

# SI VAULT



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October 09, 1967

## A Windy Passage From Cocktail To Cocktail

A fishing enthusiast who thought sailboats were just a pretty excuse for giving parties finds that an ocean race is something more than merely the laziest distance between celebrations

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It began with a phone call: "Would I like to crew in the Regata al Sol?" The Regata al what? It was, it turned out, a sailboat race, a 560-mile sailboat race from **Biloxi**, Miss, to Isla Mujeres.

Isla Mujeres? Never heard of it.

Neither had a few million other people. It was a small island off the tip of **Mexico**, near **Cozumel**, in the Territory of **Quintana Roo**. Beautiful place. Untouched. Wonderful beaches. No telephone. Great fishing.

What kind of fishing?

Bonefishing. Tarpon.

Sign me on.

I had never participated in a sailboat race, but I figured I could put up with anything that placed me among bone-fish and tarpon. Besides, everyone knows that a sailboat race is just the shortest distance between two cocktail parties. I envisioned day after day of languorous cruising in tropical climes: sunny mornings, slumberous afternoons, a drink or two before dinner. And after dinner, time before bed to stretch out under the sails and drag one's feet through the luminous waters of the **Gulf of Mexico**.

Yachting had always seemed to me a rather mindless activity, and I imagined, if anything, that my ignorance would prove to be an asset. I went off to buy a pair of canvas yachting shoes—since walking on a deck seems to require a different tread than walking on a tennis court—and while crossing the shopping center parking lot, I heard a lion roar.

This turned out to be only the first surprise of a surprising experience, and I mention it here because later I was to wonder which creature was more out of place, that crated carnival lion on a dozen acres of asphalt or me on a yacht.

Flying down to **New Orleans**, I filled the first line of my notebook. "Am now jetting through the air who knows how fast, to catch a boat, who knows how slow, Ask the pilot of this plane what he thinks of sailing and 2 to 1 he'd burst out laughing." That sounded pretty good until I met a crewmate and learned that his profession was flying airplanes. Surprise No. 2.

At **Gulfport**, the night before the race, I found exactly what I expected to find. A rousing party had spawned over the docks and moved inland as far as the Broadwater Beach Marina. It was gusting strong when I joined it. I wandered around, boozing and eating shrimp and listening to what an idiot I was for embarking on such a jaunt. Did I know what I was getting into? Did I have my pills? Seasick pills, dysentery pills. "Let me see your smallpox vaccination." And what about foul-weather gear? "You know it can get mean as hell out there."

After a while it occurred to me that one of the functions of a yacht club must be to hate yachts, for in the course of that long evening I didn't hear one word about the pleasures of sailing, only about the horrors. This may have been because there didn't seem to be many sailors around, at least not of the kind that race sailboats.

Where were the racing sailors? "There's one," somebody said, "and—oh look!—there's another." Two sailors for 14 boats! That hardly seemed an adequate number. Where were the others? "Resting," I was told, "as you should be."

Next morning, bright and bouncy in new green yachting shoes, I reported aboard the *Nimbus*, a 48-foot cutter owned and skippered by David B. Hatcher, then of **Houston**.

Several hours later, when the *Nimbus* crossed the starting line under full sail, I made another vivid observation: "10:50 a.m., May 28, 1966," to which later in the day I added, "These people mean business. They really intend to win this thing! Surprise No. 3."

I wrote no more, for by that time my hands were too sore for lengthy comment. It had been a difficult eight hours, and in the course of them I had picked up an assortment of nicks, welts and blisters, "love bites," as they were called by other members of the crew, most of whom, having raced aboard the *Nimbus* before, had formed with her a highly personal relationship.

A racing yacht is a profound complication of ropes, sails, personalities and moods, and a stranger to these is hopelessly lost at first. He wanders about in a maze, trying to attach the right term to the right object, the right name to the right person. In time, however, the darkness lifts and there is a welcome shock of recognition when a sheet becomes distinguishable from a halyard and individual members of the crew, until then names only, acquire identities.

