

85-Year-Old Wins Florida to Mexico Race

I have always considered myself the luckiest person on Earth for getting the opportunity to set foot in the USA in 1969 to attend university, meet Shirley, and being presented with boundless opportunities which I could ever have imagined.

If you had told me I would one day get to race in St. Petersburg Yacht Club's "Regata del Sol al Sol," I would have said "No, not even in my dreams." Sure enough, this dream would come true when Loren Hoffman, a friend from Crescent Sail Yacht Club, invited me to crew on XTC, a 1998 Beneteau Oceanis 461, under the command of 1960 Naval Academy grad Tom Glew (age 85).

The Race

I met Tom, who loved math and would mentally calculate using formulas I have long since forgotten. As good as I too was in math, I would not be able to mentally calculate like he did—even if I remembered the formulae. He is proud that his grandkids are good at math, as well. One unlikely formula that he would repeat with a smile and mischief written all over his face was "*The angle of the dangle...*". He would just state the first part of the theorem, leaving the rest to adolescent boys.

Several weeks before the race, Shirley and I met Tom, and his beloved wife Maryann, and other crew members to help prepare the 46-foot Beneteau for the 456 nautical mile race across the Gulf of Mexico from St. Petersburg, Florida to Isla Mujeres, Mexico. Maryann - always magnanimous, was there every day getting XTC ready to make sure that the crew had enough food, and clean sleeping arrangement to rest during the long race. She is a true partner who got things done.

Two days before the race, we helped move the vessel from Pass-a-Grille to St. Petersburg Municipal Marina. As we approached, Tom radioed the dockmaster requesting dockage close to the entrance because he was octogenarian. Now, I have occasionally played my septuagenarian card, but I quickly realized that the octogenarian card trumps all other cards of my generation. The dockmaster assigned a spot right off the entrance to the marina.

As I am new to long-distance racing, I made a point of attending every briefing offered to competitors at the Club. The one about prevailing currents described the current patterns near the Yucatan Peninsula, which favored an approach that would lead a racer further north and across a slightly longer distance to take advantage of prevailing currents for a faster finish. The other briefing about wind forecasts predicted light winds at the start of the

race that would gradually increase to 24 MPH (gusting to 27) as the night progressed and increasing further to 26 MPH (gusting to 29), with waves gradually increasing from 6 to 9 feet by the second day. As a small sailboat racer, unless it is a championship race, I usually stay away once conditions approach 17 MPH if the gusts are over 20, but I figured that a 46-foot Beneteau should be able to handle those conditions if the sails were reefed properly. What I didn't consider was the height of the waves, which would toss the crew and equipment around like balls in a bingo cage.

Soon, waves started increasing by midnight on the first day. Two of the seven-person crew succumbed to sea sickness and had to retire. Changes were made to the watch schedule to accommodate our reduced crew, as we rode from wave to wave toward Isla Mujeres.

By the second night, waves increased yet again. Captain Tom spoke with the crew on watch about the need to shorten the sail by using the second reefing point. The discussions between Loren and Tom were more heated than I would like to admit. Neither I nor Loren were up to the dangerous task, and Tom insisted on doing it himself, which Loren was very vocal in his opposition. At one point Tom shouted, "Goddammit, I am the captain, and I can do what I want!". Fortunately, Tabatha rushed over and called Hank who was resting down below by banging on the hatch and yelling through the cover "gotta have you up here Hank". Hank, hearing the ruckus, stepped out, to the cockpit groggy to take control of the situation. The young sexagenarian was the only one up to the task and was able to make his way to the base of the mast, hold on to the violently swinging mast with one hand, grab and pull down the luff of the mainsail with the other hand to place the ring in the hook and call "Made"; from there, the rest of the crew safely winched the reefing line and halyard to shorten the mainsail.

