

The first day of spring in 2002 I signed the papers to become the proud owner of my first “big” boat. Up to that point I had only sailed an old wooden Star and solo cruised a J-24 my father had bought over two decades earlier. Standing on the deck of my J-35 in Westbrook, Ct I began to feel a bit overwhelmed by its size. Lugging the sails up on deck reinforced those thoughts. Nearly 12 years later and the boat is now my “tiny” little ship that has carried Bob Fischer, Paladin’s navigator, and me North to fog bound ports in Canada and as far South and East as Bermuda’s inviting sandy shores.

That first season I struggled to form a crew and was lucky to get half the allowed weight on the rail. Combine that with limited racing knowledge and the end result on the course was obvious. By late August we had a perfect record; last in class. Looking to break our streak I signed up for The Vineyard Race. I had commitments from six friends, but as the date approached, and the weather forecast turned less optimistic, that number dwindled till it was just Bob and me. I had already paid the entry fee so figured; “What the heck! Let’s switch to the Double-Handed Division.” We got our money’s worth that race, from drifting our way down the Sound, to beating toward the light tower in choppy seas and 20-25 knots of wind. That seemed to take forever! Then there was the late night rounding and the dilemma of whether or not to fly the spinnaker double-handed for the first time, in those conditions. We chose to wait till dawn, and ran back to Stamford just thankful we didn’t jibe, intentionally or otherwise. Last again but a blast! That’s how two friends were indoctrinated into the Double-Handed fraternity.

We learned a lot about our boat and ourselves, and knew we had some work to do on both fronts. Being an engineer by trade and tinkerer by nature, I was compelled to incorporate some improvements for shorthanded sailing. Even then I knew that I would like to compete in the Bermuda Race so set about understanding all the safety requirements for offshore races. Between 2003 and 2004 I rebuilt Paladin to make her safe and strong for ocean passages. The biggest hurdle would be achieving the 115 degree positive stability range. Removing much of the “unnecessary” contrivances that did not provide structural support enabled us to pass the stability test without adding ballast and unwanted weight to the boat. I also reinforced all the bulkhead and floor to hull joints with epoxy and fiberglass cloth. We were lucky to get some sound advice on boat preparation and safety from double-handing great, Rich DuMoulin. It seems obvious that you can’t win if you don’t finish. But that was the approach I took and it has enabled us to many times do well. Check your gear frequently and get the most reliable equipment possible. Know your boat and it’s systems inside and out, including how to disassemble a plugged-up head in the dark while beating through rough seas. Bring all the necessary tools for repairs but no more. Fix the problems at the dock, not after the starting gun. If, like me you have an old boat it becomes even more important to look for signs of fatigue and corrosion in rig, steering gear and keel attachment.

Sails selection is another area that deserves a lot of thought. Distance racing is tough on sails, from slating about while waiting for a breeze to fill or throwing in a second reef in a blow. I spoke with a few of the areas lofts and ultimately decided to have UK Sailmakers supply my entire inventory. I found working with my sail maker and explaining what I expected from my sails, (durability/dependability, easy reefing/sail shaping, and of course speed) and how I planned to use them, eliminated all disappointment. For headsails I ditched the tuff-luff and went with hanks to eliminate risks associated with jammed luff tapes or foredeck battles with unruly Genoas. For the main I prefer a bit more structural fibers for offshore work, along with two sets of reef points. The second reef is quite deep, cutting the main area almost in half. Make sure there is plenty of reinforcing to uniformly distribute the load on the clew so the sail doesn’t pucker after shaking out the reef. Also give plenty of thought as to the routing of the reef lines to avoid chafe and unnecessary effort to winch down the reef clew. One of many good suggestions from Rich is to have a snap shackle affixed to the mast near the gooseneck to capture the reef tack earring. The curved horn found on most boats for this purpose doesn’t quite cut it. Give a lot of thought to how to reef and practice frequently. It’s much quicker and the sail plan will be better balanced if you can reduce sail through reefing as opposed to changing headsails, assuming your headsail was built strong enough for the

wind and sea conditions. A deeply reefed main can catch a lot of water from breaking waves so think about tying up the loose sail material.

If you have an older masthead boat like the J-35 you'll have a large inventory of headsails. For double-handing forget about the big one(s) as you'll almost always be too tender and your buddy working the foredeck may suggest you take up single-handing. For an ocean race on Paladin we will bring a 141% Genoa, an easy tacking #3, a reefable #4, and the storm Jib. The trysail comes along too and not just because it's a requirement. When it comes to spinnakers we will bring one or two all purpose chutes (depending on any sailing instruction limitations) a reaching spinnaker and a 1.5 oncer. We actually use the heavy chute a bit especially when the seas are running, just so we don't have to worry about any catastrophic sail failures. First priority in short handed racing is to finish without any dramatic stories to tell. Avoid breakdowns and accidents, speed will follow. Distance racing success is about consistency and never giving up. We've done a four day ocean race where we saw our position drop steadily after the first day just to catch the following breeze first and pull off a win in the final sprint to the finish. I subscribe to the notion that luck favors the prepared, but sometimes it feels sorry for Tail End Charlie. Either way we'll take it.