In time, I began to learn that the skipper's two sons, Dave Jr. and Bob, were the Lord Jims of the *Nimbus*. For them sailing was not a mystery but a challenge. They threw themselves headlong into each new problem, depending upon their youth and enthusiasm to overwhelm it. When a snare developed in one of the halyards, it was Dave Jr. who rode a bosun's chair 70 feet into the air on a pitching mast and spent a reckless half hour tarzaning about the spreaders.

Our best helmsman was Swede Lauritsen, who combined knowhow with strength. His cool proficiency at the helm carried a landlubber such as myself through many troubled moments. A former football player at the **University of Michigan**, he shook off squalls as though they were tacklers.

Chuck Billing, a **Houston** insurance man, spoke often of the science and esthetics of sailing. It was he who told me—surprise!—that a boat is pulled more often than it is pushed by the wind.' Chuck admired the beauty of a sail properly set and "glued to the wind," and wanted me to appreciate what a refined and delicate piece of machinery I was privileged to be riding.

Charles Bruning was the loner aboard the *Nimbus*, an alert man with taut nerves who chewed Gelusil during tense moments and covered his head with a handkerchief worn like a skullcap. Someday in the future when I read a newspaper account about how some sailor has undertaken to circle the globe in a 10-foot sailboat, I will not be surprised to learn that his name is Bruning. He did everything well.

**John Williamson**, one of the navigators, approached sailing with dispassionate thoroughness, as he might approach any skill he wanted to master. When he wasn't working at the chart table, he was learning the foredeck from Dave Jr.

For Enrique Huber, a Mexican business man and our other navigator, a boat was a place to relax, and he found it hard at times to understand what all the racing fuss was about. If there was no wind, there was no wind, in Enrique's opinion, and no amount of raising and dropping sails was going to produce it. It was Enrique who appeared from the cabin one sultry evening to take a sighting on the moon, a yellow orb then resting on a pile of clouds, and announced with a sigh, "But it is too beautiful to shoot!" His wit was a happy presence on such an earnest voyage.

The one person on the *Nimbus* whose composure never left her was Audrey Hatcher, the skipper's wife. As Swede put it, "She's the only woman I like to race with," and his opinion was reflected in that of every member of the crew. Audrey exercised a steadying influence when tempers flared—as they often did—and she guarded the galley and the crew's health with authority and good humor. When a halyard tore most of the skin off the skipper's left hand, it was reassuring to know Audrey was there to look after it.

On any boat, of course, it is the skipper who sets the tone. Ocean racing is a highly abstract sport in the sense that most of it is played without the benefit of a visible opponent. On an ocean race, if there is nobody aboard to remind you that you have an opponent, you may easily forget about him. On the *Nimbus*, David Hatcher was our racing conscience. "Come on, you guys, let's race this bucket." A tanned, stocky man, he never let up. Goofing off infuriated him, and while his language could be withering, one felt he called it out of a part of himself reserved for the sea. It was clear that for him the pleasures of racing all came from the boat, not from the provisions she carried. Although provisions were plentiful, they were not luxurious, as they are on some boats, and as close as anyone got to alcohol was two cans of beer a day.

"It's hard enough to race a boat sober," he said.

There was a lot of fantasizing about "chilled pitchers of martinis," etc., but as in any disciplined surroundings the snobbery that accompanies abstention more than made up for the actual deprivation: our crew could look down on boats where life was easier.

"I've raced on boats like that." Dave Jr. said. "You have a great time. The skipper never raises his voice and nobody works too hard. Of course, you never win any races. Winning's not the point. Cruising's the point. I like to win myself. I wouldn't be out here unless I thought I was going to win."

Winning seemed a long way off the second day of the race. We struck a calm and flapped about the Gulf for 48 horrible hours.

I had always thought a becalmed boat was an idle boat. Never believe it. The Ancient Mariner wasn't racing. Squeezing movement out of missing air currents is a fiendish occupation. Sails are shot up and down like window shades. Winches grind. Halyards hum. Arms and legs ache.

"Chasing zephyrs on a flat sea," I wrote in my diary, "is the closest thing to fishing a racing boat can offer. After the spinnaker is lowered and the drifter raised for the fifth time in as many minutes, you fall to the deck in a heap, and what do you hear?"

