



## **The race to the starting line**

SEEKER gets the Aloha spirit

By Ken Greff

Running down the easterly trades, the hiss of water flying past the hull, while the boat heels to the steady pull of the spinnaker, the big majestic deep blue ocean swells slipping under the keel as the helmsman keeps rhythm, feeling the chute load up in the trough as our trusty Pretorien rises up the back of another swell to catch the fresh breeze and surf on top of the next wave.

This was the dream, the vision, a northwest “flat-water” sailor’s long held desire, the goal held for years, the siren song of a race to Hawaii. Dreams are the making of great excitement and motivation and when acted upon, can become gateways to opportunities and experiences which enrich our lives in ways we might have never fully grasped had we failed to follow those dreams. For me, and the four friends that stood with me in our race to Hawaii, participation in the Vic-Maui 2008 became exactly that, a spectacular lifetime experience.

Having sailed as navigator aboard the Centurion 42 AIRFARE in the 1998 Vic-Maui I had a pretty good idea of what was involved in the race, and as retirement drew near I recognized that at last, I had an opportunity to sail the Vic-Maui race on my own boat. As I approached the decision to enter the race, I recognized that to be competitive sailing a relatively heavy “racer-cruiser” with a 30 ft waterline in a 2300 mile ocean race with an 18 day time limit was a significant challenge. Yet unless you do the Vic-Maui, how else do you ever get the chance to sail your own boat from the Northwest through those glorious trade winds to a personalized welcome in the islands of paradise? With this in mind, I decided the time had come for SEEKER and her owner to get some “Aloha”.

As everyone knows sailing is about teamwork, and like many NW sailors, I have been fortunate to have developed a number of close friends through this sport. So, after years of telling myself “someday” I will do the Vic-Maui, I invited good friend and crew member Andrew Berg aboard for a “discussion and planning cruise” to consider future sailing goals. It didn’t take long to decide that “someday” was NOW! A handshake later we formed a partnership committed to enter the double-handed division of the 2006 Vic-Maui. After nine months of hard work on the boat in eager anticipation of the race we collided head on with a hurdle which stopped us cold. Insurance! It was a very bitter day in April as we faced the reality that after nine months of effort by our insurance agent, we were not going to find insurance for double-handed offshore racing. Our dream of a

double-handed Vic-Maui race to Hawaii was over. In the “race to the starting line” we were 0 for 1.

Sailing to Alaska and back that summer gave me plenty of time to “chew” on the whole experience and I realized that I was not willing to give up on the dream. So, in the winter of 2007, following a much shorter discussion and another handshake, the partnership was reformed this time focused on a crewed entry in the Vic-Maui 2008. I had learned that succeeding in the “race to the starting line” is 90% of the challenge of this race, and this time I was determined to win that part of the race

Several goals for our race campaign were established: 1. Safety and seamanship were top priorities. 2. To prepare the boat thoughtfully so we could rely on systems and gear in any/all conditions, 3. To sail a solid, well planned, well navigated, and well handled race. And perhaps most important: To have fun with good friends.

Taking a shared partnership approach crew was selected early. Seeking diversity of talent, age and background a crew of four were invited to join in on the campaign, and in early October 2007 we had our first “Aloha Crew Meeting” which resulted in official formation of the SEEKER 2008 Vic-Maui campaign. The crew included: Andrew Berg, of Bellingham who brought his athleticism, racing skills, adventuresome spirit, and keen scientific mind to the role of navigator. We were also lucky to be joined by fellow Pretorien owner Lauren Buchholz who had become something of a legend as a bowman on several top rung Puget Sound racing yachts, as well as good friend, Vic-Maui veteran and avid sailor Gary Hammons who added his extensive racing experience and tenacity to the mix. Rounding out the crew was Capt. Gordon “Bucko-Billy” Sims, fellow schooner-man from my days on tall ships who brought his ethic of seamanship, extensive experience at sea and sailing knowledge as well as his skills as an ABYC certified electrician.

It was an exciting prospect as I recognized on that early October evening, that the depth of skills present in the crew represented a degree of competence, and dedication which was just the sort of energy that would serve us well in not only our “race to the starting line” but also in the race itself. So, adopting a motto of “No Short Cuts” the five of us dove into a long winter of preparations organized so that we would be finished with work parties by the end of April, giving us all of May and part of June to sail the boat, and get into the fun of the adventure. The dream was fast becoming reality.

Despite the year which Andrew and I had already put into preparations, the work lists were surprisingly long. We had already renewed all the standing rigging, and most of the running rig. We had also upgraded the charging system with a 125 amp alternator, smart regulator, and 300 AH gel cell battery bank. Single side band radio was already installed and tested, and the boat was already fitted with quality sailing instruments, decent set of sails, new engine, and comfortable crew accommodations.

