

HURRY UP AND WAIT

Vic-Maui 2008

Pacific Yachting joins *Zulu* as strange weather displaces the trade winds to challenge a small but determined fleet

BY DALE MILLER

Racing a small boat across a big ocean has as much to do with endurance and mental toughness as boat speed and tactics. Keeping your stuff together and your mind right, as our shift's watch captain colourfully reminded us daily, is the key to keeping yourself on the bus to Maui. Those crews able to endure through starless, sleepless nights, equipment failures and trying conditions, all while keeping the boat going fast and in the right direction, are the ones who'll win in Hawaii.

The Vic-Maui Yacht Race is a 2,308-mile marathon from Victoria to Lahaina, Maui, that's been officially running biannually since 1968. This year's fleet was the smallest since the first unofficial sailing in 1965, with just nine boats crossing the start line. Representing *Pacific Yachting* was Tyrone Stelzenmuller and myself on *Zulu*, competing against Canadian boats *Strum*, *Black Watch*, *Starlight Express*, *Red Heather*, *Turicum* and *Something Wicked*, and an American contingent of *Seeker* and *Passepartout*.

Pre-Race As with all distance races on the day before the start, June 21 saw the docks buzzing with anxious sailors stowing gear, making last minute repairs and socializing with family and friends. The pre-race dock party is an essential part to any distance race, and this year's was truly a great one, with craft beer and finger foods

from Spinnaker's Gastro Brew Pub and IBM-sponsored boat tours for children with special needs. It wasn't long before skippers and crew trickled away in the early evening for their last dinners with loved ones and one last sleep in a comfortable bed.

Race Day The spectator fleet outnumbered the race boats in the half hour before the 10:00 gun on July 22. *Strum* was over early and had to duck the line, but before long, the entire fleet was tacking their way out to Race Rocks in a steadily freshening breeze. Soon we were suited up in our full foul weather gear, with 25 knots on the nose against a 5-knot ebb current—giving us a good soaking going through Race Rocks. The fleet made great time exiting the strait, with many boats making their way around Tatoosh Island and into the Pacific around midnight.

The Pacific High Once the strait is cleared, the race enters its second phase, which is basically to sail the most direct course to Maui as fast as possible. The trouble with this plan comes from the Pacific High, which is a huge high-pressure zone—blue skies, no wind—that sits on the rhumbline between Victoria and Maui during the summer. The usual tactic is to scoot down the North American coast on the edge of the continental shelf until you're roughly parallel ▶

Life Aboard *Zulu*

1 The pre-race dock party is one last chance for the crews to relax and kick back a few beverages with family and friends. As in years past, Spinnaker's Gastro Brew Pub and Guesthouse sponsored the party, providing all the craft-brewed beer, mai tais and finger food the crowd could handle. Located right on Victoria's Inner Harbour, Spinnaker's is Canada's oldest brewpub, serving hand-crafted beer and quality food with fresh ingredients from local Vancouver Island farmers. And their private guesthouses proved a great place for the crews to spend one last night in a real bed.

2 When you're out of sight of land and your competitors, a GPS, single side band radio and a laptop are your only contact with the outside world. Here, Greg Westerlund checks his competitors' positions against the GRIB weather files to plan *Zulu's* route down the coast.

3 It was a bumpy ride sailing through Race Rocks in 25 knots of westerly breeze against 5 knots of ebb current. The foredeck crew of Peter Gibbons (in black), Dale Miller (in yellow), Mike Wealick and Doug Beckett kindly blocked the waves from soaking owner Findlay Gibbons and the rest of *Zulu's* crew.

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4 The first week's conditions were challenging for both boat and crew. *Zulu* hit a top speed of 17.6 knots under code zero and reefed main while suffering through several broken halyards and a blown spinnaker—nothing out of the ordinary for offshore racing.

📷 GREG WESTERLUND

5 The calmer conditions in the second week allowed the *Zulu* crew to perform some maintenance up the mast. Here's the view from Dale's trip up to replace a seized halyard block. Brothers Peter and Trevor Gibbons were not so blessed by the conditions when they went up the week before.

6 Meals were planned for 14 days, but *Zulu* ended up taking 20. Needless to say, the pickings were slim on the last two days.

7 Tyrone Stelzenmuller and Greg Westerlund make repairs to the heavily damaged A-1 kite. It took Tyrone 18 hours to handstitch 40 feet of leech tape and reattach the head.

📷 TREVOR GIBBONS

8 *Zulu* sailed into the light winds of the high shortly after Canada Day. Here, Greg Westerlund drives in his sunhat, with an effigy to Sucko the Windsucking Bat in the background.



