

SAIL AMERICA NEWS

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THE SAILING LIFE

Ice Pick, Crampons and Navy Firing Range Part of the Mountainous Sea Experience for Jerry Richards from the Recent Mini Fastnet Victory

NOTE: This is a new column for Sail America News readers designed to capture the personal passion of industry professionals who share their love and passion of the lifestyle and sport. We welcome your submission for column consideration. E-mail your own personal sailing account to our Editor Wanda Kenton Smith wanda@kentonsmithmarketing.com, or to Jonathan Banks jbanks@sailamerica.com

This Month's Passionate Sailor

Jerry Richards is the national sales manager for Gill North America and has worked for the company for 10 years. Last year, he and his crew from Gill won the coveted inaugural Sail America Sailing Industry Regatta.

While many industry colleagues may know Jerry for his racing car passion, he comes from a highly competitive sailing background, having started competing in dinghies at the age of 13 on the south coast of England. Jerry won the British 470 National Championships in 1979 and '80 and qualified for the Moscow Olympic as crew with Edward Warden Owen. He started sailing Solings with Chris Law in 1982, winning the Los Angeles pre-Olympics, Hyeres Week, and Cannes Ski Yachting. He then went on to win the J/24 Worlds as bowman for Dave Curtis in 1984 in Poole, England. He finished fourth at both the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and 1988 Seoul Olympics. Other notable sailing career highlights include winning the Admirals Cup in 1989 and the Fastnet Race, plus 2x winner of the USA Congressional Cup, among many other distinctions.

This month's column, written by Richards, is an account of the Mini Fastnet Race that started July 5 from the Royal Western Yacht Club, Plymouth England. Richards sailed this race for the first time with 25-year old skipper Conrad Coleman whom he met three years ago at Strictly Sail Pacific. It was the first serious race Richards had competed in for more than 10 years.

"Once sailing is in your blood, it's hard to let go," he chuckles. "It must be ... at 53, with opportunities to race the largest, fastest boats in the world, I raced a Mini for the first time!"

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"I'm back. It was a great adventure. Traveling by train through the British countryside and stopping at a station called Westbury right next to the coal hole which became a small lake where I started dinghy racing at the age of 13, 40 years ago.

"To race a 21' Mini Transat it is a requirement to pass the ISAF Survival at Sea Course and carry an ISAF survival suit and PFD with built in harness. I am very grateful for the loan of this equipment from Mustang and Spinlock, but no one told me I would need an ice pick and crampons to get over the mountainous seas we encountered the third day!

My skipper, Conrad Coleman, and I had a great time and did well until we decided to retire to save the boat from the relentless seas. Conrad was thrilled after receiving confirmation prior to the start of the race that he had qualified for the single handed 4,200-mile Mini Transat in September from France to

Brazil; a real achievement as he only started sailing the boat in February. This news would contribute to our decision to retire.

The Race

Due to an unexpected powerboat race in Plymouth harbor on the Sunday, our start was delayed until 2:30 pm. This meant we had less favorable tide and after a 10-mile beat we rounded Edystone light house in about 18 -20 knots with one reef in the main. Let the games begin! With dusk setting in, we two-sailed reached for a time while watching the other boats to see if they hoisted shoots. With no other shoots in sight and as the night set in, we lost sight of the boats in front and behind and in 20-28 knots of wind, we hoisted the spinnaker and had an exciting reach for 150 miles all night. We jibed twice and with boat speed maxing out at 17.5 knots, we did sustain several broaches along the way but, unlike bigger boats, the Mini recovers very quickly.

The next morning, we rounded the Needles Fairway buoy at about 7:00 am, having not seen another boat since it went dark the previous night. There was some concern as we sailed back west towards Plymouth because we didn't see any other boats. Perhaps we had missed a tide gate because we were the only boat that went out to sea in the early stage of the race. Oh yes ... did I mention it had been blowing 25+ all night and now we would be beating into 28-40 knots of wind and mountainous seas for the next 5 days! Crampons and an ice pick would have been helpful!

After rounding the mark and sailing upwind for about 35 minutes, we came across a group of five boats reaching in the opposite direction, so Conrad had made a great call going out to sea and we were in a good position. By late afternoon, we were down to three reefs and the storm jib with huge seas - I mean huge in a 21' boat! Hang on tight, grit your teeth and just hope there is a back to the wave to slide down. From time to time, the seas would break over the boat as we climbed to the top of the waves. It was exhilarating and great to be back at sea after 16 years away.

The Navy came alongside us that afternoon and informed us that we were on the firing range and would need to tack and sail for three miles to clear the area. Several cannon shots were fired shortly after and we cleared the area.

Monday night was a full moon and our starboard track was like something out of a Disney movie. The moon was casting a golden highway and we were beating right up the middle; it was one of those times you remember.

We had been reefing the jib and the main many times; probably the hardest task for me was stacking the five, four-gallon water bottles and the bag with anchor and chain to what would become the new high side prior to the tack. Remember we were doing this in big waves. I have to say Conrad was so in tune with all the systems for reefing and sail changing on the boat. It was very impressive.

By late Tuesday afternoon, Conrad was talking to other competitors and received reports that probably all but one in our class had retired. We had no wind or boat speed instruments by now, and with the weather still forecasting force 5, and two and half days beating to the rock in a boat designed to reach, it was still a long way to go. After discussion on and off for about an hour there was not much racing to be done as we had a good lead over the only boat that went on to complete the race in our class so we decided to call it a day on Tuesday night. This would give Conrad time to return to France and strip the boat in preparation for the Mini Transat.

The highlight was when we returned and were met by the race officer who prior to the race had teased me about sailing with Conrad. He had a very different respect for us both when told we led the race overall Monday evening ahead of the faster Proto's. We were both thrilled to hear this as the conditions had been somewhat heavy going, and we were in great shape apart from the instruments. We had been able to get rest and were eating and drinking, which in these conditions can be overlooked.

Disappointed not to go around Fastnet but had a great experience, even with mountainous seas and up to 40 knots of wind. After a week, my hands were still swollen from playing the traveler. I had the crap beaten out of me. It was a blast."



850 AQUIDNECK AVE, UNIT B4, MIDDLETOWN, RI, 02842
1 (800) 817-SAIL • FAX: 1 (401) 847-2044 • INFO@SAILAMERICA.COM
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