Yet with “only” nine months to go before the start work parties were scheduled for two week ends a month, with lots of time spent chasing parts, and supplies in the interim.

The path to Fisheries Supply became “well worn” to say the least. Starting with a fall period in the boatyard we prioritized the big projects which involved keeping water out of the boat. This meant a re-build of much of the cockpit area, re-bedding the deck hardware, and renewal of the portlights. Other major projects included a total re-build of the steering system, including dropping the rudder to check bearings, installing a second spinnaker pole along with the gear to handle it so we could do double pole gybes, servicing and re-building rigging parts such as the gooseneck, running new lifelines, and setting the deck and cabin up for ocean work.

The ISAF Offshore Safety Regulations became our “bible” and dictated a number of items which were added to the project list. Navigation improvements included installation of a Pactor Modem for accessing email and weather fax data, as well as improvements to electronic charting options. Andrew invested considerable time making sure these tools were working well and looking at routing parameters and decision points for sailing a smart race. By the March haul-out I was astonished at how much had been finished thanks to the capable efforts of the crew, and by April we were on plan and sailing the boat. Then the big news came through; Scott Rohrer of Rich Haynie Insurance in Seattle had secured insurance, as promised and we were “good to go”! With that welcome news it was time to party as I had every confidence that SEEKER would be at the starting line for the Vic-Maui 2008.

With the work behind us, the fun and sailing began which was headed off by a fabulous “Aloha Bon-Voyage” party on the docks complete with tropical beverages, Lei’s and lots of friends and family who came to see us off and share in the excitement of the Vic-Maui adventure. Much to our surprise the evening was highlighted by a spectacular sunset salute from the Seattle Fireboat “LESCHI”. It was a magical night, and as we headed for Victoria, I began to sense that this experience was shaping up to be much more than ever imagined. The “race to the starting line” was coming to a head.

Upon our arrival in Victoria, we were now in the welcoming hands of the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club, and we quickly settled into our assigned spot on the docks in the inner harbor. This period in the days leading up to the start is filled with anticipation and excitement which is well tempered by the celebrations hosted by the Royal Vancouver and Lahaina Yacht clubs. This was our first chance to meet the skippers and crews from our fellow competitors, and our first look at the handicaps and class assignments for the race. The excitement of the competition was building rapidly. Two days before the start a nice banquet was held at the Royal Victoria Yacht Club with lots of room for friends and family. This was followed by the famous dock party complete with delicious food thanks to the Royal Vancouver Yacht club, Spinnaker’s Brew Pub, and Mai Tai’s compliments of Lahaina Yacht Club. This is a great time of excitement, anticipation with lots of sea stories and enthusiasm exchanged between crews. With our preparations long behind us, we spent most of the time loading some last-minute provisions, and generally enjoying the time with friends and family.

Finally, the day of the start arrived, the culmination of years of planning and effort. Awakening to the dawn of June 22<sup>nd</sup> I knew that SEEKER would cross the starting line

for the Vic-Maui 2008 and the adventure of racing to Hawaii would begin! As planned the crew gathered aboard early, stowing last minute gear and provisions, saying goodbye to family and friends and taking all lines aboard we headed out to sea.

Right from the start the feeling that something really magical was happening was clear in my thoughts. The crew worked the boat easily in a concentrated, yet relaxed and familiar manner each knowing the gear, our procedures, and each other well. We set our new # 3 in the building breeze and headed for the starting line. We were within half a boat length of the line right at the gun, and with both boats on either side of us turning back to recover from an OCS signal, we had clear air, and full boat speed as SEEKER, the small “slow” boat in the fleet took a lead position as we blasted toward Race Rocks. It was “just like Swiftsure” except we had WIND at the start! Under #3 and reefed main it was our kind of breeze and SEEKER showed its Wauquiez pedigree as we muscled through the steep chop passing Cape Flattery before dark. Score 1 for 2 in SEEKER’s “race to the starting line”! This time there would be no turning back!



SEEKER outbound Straits of Juan de Fuca: Vic Maui 2008

As we passed Tatoosh Island we set a # 2 and reached off to the south with half the fleet still behind us disappearing into the darkness. I couldn’t help a round of “high fives” knowing that at long last, we had just made the “big left turn” at Cape Flattery and were headed south and west toward the islands of paradise!