" 'Chute time!'"

" 'Ease the genny.'"

" 'Trim the main.'"

" 'Get the turtle.'"

" It is surprising how many commands on a sailboat come in threes, like bad luck.

On May 31 a sudden squall, what the Mexicans term "a small hurricane," with winds up to 50 knots, broke the calm. Three layers of water struck the *Nimbus* simultaneously—a layer of rain, a layer of sea and between them, a layer of waves. David Hatcher dropped the spinnaker and called everyone on deck. The sky seethed with lightning. Clouds rolled across the water. They were not dark, as they are on land during a thunderstorm, but an eerie white, the color of icebergs. The wind slammed the boat on her side, and I heard the skipper laughing furiously. He had the tiller pulled back under his chin, hanging on while the boom banged along on top of the water. Here was the wind he had been waiting for. A white shroud covered the bow. The lee railing went under, and the sea hissed on the deck inches from the cockpit.

"Get this boat up!" someone shouted. "Come on, goddammit, get this boat out of the water!"

Heeled over that far, you get the impression of sliding down a steep hill. The ride is terrifying and exhilarating, a strange mixture of horror and delight. Even the saltiest sailor must occasionally wonder whether the boat is going to hold up under him. Dropping the mainsail, of course, would help it hold up, but races are not won without sails, and when the *Nimbus* cleared the squall she was still flying everything she carried into it.

Lulls follow storms on long ocean races, and soon the boat picks up the same tempo, alternating between dull hard work and moments of electrifying sensations.

Two days later we were only 30 miles from Cuba, lazing along on big swells. Someone asked our Latin-American crewmate Huber what he would do if a Cuban gunboat should draw up alongside. He threw open his arms and cried, "Amigos, save me from these Yankee imperialists!" We lost another sail that day when a spinnaker blew out. The beer was all gone and so was all but a small lump of ice that Audrey used to make lemonade. A general fatigue prevailed, and the conversation drifted back and forth between our position in the race—we seemed to be leading the fleet—and what the first drink was going to taste like in the bar of the Zazil-Ha on Isla Mujeres.

"You know what I would like right now?" someone said. "A shot of brandy on ice, chased by milk."

The first night I spent aboard the *Nimbus* I spent sleepless, wondering why the damned bunks were so hideously uncomfortable. I soon found out. On a sailboat a bunk is not meant to encourage sleep. Its purpose is simply to hold in the smallest space possible someone who is already three-fourths asleep by the time he reaches it. After four days at sea I would have slept in the bilge, although my favorite bunk was among the sails in the bow. I would drift off on the sound of Bruning "calling sails" for the helmsman:

"You're edging, edging a bit. Watch it."

"I'm coming down."

"More."

"Coming."

"Still more."

"How's that?"

"That's good. Hold it."

"Right on 280 and holding. Locked in...."

Then, at last, we were approaching the end. "Now's when it starts getting exciting," Bruning said, chewing a Gelusil. "The first day's a bore. The last day hums."

Six days before, 14 boats had left Biloxi. Since then, apart from an occasional sighting, the only communication between them had been over the radio. According to the rules of the Regata al Sol, there were no restrictions on the use of radios except that no boat could receive coded weather or "other pertinent information" that was not available to the rest of the fleet. David Hatcher had talked to other skippers from time to time, but because skippers like to guard their positions, no one could tell for sure whether the information he was getting was on the level. A skipper handles his whereabouts the same way a quarterback handles a football: deception is part of the game.

The general feeling on *Nimbus* was that she was the lead boat. The only other boat that seemed to pose a real threat was the *Temptress*, a Columbia-50, but since she owed the *Nimbus* time, each passing hour made her less of a threat.

The navigators placed Isla Mujeres 50 off the starboard bow. If the wind held up, we should be there by midnight. Spirits ran high. Audrey Hatcher threw caution overboard and dropped *all* the ice in the daily pitcher of lemonade. Bruning took a shower with a bucket of saltwater and suggested everyone else do the same. "Otherwise, the Zazil-Ha will shut the door in our faces."

About this time a blue sail was sighted on the horizon. When it got near enough to focus on, we saw it belonged to *Temptress*, and she was closing fast.