Now that we have the boat set-up for the rough stuff it's time to think about the crew. A two day Safety-at-Sea seminar is well worth your time. In addition to learning a lot, it can actually be fun. You'll discover how much effort it takes to right an inverted life raft, and see just how much water can enter a boat from a failed sea cock. With that information it's time for you and your friend to go out sailing. I like the cold, wet, windy days to better simulate the conditions you'll most likely encounter during an emergency. If you're new to sailing, practice on those days when you may not otherwise go out. I had a professor who told me on the first day of class, "In order to improve one-self you must be willing to remove yourself from your comfort zone." "Oh great" I thought at the time, but those words stuck with me and they are particularly apropos to sailing. I wouldn't suggest going out in a hurricane, but gradually push a little more each time. Eventually 30 knots will feel like 15 and big waves challenging as opposed to intimidating. Practice man-over-board drills! And take the boat out by yourself often. After all a man-over-board on a double-hander means it's all on you to save someone's life. Aboard Paladin its hand steering only if one of us is below, no autopilot. Also don't throw out that old spinnaker, you'll need it. I suspect many MOB situations arise when this sail is going up or down so learn to quick stop the boat by yourself with the kite up. Practice with a few friends aboard as observers just in case you wind up in the drink. I'm told many drowning victims are found with their fly down, so clip on when you're hanging off the backstay, or have a bucket in the cockpit when nature calls.

When I talk to non-sailors about distance racing I always get two questions. "How do you sleep?" And "What do you eat?" "No we don't stop for the night" and "not much" are my standard answers. These are actually questions we should ask ourselves. When I did my first Vineyard Race I was on deck almost the whole time and didn't really sleep. Not a good idea! If you're not steering, changing sails, or navigating lay down and close your eyes. At first it's hard to do but with each race it gets easier. Develop a system of watches that works for you and your partner. Bob and I used to loosely follow two hours on, two off, until I did a double-handed Bermuda return with a Swedish physicist friend of mine. We stuck to strict four hour shifts. That gave the off watch time to change out of wet foulies, eat, sleep and still get on deck 15 minutes early to discuss the conditions with the helmsman. Two hours is just too short to get any meaningful rest. As for hand steering in four hour stints; mentally I would break it up into four one hour shift and it wouldn't seem so tedious (not that sailing is really ever tedious). I also would have the time set on one of the cockpit displays which helps me pace myself. Heavy weather helming might be physically more demanding but the minutes appear to pass more quickly with the greater sensory inputs. While we're on the subject of displays, the large numeral ones are nice but I find in limited visibility like fog I have to steer working off the old fashion compass card, otherwise the boat's track would appear rather erratic.

What to eat will come down to personal preference. I'm fine with two premade sandwiches the first day and what amounts to snacks for the rest of the race. That could be fruit, nuts, crackers or Bob's

wife's homemade trail mix or my wife's arepas and empanadas. The only "cooking" going on in the galley (a gimbaled camp stove mounted on the main bulkhead) is limited to heating up canned soup or boiling water for coffee or tea. Hydration is more important than food so we are drinking water constantly. For breakfast I like to have a cold chocolate Ensure. It's got the vitamins and carbs and is convenient when at the helm. I also freeze two dozen water bottles before a race so we don't have to bring ice for the sandwiches and it provides something cool to drink on the hot days as they thaw. A cold beer is a welcome treat but just that, limited to one or two a day.

If the boat and crew are well prepared the race is half done. Sailing fast is good as long as it's in the right direction though! Listen to the weather reports leading up to the start of the race but don't lock yourself in to a plan based on that information, it's too macroscopic, especially for Long Island Sound where land/sea thermal differences often overshadow weak gradient winds. Current is a different story. It is much more predictable so we pay close attention. For a race like Bermuda, Bob begins studying the Gulfstream months in advance. Its characteristics change much more slowly than the wind so if you interpreted the sea surface Temperature and altimetry data correctly you have a good shot at finding what you expect, when you expect it. For Long Island Sound we are always looking at the current tables. Don't make the mistake of using the tide tables. High or low tide and slack water do not coincide at the east end where a large volume of water is forced through narrow openings at the Race, Sluiceway and Gut. Small boats can gain an advantage over their faster competition by finding favorable current, as it represents a greater percentage of their maximum boat speed. Think of it as a performance gain without a rating penalty! Take full advantage of it. (No penalty for a smooth boat bottom either, so get out the wet/dry paper before launching.) Also don't be afraid to throw out the anchor when the current is contrary and the wind has abandoned you.

Double-handing is a growing sector within the sport of sailboat racing and for good reason. It's a lot of fun! Gone are the frantic last minute calls to find replacement crew, logistical issues, or personality conflicts that can arise when so many people are confined to such a small area for what can seem like a long time. The double-hander's time isn't relegated to hours on the rail. It's spent analyzing, strategizing, helming, and even relaxing. When you're alone on deck in the middle of the night, with nothing but the stars in sight, and the sounds of hull cutting through the sea you feel as though a million miles separate you from all your land-based concerns.

More and more races are sponsoring Double-Handed divisions for both short and long distance races. And with each boat only needing two people we could theoretically grow the number of entrants many fold. Stamford Yacht Club even has a weekend regatta just for us. My advice to anyone considering double-handing is to give it a try. You may get hooked just like I did.