

Back Off Takes First in Class

The historic St. Petersburg - Habana Race in late February was laden with casualties. Of the 80 boats that entered the 284 nautical mile adventure, only 21 finished. For the crew of Back Off, a Sovarel 33, their ability to start the race was in question even before it began.

The mid '80's boat was purchased by St. Pete Capt. Tony Barrett just months before the race. "It needed some attention," recalls captain Jim Marvin a member of Barrett's crew of eight. "He worked on it on land for several months and just got it into the water the week before the race."

Their shakedown cruise the day before the race was cut short when they couldn't raise the mainsail more than a quarter way up the mast. "We were doing some very intensive work preparing the boat," adds Marvin. "It was amazing, but the morning of the race we were actually ready."

So where hundreds of other boats that flocked to the start on Feb. 28. Sitting along the seawall of the St. Petersburg Marina, Marvin points to the water and says, "It was a sea of mass all over the horizon. There were spectator boats, there were dignitary boats, there were yachts, small vessels and press boats; there were schooners and the tall ship Lynx. It was a big launch."

A lack of wind forced the start south of Pinellas Point. Back Off did well and was making her way to the Skyway Bridge when everyone ran into a strong current sweeping into the bay. "The massive flooding current with a lack of wind put the brakes on the entire fleet," Marvin says.

They finally got some wind and off they went—a crew that had not all sailed together, sailing a boat they had never sailed.

They stayed close to the rum line (the shortest course between two points) and experimented constantly with the sails. "It was a matter of keeping the boat moving as fast as possible over a long stretch of time and not losing focus," says Marvin.

Some boats had state-of-the-art technology and could track their competitor's progress, not so for Back Off with just a small GPS and chart plotter, but it was an advantage. "Since we couldn't worry

They made their way around the keys by the Dry Tortugas, then the wind died. Marvin was on watch that night with fellow crew member and girlfriend Katherine Tyriver bobbing around while the sails whipped back and forth. "That's really torturous for racers; that's really bad."

The wind picked up the next morning, but kept changing direction. Finally it came



By Betsy Judge

around from the North and once in the Straits of Florida, they could actually use the spinnaker as a spinnaker. “We had a consistent wave pattern from the stern and we were dialed in. We could finally see what that boat could do. We were starting to see the competition fall behind us,” Marvin says relishing the memory.



The Back Off crew (upper right photo) included: Tony Barrett, (top left), Brian Kennalley, Kim Stininger (red hat), Larry Hogan (sitting), Katherine Tyriver (white hat), Jim Marvin, Brian Kaczor and Brian Davies (foreground). Next under Back Off nears the Skyway. The arrow in the map links Back Off to info about their position.

“By mid evening, we could see the lights of Havana on the skyline. It was amazing to see our destination.”

Twelve miles out they called in as required and started monitoring the VHF radio to see who else was calling. Marvin was most worried about Grant Dumas on Warrior, a Trip 38. “It was an excellent boat and he’s an excellent skipper. I thought he is probably sitting at the bar having a rum drink.” They were within an hour of reaching the finish when they heard a call from Dumas at the 12 mile point. “We were all cheering and slapping hands—we knew that we had to be in a lock for first place.”

They still had to navigate the channel with shallow coral on either side in the dark, and they searched desperately for the safe water mark they had to pass to port. “We decided to slow down and douse the spinnaker with all eyes watching for this thing,” says Marvin. “Closing in, I see it! ‘Oh my God it’s on starboard,’ I yelled.” The captain orders a jibe before the preventer line was removed which made for a very “un-elegant jibe,” but they made it and got in about 10:30 p.m.

It had taken them two and a half days, about 12 hours longer than anticipated. They were not first over the line, but their handicap got them first place in their class, Spinnaker B. “In a boat that was not ready to go the day before the race, with people who had never raced before,” says Marvin.

A front from the North with winds up to 25 knots whipped the seas into a frenzy and delayed everyone’s departure a couple days. They became tourists and saw some of the island. Some crew members flew home and Marvin and Tyriver helped take the boat back. The adventure continued as they hit seas of up to 15 feet in the Florida Straits with the main reefed, and Marvin at the helm for the first time. “I was getting to know the boat in the heat of the moment. Once I got the hang of it, she did respond very well. I thought as long as the rig stays up, we should make it.”

They got into Key West about 2 a.m. and rented a car to drive to St. Pete the next day.

“I was really proud we pulled it out amongst our competition, because they had good, fast boats and their crews had worked together, but our guys had a lot of heart; it was almost a 50/50

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