"That's all right," David Hatcher said. "We've still got her beat. She'll never make up the time she owes us."

Her course puzzled him, however. If we were right and Isla Mujeres was straight ahead, why was the *Temptress* closing on us at right angles? She appeared to be running away from the island, not toward it. Someone then mentioned a disturbing fact. Aboard the *Temptress* was the skipper of the boat that had won last year's Regata al Sol, a Mexican born in Yucatan. And this was the Yucatan Channel! Was it possible he knew something about these waters and their strong tricky currents that no one else knew?

"That's possible," David Hatcher said. "It's also possible"—and here he looked at the navigators—"that somebody's goofed and we're headed straight for Panama."

No, that was not possible, the navigators insisted. Isla Mujeres was right where they said it was. They showed him figures to prove it. They had even gotten a radio fix.

Yet there was the *Temptress*, with the local Mexican aboard, and she was sailing altogether a different course.

"Maybe we ought to cover her," the skipper said. "So long as we stay with her, she can't possibly beat us."

But then another boat might beat us.

That was true. He went below to look at the charts and think. While he was gone, Swede Lauritsen, who was at the helm, nodded his head. "She's doing just what I'd do if I was getting beat," he said. "She's going inshore hoping to find more wind than we've got out here. That's all she can do. Out here she's already licked."

The skipper reappeared. "Hold what you've got," he said to Swede. "We may never see the land again, but let's go. Let's get this bucket moving."

And move we did, slam-bang into another squall. Through the driving rain I heard what sounded like a cannon shot, followed by a wall of despair. The boom had broken. Floorboards were ordered torn up and lashed around the break. Then a hole was spotted in the chute.

"Drop it," the skipper said, "and get some adhesive tape on it."

In six days of racing the *Nimbus* had lost four sails and the boom, and the skipper had lost most of the skin on one of his hands.

But never mind. With the lights of Isla Mujeres glowing off the bow and a new Cal-40 disappearing off the stern, things couldn't have looked brighter. Bruning cooked a victory stew, which was another of his specialties, and we ate this in a hilarious mood while watching the moon rise. The boom was holding and so was the wind.

"Zazil-Ha, here we come!" someone said.

For me this was the high point of the race. I had begun this trip with a scornful laugh. Now I realized that scorn had been replaced with pride. I knew what Swede meant when he called ocean racing "the greatest sport in the world." And when I heard a voice say over the radio, "Hello, Isla Mujeres, this is the yacht *Chandell* preparing to cross the finish line," I was as stunned and bewildered as everyone else.

"*Chandell!* Where the hell did she come from?"

No one would hazard a guess.

*Nimbus* had outsailed a bigger boat and lost to a smaller one. I suppose this is a familiar irony in racing, but accepting it is still hard. Finishing second (third on corrected time) is somehow not good enough to make up for all the aches and bruises incurred along the way, and though we had the ritualistic drink in the bar of the Zazil-Ha, the drink everybody had talked about for six days, it didn't taste as good as the warm beer after a squall. Maybe the lateness of the hour (3 a.m.) had something to do with it. Maybe not. In any case, the going was heavy. Chuck Billing wondered when he could get a plane home. Swede talked about another race coming up, this one in the Great Lakes. Dave Jr. thought he would do a little skin diving. "Might as well. There's nothing else to do." And I suddenly remembered what had brought me to Isla Mujeres in the first place and asked the manager of the hotel, Mr. Esteban Lima, about how I could get to the bonefish and tarpon.

Mr. Lima said he would try to find me a boat, "though it might take a day or two."

I told him I'd wait.

Hanging around such a fine hotel as the Zazil-Ha on such a beautiful island as Isla Mujeres seemed an easy enough thing to do. On any other week it would have been. But this was the week of the Regata al Sol, and soon the Zazil-Ha looked the same as I remembered the Broadwater Beach Marina looking the night before the race. Many of the same people had chartered an airplane in order to be on hand when the boats arrived. Among them was a yacht broker. "You'd be surprised," he told me, "how many people crew on a boat for the first time and then want a boat of their own."

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