The Vic-Maui is known as a ‘navigator’s race’ for good reason, as it challenges the skill of the crew to sail the boat well, and to be able to read and understand the weather on the North Pacific ocean, to understand the sailing qualities of the boat, to select the best course and then to sail the boat to its optimum over many days through the variety of

changing conditions inevitably found in a 2300 mile race. Doing well in the race means that you must figure out how to optimize your performance in all these areas. The tactical challenges are immense and add immeasurably to the challenge and excitement of this race. They also open the door for the “small, slow boat” to have a chance at being called to the podium at the awards banquet.

We had our work cut out for us. We were the slowest and smallest boat in the fleet and rated to be over 3 min/mile slower than the fastest boat in the fleet, and 1min/mile slower than the fastest boat in our division. Racing against boats with much greater speed potential, longer waterlines, and greater ability to surf in the trades was a formidable challenge, and we knew we had to deliver on the goals we had set for ourselves just to finish the race, much less place.

The run down the coast was all that northwest sailors know coastal work to be. We felt right at home reaching hard at times and running with the spinnaker when the wind came far enough aft to set the kite. Andrew set a brisk pace from the navigator’s seat calling for optimal wind angles and as short and direct a course as possible toward Hawaii. His sailing directions were clear and even posted on the binnacle: Sail to Maui! As the first week unfolded we found ourselves in virtually a dead heat, boat for boat with the faster boats in our division and rated in first place on projected times. On our shorter waterline we knew we had to sail the boat well, and once again the depth of skill in the crew became a key element in our performance. Boat handling, balance, careful steering, constant attention to sail trim, consistent adherence to the watch schedule to maximize rest and crew work at night, all became crucial aspects helping to maximize our daily runs. We also counted on our motto of “No Short Cuts” in the preparation of the boat knowing we could count on systems to function flawlessly and thus eliminating potential distractions from sailing performance.

As the second week of the race began to unfold, we were settling into what felt like a solid race routine until the ocean decided to show us a piece of it’s wild side. As I was changing watch, Andrew having just finished his latest review of the weather charts, mentioned in his typical understated way as he climbed to the deck, “it looks like things are going to get interesting”. For years we had been planning a strategy about how to find the fastest “slot” around the southeast corner of the high, sailing the shortest course possible and maximizing wind angle to then pick the spot to make the big gybe south to Maui. As I stared at the weather charts, with Andrew’s comments ringing in my ears it was obvious that all those plans were for naught. Where there “should have” been a nice big high-pressure system, instead, standing directly between us and paradise was one mean looking low complete with the typical associated cold front, and that lovely little note left for us by NOAA “Developing Gale”. This not only meant headwinds, it meant strong headwinds! As you might imagine this got our attention and created no small amount of discussion among the crew. I was reminded of a verse I used to recite to the kids when they were young, something about bears, and how you cant go “over it” (it was already tracking faster then we could move), you can’t go “around it” (too many miles out of the way) you can’t go “through it” (that would put us right in the middle of the gale) so you “have to go under it”!

Batten down the hatches boys we have some hills to climb between us and Maui! Out came the heavy sheets, batteries were charged, hatches locked and dogged, food prepped, gear stowed, and as the sun set to the west an ominous bank of clouds obscured the moon, and the breeze started to build from the south. The wind built rapidly with stiff gusts, and big swirls of direction, finally settling on a stiff southeasterly. As conditions built into the night we slowly geared down, first one reef, then another, smaller jib, then smaller yet while still the wind and seas built. Sea state became the predominant factor affecting our progress as the stiffening 30+ knot winds pushed seas in the range of 15-20 feet with several cross seas making for very wet and challenging conditions in which to steer, much less “race”. The “dark watch” was wet and wild that night, my thoughts filled with reflection about how it is during nights like this where the concept of ocean racing and elements of traditional seamanship collide. As dawn brought visibility to the scene Bucko-Billy Sims took the deck and Andrew and I scrambled to catch the morning weather charts. It didn’t take long to see that our progress toward Maui was being slowed drastically by the sea state which wasn’t going to abate for some time on this course and it was time to consider other options. Then, as one particularly big sea washed over the deck, we decided we had slogged our way far enough south so that we were below the center of the low and could now turn to cross the front and get to the back side where the winds would veer and once again be behind us on a course for Maui. By evening, we had crossed the front, and were setting more sail as SEEKER was back in the hunt for the finish line.

At morning roll call the bad news came through. The bigger boats had managed to get to the back side of the front before we had, and had made miles on us in the rough stuff. Even worse, up ahead the “high” had turned into a long east – west ridge of virtually no trade winds meaning that the last days of the race were likely to prove to be slow, tedious and challenging.

Challenging for some perhaps, but Gary and Lauren were in their element. Light air down wind sounded like home to them, and out came the light air gear, the big spinnaker was set, and off they went setting the pace for the rest of us, as they worked from wind line to wind line, squall to squall, cloud to cloud, gybing on the lifts, and constantly evaluating optimal sailing angles to maximize boat speed.

