

formance in high-medium to heavy air made sailing her then like trying to drive a double-A fuel dragster in city traffic. It required a fine balancing act to keep her from rounding-up to weather and taking a complete knockdown in a heavy-air spinnaker reach. Several times my crew and I found ourselves lying flat on our side with the tip of the mast in the water. This always took us from the front and put us at the back of the pack.

At the end of the 1985 racing season, I tallied my bruises and I sold the sleekly beautiful Spica. I replaced her with a thirty-foot, nine year old, medium-displacement, ocean racing yacht that I had found in Seattle, a San Juan 30. She had been treated with kid gloves and had an extensive inventory of Hood sails in good condition. She was thoroughbred racing machine, but nothing so extreme or squirrely as the Santa Cruz. I renamed her Spica, like her predecessor, and waited for the 1986 season.

While I was waiting, I made a few important changes in my life. I quit my career as a news editor, split up with my wife of twenty-three months, packed up my midlife crisis and moved from Portland to Astoria.

The single major commitment in my life that remained was my dedication to yacht racing, to learning how to do "this crazy thing," as Werner had described it.

As the first series of the racing season approached I sought out a new crew. I had hoped to find experienced hands willing to endure the trials of an unproven skipper and a boat with promise. What I got was an out-of-work social worker, a waiter/actor, a chef and a beautiful dancer. For all my purposes, none had any sailing experience; forget racing skills. To date, they are the best damned crew I ever sailed with.

I gave these four souls instruction in sailing and yacht racing techniques using the wing-and-prayer osmosis method. We went sailing often in the early spring of this year. First we went tacking and then we went tacking and gybing and at last we went flying with the spinnaker.

Tacking and gybing came fairly easily to the crew. The spinnaker remained something of a mystery to them well into the first race series. I am not a teacher. I am not sufficiently patient. I managed, however, not to alienate my new crew who worked very hard to grasp these new skills.

Eventually, they learned to get the spinnaker up in a more or less seamanlike manner. Getting it down in the same way took a while longer. The average twenty-five knot winds in Astoria this spring made their learning more than difficult; it made it an often terrifying experience for them. Flying a great spinnaker in that kind of wind can put the fear of God in the most jaded veteran. They persevered. They lived through wild death rolls, roundups and near knockdowns, spinnaker wraps, jammed halyards and an exasperated and thoughtless skipper. It paid off.

The season began with a five-race series sponsored by the Astoria Yacht Club. The first race of the series took place in seas driven to frenzy by a screaming nor'wester. The going was so heavy that on the first leg to weather Spica's starboard genoa block tore from its track. Before the race was over, its mate on the port side also was gone.

We were disqualified in that race for failure to yield right of way to a starboard-tacker in a crossing situation. I never saw her coming from behind our sails and I nearly rammed her. This did not inspire confidence among the crew.

Otherwise, this first race was also something of a shocker for the crew. Up until then, we had sailed a bit and rested and then gone back to work. They learned that in a race there is no let up. They discovered that racing requires constant concentration and hard work and is both mentally and physically exhausting.

A red J-30 named Impulse won the first race in a walk. She easily outdistanced all other competitors and made it look easy in the process. She is a fast boat with a good crew.

In the succeeding three races of the series in similar conditions, Spica did miserably. If she wasn't last across the finish line, she was last on corrected time. Problems on the spinnaker take-down usually were the chief reasons we finished out of the money. We even were trounced regularly by a duplicate of my original Windhover.

Each of these races was won by the red boat, Impulse. A pattern had emerged. The red boat always was first and the gray boat, Spica, was always last. It was demoralizing to me as well as the crew, though they seemed to handle it better than I did.

On the day of the fifth and final race of the series I was in a morose and bitter place. As we left the dock I said, "Well, I guess it's time to go lose another sailboat race." Nobody laughed.

The dancer in the crew, Anugita, diplomatically pointed out to me that I was being a jerk and that this had an effect on the entire crew. She was right and I think I was successful in lightening up and actually getting myself pumped up for another opportunity to excel, as I like to think of races.

Fate dealt us the high post at the start and we got away in a fast break in clean air at the front of the fleet and stayed there all the way to the weather mark. This was our first race in light to medium air and Spica performed as though she was designed for just these conditions. The red boat was closing from behind, but she was too high on the mark to get there before Spica and she compounded her problem by tacking too soon for the mark and forcing herself into another time consuming tack.

Around the mark (buoy 25) we reached off to the south and the red boat used her much lighter displacement to close the gap and open a small lead. When she went to her spinnaker five minutes before we chose to, she opened a considerable lead. Once I decided it was time to go to the chute, the red boat's lead ceased growing.

It was an easy lope downhill and back toward Astoria. We closed slightly on the red boat and opened a large lead ahead of the rest of the fleet.

At the leeward mark, our spinnaker douse went smoothly for the first time in a race and we came up neatly close-hauled and heading northwest toward Desdemona Sands and closing on the red boat. The red boat tacked long before the big sand bar would have forced her to. That was a mistake. When next we would meet, she would be on port tack and I on starboard with right of way over her.

We carried our tack toward the sands until we almost stuck the keel in the bottom and found ourselves only a little below the finish mark. We tacked, then held our course and forced the red boat to give way. Then we tacked for the layline to the finish. When there, we flopped back onto starboard tack and beat for the line.

We were out in front again and home free. We had beaten the red boat, not just on handi-cap, but boat for boat!