Around midnight, on my watch, monitoring the navigation screen at the wheel, Hank was at the companionway when he saw the window give way as buckets of water rushed in across the sink and onto the floor. A rogue wave had hit our broadside with such force that it broke the seal around the window, allowing the sea to tear into the cabin. Tom quickly called all hands to the cabin to figure out how to stop the leak and prevent the window from completely breaking loose with disastrous consequences. I stayed on watch alone at the wheel to keep an eye on the navigation console as my watchmate ran down to help. The waves were at their highest, bobbing the 46-foot vessel like a Dixie Cup. At one point, the wave slammed XTC and propelled her violently as I watched GPS register 15.3 MPH... nearly twice the theoretical hull speed of 8.4 for the 46-foot sailboat. I had both ends of my tether clipped to the backstays and the shackle clipped to my life vest, holding onto nearby stanchions to keep me on board in case XTC got hit by another rogue wave. Because the crew was preoccupied with the window, my watch lasted nearly four hours. As I bounced

around, I kept thinking that this is probably how sailors sometimes perish. I was certain that I would not be one of them, because I was securely tethered and monitoring the autohelm work extra-hard to keep XTC on track. Unlike short races, using an autohelm is permitted in long-distance racing. As a matter of fact, steering constantly for hours on end is nearly impossible. The concentration needed in heavy weather would be exhausting and completely ineffective. “Otto,” as I called the autohelm, was a reliable servant—he never complained, doing his work with diligence and accuracy.

Thankfully, the window was sealed, and we were quickly back to the business of racing, punching through the waves as Tom called for sail trim and slight adjustments to heading. Early in the race, the octogenarian had decided on the direct course, predicting that due to high winds, taking advantage of currents would not necessarily be the best strategy, and the shortest distance between two points may be preferable. Although the winds were very heavy, winds on a beam reach would favor a straight line. The old man was right—his strategy paid off, and XTC finished first in Cruising A, as well as Cruising B, taking the overall first place in Cruising Class and equaling his son Eric’s legacy (who had won the Non-Spinnaker Class in 2015). With a big smile on his face, Tom kept telling everyone he was cut from the same fabric as his son. This was a feat that no card (octogenarian or otherwise) would have given Tom the advantage. It was purely his and his two first-mates Loren and Hank’s doing (whom I like to refer to as “the Professor” and “the Coach”), assisted by Tabatha, who hauled her ass off (as she would put it) to the cockpit whenever needed. In addition to many SPYC perpetual trophies, first place finishes in 1999 and 2015 to Cuba, he was able to add the coveted race to Mexico with his beloved XTC. —and I was incredibly lucky to witness it firsthand.



Captain Tom master of 22 Isla races and 3 Cuba races assisted by veterans Hank Brautigam (8+ Isla races) on the left and Loren Hoffman (7 Isla races) on the right. Photo taken just as they stepped off XTC past midnight after 63 hours of racing.



XTC approaching Isla Mujeres dockage 63 hours after leaving St. Petersburg, finishing just past midnight.

Isla Mujeres

The island, a short distance from Cancun, is now sunseekers' destination with modern facilities. My wife Shirley, who had visited the island with her college friend Jan in 1971 remembers it differently. She remembers taking a ferry across from the mainland with locals transporting chickens and small livestock to the island. The efforts of one family, the Lima family elevated the economic conditions of the island to what they are today. Salvador Lima, and now his son Enrique, a friend and contemporary of our Captain is the force behind the development of the *Regata del Sol al Sol* (Regatta from the Sun to the Sun) and *Regata al Sol* (Regata to the Sun). After the Cuban Crisis, regattas from Florida clubs to Cuba had nearly ceased taking place. The Limas traveled to Florida and promoted the idea to several yacht clubs in West Florida for a race to Isla Mujeres. Their effort captured the imagination of two clubs, St. Petersburg, and Pensacola. Enrique is well respected and admired for helping perpetuate the prestigious regatta by helping organize several events for the crew and those who fly in to join the crew for festivities following the race.

As Tom told his crew: “If you don’t have fun when you get there, it’s your own fault.” He was right. Shirley (who flew to Isla to join me at the finish) and I are the lucky beneficiaries of the work that the SPYC Event Committee, the Lima Family, and the local government have done to make it memorable. There were Crew Parties, Receptions, a Basketball Game against residents, Rum & Coke Party, Poker Run, Mayor’s Reception, Regata Amigos Race..., and finally, Cocktails, Dinner & Awards Presentation.

I quickly felt at home when I woke up the morning after the race and saw the rocky beach at the hotel (in my youth my favorite swimming holes were rocky). It took me back to Beirut on the Mediterranean. I felt a sort of kinship with the place and the people. Since I had planned some snorkeling and scuba diving, I missed a few of the events. But I made sure to attend events organized by local authorities and the Lima Family.