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with San Francisco. From there, you make a right turn toward Hawaii, sailing the delicate line between the light airs of the high to the north and the northeasterly trade winds to the south. Unfortunately for this year's fleet, a huge low in the North Pacific had pushed the high down to such a low latitude that it displaced the trade winds to well below Hawaii.

The first week after *Zulu* lost sight of land was a tough one. Predictably, *Strum* was already hundreds of miles ahead to the south, making her way down the coast along the classic great-circle-to-Hawaii route. The rest of the fleet was heading a bit further out to sea while staying within a couple hundred miles of one another, doing 6–16 knots of boat speed in 10–20 knots of breeze. *Red Heather* and *Zulu* were doing well digging their way south in *Strum's* wake, while *Passepartout*, *Seeker*, *Starlight Express*, *Black Watch* and *Turicum* were taking the higher route, gambling that they could make it over the high and into some stronger breeze while sailing a more direct route to Maui.

At the time, our smaller-scaled GRIB files showed that *Turicum* and gang were sailing out into the middle of nowhere. They either saw something we didn't or they were taking a flyer. Either way, we kept on our course to what we hoped would be 15–20 knots in the trades.

During morning roll call on June 26, we heard that *Something Wicked* had lost their rudder and were withdrawing to San Francisco under power.

Sailing in the Snowglobe That first week introduced us to the challenges of sailing at night. Without stars in the sky there's no horizon to look at, no light on the sails and no sense of direction for the driver. This leaves the driver to rely entirely on instruments and the compass, which lag behind any changes in direction or wind, making it difficult to keep a steady course, especially with the strong wind and swells. After a few roundups, we learned to play it safe with our sail plan at night, putting up our larger sails as soon as the sun started rising on the horizon. Despite these challenges, *Zulu* managed to do well on the run down the coast, making up lost time on *Red Heather* and putting us back into contention for the lead.

A few days later, it became clear that the trades weren't filling in and the wind had indeed materialized on the other side of a weak high-pressure zone—exactly where *Turicum*, *Passepartout*, *Seeker* and *Black Watch* had positioned themselves. By this time, ▶

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Starlight Express was lagging several hundred miles behind the fleet. Where we were, the wind had unexpectedly shifted to the south and built, so we made the tough decision to abandon our southerly route and converge with the fleet to the north by shooting through the high. Unfortunately for us, this was the beginning of the end.

Miles ahead, *Strum* had successfully gone south, discovered that the trades were not there and headed west again on a course to the north of Hawaii, directly through the high that had swallowed us whole. After a few days of little wind, they made it into the new northerly breeze and surfed their way down to Hawaii to line honours and overall victory on July 4 at 18:22, with an elapsed time of 12 days, 11 hours, 22 minutes.

Once on the other side of the high, *Turicum*, *Passepartout*, *Seeker* and *Black Watch* sailed a southwest course more or less straight from their turning point just north of California. *Turicum* was making great time and closing in on *Strum* for corrected overall. A couple days out, they hit some lighter winds and slowed down just enough to miss the corrected overall win by five hours while still winning Division 2, officially finishing at 15:02 on July 8. To round out the division, *Passepartout* made it in

on July 10 at 07:26 for third, while *Seeker* cut it close to the July 10, 23:55 deadline by finishing at 18:23, correcting out to second place.

The rest of the fleet was not so lucky. *Starlight Express* withdrew due to time restraints on July 3 and made her way to San Francisco. *Zulu* officially withdrew on July 5 after our calculations revealed that it was impossible to finish the race by the cutoff time. Both *Red Heather* on the lower route and *Black Watch* on the upper managed to make it to Hawaii, but both missed the cutoff on Thursday night by a handful of hours.

Of the nine starting boats only four managed to finish the race. Fortunately, with the crew of *Something Wicked* flying in from San Francisco, all but *Starlight Express* made it to Hawaii for mai tais and the big party on Saturday, July 12. In spite of the fluky winds and gear failures, not a person at the party had any regrets.

With its charge up the Strait of Juan de Fuca, run down the coast, delicate dance with the Pacific High and trade wind sleigh ride, the Vic-Maui is the most challenging and rewarding transpacific yacht race to Hawaii. With the challenge comes the trials, and enduring those is half the fun. ☺

9 Fourth of July fireworks greeted *Strum* at the dock in Lahaina—not a bad finish to a 2,308-mile trip. **10** Taking line honours and the corrected overall win, RVYC's *Strum* made all the right calls on their way to Hawaii, narrowly beating the Vic-Maui veterans on *Turicum*.

📷 PATTI LINK / PAMELA BENDALL



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