-old skipper of the Aage Nielsen-designed cruising yawl *Holger Danske*, had an aggressive crew of small-boat sailors and exploited the high-tech Loran-C navigation system that for the first time was allowed for the entire race. Formerly, navigation was a target shoot at Bermuda. Now (and later with GPS) it was more like a chess match with the Gulf Stream, whose eddies were tracked by oceanographers. The top boats in 1982,

Brigadoon III and *Carina*, did well by tacking away from the shortest course to the finish in order to find a favorable eddy. The Nyes missed winning their third Bermuda Race by just 16 minutes.

The Gulf Stream's crucial importance was emphasized again in 1984, in another slog dead into the wind. According to the IOR division's winning navigator, Alex Bruno, in Jack King's *Merrythought*, tactics were simple. Once the boat was out of favorable current, "the ride would become much more comfortable. That was when you had to get back into it." Boats were jumping waves all the way to Bermuda. Two years later, after days of too much comfort in a big calm, the wind finally came up in time to reward the small boats, with David Clark's *Silver Star* (IOR) and Donald Robinson's *Puritan* (IMS) winning the top prizes.

In 1988 Bevan Koeppel's 77-footer *Congere* became the first boat since *Baruna* in 1948 to be first on both elapsed and corrected times. That year also saw a dramatic rescue. When Christos Kritikos heard that a competitor needed assistance, he withdrew his 70-footer *Karyatis* from the race, turned on the engine, found Larry Huntington's much smaller *Denali*, and in a bold maneuver picked up Huntington's son, Matthew, who was suffering from acute appendicitis. Kritikos got Matthew to Bermuda in time for a successful operation at King Edward VII Memorial Hospital. The Huntingtons and *Denali* would go on to win the 1990 race.

7. Happy Valley

The U.S. Naval Academy had sent 157 crews on the race as a training exercise and had taken home a few small cups, but in 1992 the Academy's *Constellation* won the whole thing, commanded by the youngest winning skipper ever, 22-year-old Ensign Kyle Weaver. *Constellation's* only difficulty was that she spent so much time with her rail down on starboard tack that her water intake (on the starboard side) was clear of the water and the engine could not be run to charge batteries. She sailed the last miles with no electronics, not even a compass light.



The issue of professionalism had been raised a few times in the race's history, but it became serious when some owners hired sailors for racing. The solution was to have two divisions. One was for boats with professional crews or minimal accommodations, the other for cruising boats with amateur sailors. The St. David's Light Trophy for the overall win went to the top Cruiser/Racer.

The contrasts could be dramatic. In 1994 the Racing Division was won by a crew of middle-aged amateurs in the new Bruce Farr-designed 36-footer, *Conspiracy*, while the overall victory went to a more traditional vessel, a 20-year-old Swan 38, *Gaylark*, owned by Kaighn Smith and one of a record 14 Bermuda Race winners designed by Olin Stephens. The first CCA commodore to win the race, Smith rode a Gulf Stream meander for 60 miles into what he called "Happy Valley" – the semi-tropical region between the Stream and Bermuda. Laying Bermuda on starboard tack, he noted a weather forecast calling for the wind to back from southwest to southeast near the island, so he eased sheets and reached to the east until the new breeze arrived. The rest was easy, he said: "Port tack, close reach all the way to St. David's Head and victory."

Maxi boats returned in large numbers, this time 80-footers sailed by crews of 25. The most consistently successful maxi was George Coumantaros's blue *Boomerang*. Only *Baruna* had as many elapsed time victories under one owner, three. In 1996 Coumantaros, now 72, built a new, white *Boomerang* and, aiming to finally take the



St. David's Light Trophy, recruited a mostly amateur crew just for the race. Said his long-time watch captain, Jeffrey Neuberth, "The Bermuda Race is closer to George's heart than anything else he did sailing. He started racing down there in 1952 and did every one through 2002. That's 26 races."

Boomerang broke the elapsed time record with an 11-knot

average speed and, even more important to her owner, won on corrected time. At the prize ceremony at Government House he told the crowd, "I'd like to give all who sail for the Lighthouse Trophy some advice: don't despair, keep trying, and if you don't win it by the time you are 75, withdraw."

8. Foxes and Hens

The fast race in 1996 was followed by a slow one in 1998. Finding that he was drifting toward contrary current, Llwyd Ecclestone turned *Kodiak* far east into what navigators called "the Death Zone" because it had paid off only twice since the 1960s. There he found a northeast breeze and won the race. Nobody was much surprised, for such is the Bermuda Race.

