

Varied skills speed Merlin to record in Vic-Maui Race Classic

by Ronald Boyd

Following victory in the Swiftsure Race, with first to finish and first corrected PHRF (long course), the focus was now on the Victoria to Maui International Yacht Race. The challenge: 10 days 2 minutes and 9 seconds. This record had been set in 1978 by Doug Fryer skipping *Merlin* in 1978.

For the 1992 charter, Dan Sinclair had amassed a group of sailors who had a broad range of expertise. It was the likes of Vlad Kahle and Peter Fargey who were able to help put this 70 foot boat together after its truck ride up from Santa Cruz. John Robertson's experience at BC Hydro ensured a trouble free electrical system. Dr. Jack Pacey used his surgical hands to rebuild the desalinator and subsequently tested its product for osmolarity and bacterial growth.

The yacht club scuttlebutt was that the *Merlin* crew didn't have what it takes, that Swiftsure was luck. Thus the crew worked only harder ensuring that the boat was fully prepared. Dan ran the boat as a good CEO, jobs were delegated and those with the talent made the decision. Organizing the campaign of a large boat and a crew of 11 takes time, commitment and talent.

Saturday, July 4: Twenty three boats showed up for the second start after five of the higher handicap yachts had left two days earlier. *Merlin's* late start at Swiftsure would not be repeated. Heading right at the committee boat with only seconds to go, Dan left room for *Mad Max*. The door was then closed. The gun went off. A perfect start for *Merlin*.

Sunday: Like many a 'driftsure' outside Tatoosh, light fluky winds shifted from SE to SW. *Jo* headed

directly west trying to reach the stronger westerlies predicted offshore. *Merlin* and *Atalanta* battled together trying to inch ahead with each puff of breeze heading south.

By evening the zephyrs were more persistent and frequent from the northwest. Up with the lovely colored sail and finally some steady speed. The Pacific High, with notorious light winds in its centre, usually sits on the rhumb line (great circle) course from Tatoosh to Maui. The navigators must find a course south around the bottom of the High, not sailing too far but yet not too close to the High as to run out of wind. After reviewing the weather charts *Merlin's* navigator Ron Boyd elected to sail to a point on the second isobar line out from the High's center and thus choose an arbitrary waypoint on latitude 40°N just west of 130°W. When there he would plan the next leg.

Monday: Squalls all day. The High had shifted a little northwest above 40°N. Would the deep low south of the Aleutian Islands force the High to the north and suck wind up from the south?

Tuesday: *Merlin* at 41°N was now south of the High's center at 45°N. A more direct course to Maui was feasible. To sail this course Boyd suggested reaching up with white sails closer to the rhumb line and thus cut the corner. Bursts of 22 knots were made with white sails only right down the rhumb line.

Wednesday: The weather fax surface analysis for the previous three days were closely analyzed. The object was to stay on the favored starboard gybe as long as possible but remain aware of an eventual wind shift to northeast.

The crew continued to sail the polar angles as given by computer data supplied by Dr. Donn Campion, the boat's owner.

Maverick and *Hokulele* were well ahead. By their southerly positions both presumably had kept their kites up. Could *Merlin* steal some miles by cutting the corner? Could they play the gybe angles and gain more miles downwind with the anticipated wind shift over the next few days?

Thursday: At sunrise the first and only gybe. A bald headed gybe which included a sail change, rewinding the guys and shortening the spinnaker halyard. Time - 20 minutes. Two hours had already been lost with various problems including: broken spinnaker

halyard, major catastrophe prevented by double halyards, spinnaker halyard wrap on the topping life, chicken kite hoisted in error as wrong sail bag brought up on deck. Dan's son Jay had been up the mast reefing spinnaker halyards.

The port gybe was not carried all the way to the finish with the pole just off the forestay or staysail luff. Over 1300 miles on one gybe right down the rhumb line. The boat was designed and set up for starboard tack. Now bunks were reassigned, starboard water tank were used and other weight conscious measures instituted.

Ron O'Gilvey, the onboard computer consultant, was madly feeding in formula into the two laptop computers. Ron instantly knew range, bearing, distance to Maui, etc. of the fleet. *Merlin* was still behind.

Friday: *Merlin* closed 23 miles on *Maverick* on a course only 2 degrees higher. Sinclair felt better knowing that Les Crouch sailed polar angles and that *Merlin* shouldn't be too far off his course.

Saturday: Straight rhumb line sailing with the pole on the forestay. *Maverick* was southeast and ahead by 45 miles, but *Merlin* was closing. By now all of the helmsman had been over 20 knots.

Sunday: The main goal of first to finish was achievable barring gear failure. Although *Maverick* was 40 miles southeast, *Merlin* was now for the first time closer to Maui by 25 miles. Speed was not a problem but it had to be done in the right direction and thus not add extra miles.

Monday: The plotting sheets became the focus. The hourly plots revealed subtle lifts during the day and knocks at night. The helmsmen were ruthlessly monitored - sail the polar angles, never above, and work the waves and surfs down to the rhumb line.

Last roll call - ETA 10 days 2 minutes. Could Dan and the crew beat the record or would the light 5 knot winds reported at the Kahului airport deny them the needed 10 knots speed?

Tuesday: Early in the morning the lights of Maui were in sight. Peter Fargey had the boat on rails—healed over and going fast. The crew had now learned how to drive through the knock downs and keep the boat speed over 10 knots. As the sun rose, three big black ugly squalls hit us. Up came Nakalele Point so fast that there was no time to reef down the main or put up the small kite in anticipation of a wild ride through Pailolo Channel.

As the point was rounded, the last squall passed over leaving flat calm water ahead. Fluky puffy winds came over the north point of Maui as *Merlin* was now in the lee of the island. The chute filled and collapsed. The 1/2 chute was called for. As *Merlin* drifted a little further off the shore the wind filled in lifting the chute ahead.

In the early morning sun the challenge had been met. The 10 day barrier was broken. The right boat, the right winds and the right crew set a new record of 9 days, 23 hours, 15 minutes and 59 seconds.

Mai Tais for breakfast.

The Crew: Dan Sinclair (skipper), Dr. Ron Boyd (navigator), Ron Drane, Peter Fargey, Vlad Kahle, Dr. Jack Pacey, John Robertson, Jay Sinclair, Dominic Soave, John Vogel, Ron O'Gilvey.

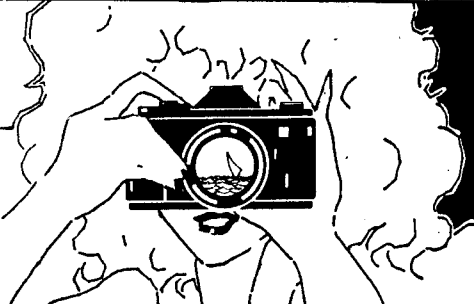
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