Slowly but surely our efforts paid off, and the miles to Maui ticked down. Conversations constantly drifted back to number of hours remaining in the time limit for the race, distance to go, average speeds, and possible finish times. Then, the ocean decided to throw us another challenge. We were over 2100 miles into the trip, where for years I had been expecting to be riding the trades and as I awoke to come on for the dawn watch I heard a sound I didn’t expect. Silence! I stumbled with the roll of the boat to the chart table wiping the sleep out of my eyes staring at the repeater for the navigation instruments. My dismay was echoed in the sullen look on the face of the navigator: true wind speed: 3.5 knots! Boat speed 2.2 knots! Andrew, who was doing an outstanding job as navigator crawled into an empty bunk in disgust, and as Gordon and I went to take the deck, we found a watch crew only too anxious to turn over the windless scene and

dive below. As I stood gazing on the placid sea, and a weak squall off to the west, I was reminded that being at sea is never quite what you expect which is even more true when we attempt to race across an ocean.

While I stood there searching the horizon for any sign of breeze, I knew that the clock was ticking down toward the time limit, and that the outcome of our race depended now, more than ever on how we as a crew handled the boat. Years of work, and preparation, long held dreams of finishing the race lay at stake. As Gordon my watch mate took the helm, I grabbed the spinnaker sheet and said “come up 10”, lets scallop up for pressure then burn the speed back down to course. There was no quit in this crew for SEEKER had one more line to cross, the finish line!

The next 30 hours proved the adage that sailing performance is truly about crew work. Sensing our destiny hung by fractions of a knot in boat speed, everyone worked to maximize our progress. Sure enough, as the sun set into the sea the summit of Haleakela rose on the horizon. Land Ho! Our goal was within our grasp. We just needed to keep the boat moving and finish before midnight the following day.

At last, destiny smiled upon SEEKER and with the morning dawn came breeze which built as we got closer to the entrance of Pailolo channel. Peeling down to the trade wind spinnaker we finally started to surf as we closed the finish line. As the sun started to descend over Molokai SEEKER crossed the finish line under full sail at 18:23:46 on July 10<sup>th</sup>, after a run of 18 days 11 hours from Victoria.



SEEKER crossing the finish line: 2008 Vic Maui

A welcome by the Lahaina Yacht Club in Hawaii is a treat to savor in life, and savor we did! Let the Mai Tai's flow and flow they did. We were met by a pilot boat cheering us on as we crossed the finish line, and while we struck the spinnaker, they came along side brimming with aloha spirit and cold beer! The greeting party upon our arrival at the pier head in Lahaina was incredible. Family, friends, skippers and crews from the other boats cheering and sending congratulations, the long-desired embrace from family and of the islands reached out with true spirit of Aloha, what a party it was. With wives, and family at our sides, and tables laden with fresh food, and drink, custom made appetizers and desserts we were treated like royalty and the sea stories flowed along with the champagne.

The 'little boat that could' had accomplished the goals set those many months before. Reality had proven to be even better than the dreams. Our race to the starting line had been won. We arrived safe and without mishap, all systems were online, and with no damage or failures aboard. And perhaps most importantly five friends stood together at the finish having shared in the accomplishment, the dream, and now the reality. A shared adventure to savor for a lifetime had been realized.

SEEKER was the 4<sup>th</sup> boat across the finish line out of a fleet of nine that had started, finishing ahead of all but one of the boats in the top division, and correcting out to 2<sup>nd</sup> place in our division and 3<sup>rd</sup> overall for the fleet.

Let there be no doubt; participation in the Vic-Maui International Yacht race is a fabulous life experience. I can't think of a better way to spend the summer. If you share the dream, if you are up to the challenge, and are ready for a peak adventure of a lifetime, then perhaps now is your chance. My advice is don't let the opportunity pass, go sign up for the Vic-Maui 2010, and start your own race to the starting line.

*SEEKER is a Pretorien 35 built in 1982 by the Wauquiez Yard in France, and designed by Holman and Pye. Ken and Kaye Greff have cruised SEEKER extensively between Seattle and Alaska since 1992 covering more than 18,000 miles. The name SEEKER captures the adventuresome spirit of the owners as they have raised their family in extensive summer cruises in the Pretorien. Under previous owners, the boat won first in class and 4<sup>th</sup> overall in the 1990 Pacific Cup as Glory Days out of San Francisco. More information is available on the SEEKER blog at: [svseeker.blogspot.com](http://svseeker.blogspot.com) and/or the Vic-Maui website at: [vicmaui.org](http://vicmaui.org)*