Two years later 175 boats reached fast off the starting line into a thick fog that gradually cleared, leaving little wind. The top two boats were old Phil Rhodes designs, Eric Crawford's Rhodes fiberglass *Restless*, and Carvel Tefft's 43-footer *Bangalore*. Although *Bangalore* was built in 1931, her owner chose not to enter the Classics Division (one of many new classes – others were for cruising boats sailing without spinnakers, for doublehanded crews, and for one-designs like the J-44). Tefft decided instead to sail with the youngsters, which he did, and whom he beat.

While it didn't blow a gale in 2000, this was the roughest race in almost 30 years. Thanks to a perfect alignment of Gulf Stream eddies and meanders, the fleet found itself in a powerful, 400-mile-long arm of four- to six-knot southbound current running into the face of a 25- to 30-knot southwest wind. Despite the appalling conditions and more than the usual seasickness, there was little serious damage. A sailor who suffered an injury was treated by his shipmates, consulted by a shoreside doctor on a communications system established before the race by the organizing committee. For a while, even Roy Disney's 75-foot *Pyewacket*, a Transpac Race record holder, jogged along at a mere eight knots. She ended up first to finish, averaging 11.8 knots to shatter *Boomerang's* record by almost four hours. The corrected time winners were Huntington Sheldon's *Zaraffa* in the amateur Cruiser/Racer Division, and Robert Towse's *Blue Yankee* in the Racing Division.

The pattern among winners since 1990 had been one of veteran skippers, usually in older boats. Yet the 2004 race winners were new boats with rookie skippers. Sailing his first Bermuda Race in *Rosebud*, a TransPac 52, Roger Sturgeon won the Racing Division and the new Gibbs Hill Light Trophy that went with it. The winner of the St. David's Light Trophy for Cruiser/Racers was Dominick Porco, in a Swan 45, *Alliance*, in only his third Bermuda Race and his first as owner.



The organizing committee reached back into the race's history to form a special Demonstration Division for 86-footers with canting keels, including a new *Pyewacket*. "We have held on to being a wholesome, offshore-oriented fleet," explained race chairman John Winder. "We have gone further than most event organizers in marking the delineation between amateurs and professionals. The goal is to keep the fox out of the henhouse and the hens out of the fox's den." The Demonstration Division boats did not complain. "The race organization was flawless, as in 2002, and it was fun participating in the East Coast

version of the Transpac," Robbie Haines, *Pyewacket's* sailing master, said. "Both the Transpac and the Bermuda Race are so historic that we liked to be in them both."

The Bermuda Race's long, colorful history attracted a record 265 boats to the starting line for the centennial race in 2006. It was sailed in beautiful yet calm conditions with only a few, mild rain squalls in the Gulf Stream. One of the most striking features of the centennial race was that boats that went either east or west did well. Good sailing counted, of course, and so did skilled navigation, but all were lucky, and in the end everybody was content. The winners of prizes presented by the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, at the typically elegant award ceremony came from across the board. Hap Fauth's 66-foot *Belle Menta* beat boats half again her size to be first to finish. In the Gibbs Hill Trophy division for professional and other Grand Prix crews, the winners were Richard Shulman's *Temptress* (ORR rule) and Timothy McAdams' *Four Stars* (IRC rule). The St. David's Head Trophy division for mostly amateur crews was topped by two older boats, Peter Rebovitch's *Sinn Fein*, a Cal 40 sistership of the 1966 winner (ORR) and William Hubbard's *Lively Lady II* (IRC).

Afterwards, Hubbard offered a representative last word on 100 years of racing to Bermuda: "For me this race does get to be addictive and I love the tradition of it. I feel like I am part of an historical event."



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Rudder magazine: *Tamerlane* crew 1906.

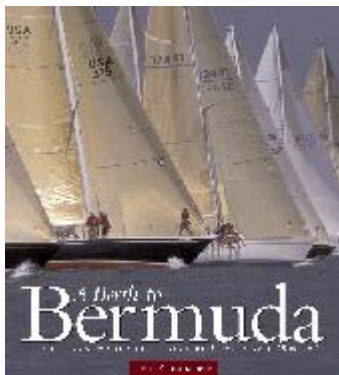
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Bermuda News Bureau: *Bolero* finish 1956.

Edwin Hills: *Holger Danske*.

Talbot Wilson: Naval Academy winners 1992, *Boomerang*.

Barry Pickthall: *Pyewacket* 2004.



A Berth to Bermuda: 100 Years of the World's Classic Ocean Race by John Rousmaniere (Mystic Seaport: Cruising Club of America / Mystic Seaport, 2006) is available from [Mystic Seaport](http://MysticSeaport.com).