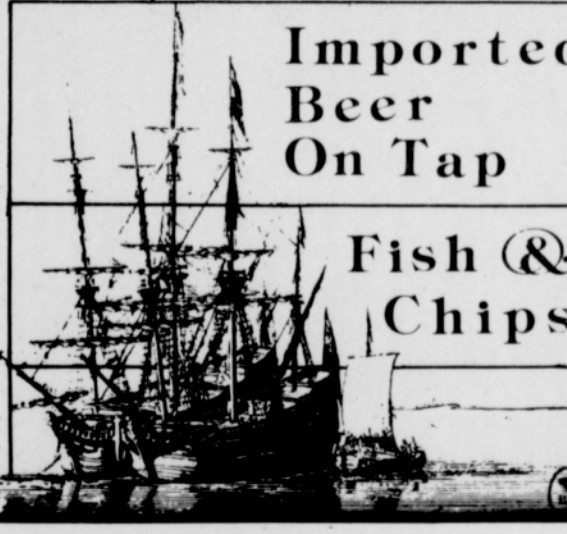
Of course, we still tied for last place in the series. And even in the last race we were edged into second place by a Catalina 30 that finished several minutes behind us but still beat us on corrected time, though by less than a minute.

But nothing could detract from the victory we knew we had earned. For myself, I had come a long way since 1983. For my crew? Well, Anugita, Dick, John and Rod may never forget the vision of a grown man wearing big, yellow boots and jumping up and down and shouting for joy in the cockpit of a small, gray racing yacht near buoy 29 just inside the Columbia River bar.

The gray boat beat the red boat, learning how to do this crazy thing.

Instead of taking part in the Six Pak races this month, Paul Haist and the dancer, Anugita, will spend most of August sailing up the coast and into Puget Sound where they intend to loll around the San Juan Islands for a few weeks.

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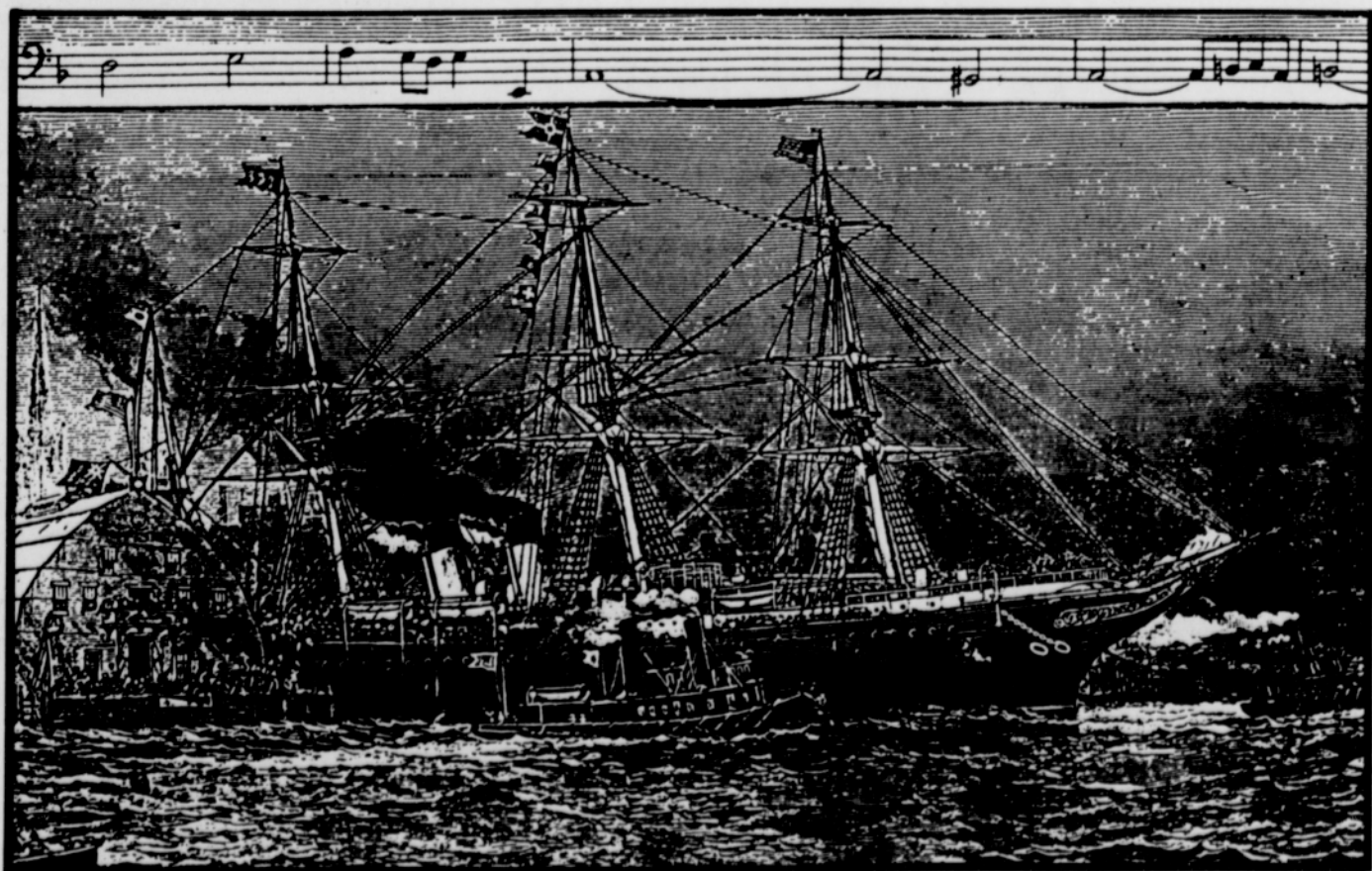
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