Casa de las Rocas (Rock House) Reception. The house built by the Lima family on the rocky shore is fortified against hurricanes and holds 52 years of Regata del Sol al Sol memorabilia, photos, and other artifacts. Shirley and I attended the lavish reception honoring skippers. The cocktail party featuring abundant hors d’oeuvres and Margaritas was a fitting finish to a difficult race as most of us had eaten very little for lack of appetite during the 63-hour race.



Casa de las Rocas - Club de Yates Isla de Mujeres (Isla Mujeres Yacht Club)



The Library.



Event Chairman Paul Goodman thanking our hosts. L to R - Paul Goodman, Enrique Lima, daughter, acting Mayor Ms. Peniche, and Isla Mujeres Port Captain Martinez.

Mayor's Reception - Palacio Municipal Isla Mujeres. This was as a solemn event with several proclamations including Sister City presentation of a plaque from St. Petersburg Mayor Ken Welch to the acting Mayor of Isla Mujeres, Señora Peniche, Quintana Roo, MX. It was presented by SPYC Commodore Scott Boyle and regatta Event Chairman Paul Goodman. After the ceremonies, the Municipality leadership invited all attendees to an open-air buffet dinner held in the plaza facing City Hall.



Isla Mujeres City Council honoring all participants and the City of St. Petersburg for its friendship.



L to R – Commodore Scott Boyle, Isla Mujeres Mayor Peniche, and regatta Event Chairman Paul Goodman presenting Sister City plaque from Mayor Welch.

Amigos vs. Gringos Basketball Game. This event is probably the second-most eagerly anticipated event by sailors, and family and friends who flew in to be with their sailing team. Throughout its history, local Amigos have won every game but one; sure enough Gringos were no match despite the enthusiastic coaching by Hank who kept replacing players to find the right mix with not much luck. We lost to the Amigos once again. Our loss didn't prevent us from having a good time. Next morning's text messages confirmed the joy the game had brought to everyone. Ramona texted: "Good Morning! What a blast last night! What fun! I had more fun cheering last night than I did in junior high. Unlike my

teenage years, I did not care what I looked like last night and what others thought... So much fun! Thanks, Jeannie, for heading up the cheering squad!". I agreed. Shirley and I were all smiles. It was more fun than watching our beloved Michigan State during March Madness.



Team Gringo coached by Hank (with the khaki baseball hat).



Team Amigos - The woman in the middle is the acting Mayor (and, on the team, as well).



Gringos cheerleading team.

Banquet and Awards Presentation. The most anticipated event, the banquet is an elaborate affair featuring folkloric dances, music, children’s prizes for logo design..., and of course, the presentation of trophies. We knew we were first in Cruising Class A, but also first in Cruising Class B, giving us the much sought-after First Place Overall. Maryann Tom’s wife, daughter and son in law Sharon and Joe flew in for the occasion, as did Jack Caldwell Tom’s childhood friend (who is also an old salt like Tom) sailed the boat back to St. Petersburg with some of us. They still call each other “Jacky” and “Tommy”. Seeing Tom win the Overall Cruising Class was inspiring: When the race committee called his name, the audience erupted. It was a special moment- extremely moving. I caught Tabatha wiping a tear away, and I glanced over to see Sharon with a big smile, Maryann with a big smile, Jack with a big smile, Joe with a big smile - everyone.



XTC team L to R - Jack Caldwell, Ramona Angelo, Captain Tom Glew, Maryann Glew, 1st Mate Loren Hoffman, Tabatha Waters, 1st Mate Hank Brautigam, Jeannie O'Grady, and Shahe Momjian



With daughter Sharon and son-in-law-Joe Leite in front of the awards: Cruising A First-Place plaque, Cruising B Second-Place plaque, Overall Cruising Class trophy, and a trophy for Most (22) Regata del Sol al Sole Races Completed.



Festivities before the award presentation



Maryann and Tom - June 1959. At the Ring Dance at the Naval Academy a year before graduation

Allow me to be sentimental, since I have a hard time putting words together to explain how quickly people fall in love with Tom and Maryann. Their generosity in spirit has left a lasting impression on Shirley and me. We feel incredibly fortunate to have crossed paths with such wonderful people who are examples of goodness and warmth.

I am the luckiest person on Earth.

Shahe Momjian – May 20, 2024