

Moonless Battle

By DJ McCabe

It's a little glow on the horizon, the Skyway Bridge, our current focus as we surf on following seas. Its Friday night and I'm on "Maverick", Harry Antley's S2-7.9, we're one of the many sailboats racing from the Davis Island Yacht Club to the Passé Grille Yacht Club under a moonless cloudy sky. We started the race at 7:00 pm and we're making record time, sailing along at 6-9 knots under Spinnaker and full Main in building winds. Everything is working like clockwork, Bernice was doing an awesome job flying the spinnaker, we are passing boats and having a fantastic time. Even the dolphins came along side the boat to frolic in our wake. Last year we finished the race at 5 am, this year it looks like we'll be at the finish by 2 am, at this speed. Way Cool! Maybe we can get a little partying in and some sleep before breakfast and the sail back.

Keeping our wits about us to stay focused for so long takes a concerted effort in a 50 mile race. To keep everyone fully functional and not wear anyone out, we switch positions. I'm at the helm now, (its good practice). Ah! I see something I've not done before... drive a boat through the Skyway Bridge. I request permission to stay at the helm till we clear the bridge. It gets squirrely and is a bit scary, but I'm successful! We rotate positions a couple more times then identify the location of our next mark (its not too difficult to tell the direction, looking at the string of stern lights on the horizon). The wind is now pushing 15 knots or better, its time to gybe. We know it going to be a challenge! Harry's back at the helm as I head to the foredeck. Bernice S. stands by to control both spinnaker sheets, just like before. Jeff Z., with his new found spinnaker knowledge, stands by in the pit to control the pole and take control of the guy after the gybe.

What?!? Huh??!!? Pole Back! Pole Back! I scream over the wind in hopes the cockpit crew can hear me. The wind is howling in my ears..... (I just got my hearing checked, the doctor said I had hearing of a twelve year old...) OK! Cool! Pole is back! I hear something. Not sure what they said but it must be time to gybe! I release the pole from the mast. Holy Manatee Poop, Batman!!!! I never saw the spinnaker do that before (as my eyes bug out). The spinnaker whipped itself to the leeward side of the boat and becomes a giant upwind sail. I don't have time to worry about that now, I have to get to the sheet and get it on the pole. Bernice needs me to get the pole back on the spinnaker. Gripping the deck with all ten toes, as the boat heels over pushed by the heavy seas. I head to the low side. GOT IT! Guy is attached, but now what?!? HEY! Where's the sail going? DAMN! And @\$#!#@ it just wrapped itself around the forestay. @\$!&! OK, I CAN do this! When Harry gybes the Main, I can grab the spinnaker and make it go back thru and back around the forestay... DAMN! It wraps again, and again, and again, and again. This STINKS! OK, I CAN do this! I scream for Jeff,

I've got to hand off the pole and get my hands on the Spinnaker to make it stop spinning itself around the forestay. Jeff to the rescue! Ok, he can hold the pole. This spinnaker is not flying again in its current configuration... So that means, I can pop the sheets off, grab the bottom of the spinnaker, and wrap it around the forestay in the opposite direction to unwrap it and get it down. OH YEAH!?! Easier said than done! I grab the sheetless spinnaker; it fills with wind at the top and yanks me off the deck! Good thing I'm barefoot and can grab the life lines with my feet... Not getting me off the boat that easy. Screaming for Jeff to stow the pole and help me get this spinnaker down, I got a plan. He stashes the pole, we start tugging on the spinnaker and tug and tug and tug. Both of us, using every ounce of weight we have we, cannot budge the death grip the spinnaker has on the forestay. It must be really stuck! OK! Plan B. If it wants to wrap itself around the forestay then we'll make sure its wrapped and tied off until we can get a flashlight and see which way to unwrap this raging white monster.

After making sure Jeff had himself and the monster contained I head back to get a piece of line, its easier than trying to make myself understood all the way back to the cockpit. As I grab a short line, I hear cry from the foredeck that makes my heart pound even harder. The monster is winning. I race back to the front of the boat just in time to help Jeff grab enough of the monstrous sail to get it back under control before it takes both of us over the side. We wrap and grunt and scream! Take that! I intentionally grab at one layer of sail, thinking I can rip a hole in it with my nails to combat its power. The sail fights back, it fills its upper body with wind and makes its muscles bulge against our restraints. We don't give up! AH HA! We win! (That battle) The sail is tied to the forestay... but for how long??

Now that the spinnaker is contained, Harry calls for all hands on deck to report to the cockpit. We have been heading out in the Gulf of Mexico and he wants to tack before we get to Texas. We gybe the main, and head in another direction from our unknown location. The spinnaker is not finished with us yet. It starts squirming its way out of the series of overhand/double half hitches followed by a backwards-underhand clove hitch that is keeping it wrapped around the forestay. We're not out of the race yet, there is still a chance if we can get the spinnaker unwrapped and the head sail up. Harry is doing an excellent job staying focused on sailing a course that keeps the main powering the boat.

I head back to the foredeck! If I could only reach above the wrapped part of the spinnaker maybe, I could unwrap it from there... The bow pulpit is too slippery with salt spray for me to get a good grip with my toes. I give up that idea after several attempts. Unknown to me, the uncontrolled white beast has inflicted a body-damaging wound on Jeff, his Back is out and he's down for the count. Bernice comes forward to continue the fight with me. During our attempts to regain control, she is able to give a mighty tug that inflicts a mortal blow to the monster's strangle hold on the forestay. Its grasp just lost a toe hold, I see it slip down. YES! Pull harder! It's working!

We alternate as we heave with all our might against the resistance of the flailing sail. It continues to give. WE WIN!!! The sail has lost all its wind and power, its down, bagged and banished to the darkness of the V-Berth.

Have to get a flashlight! The halyards are still all twisted aloft, I still think we can get them unwrapped. We've had such a good race up to now; surely, we can salvage something and still finish. Even if it's just getting the headsail back up and doing a wing on wing the rest of the race. I reach for the flashlight in my pocket. What the...?!? The top half of the flashlight is gone! Did the monster do that; did he eat the batteries and bulb? Bernice has a flashlight that we can use. Drat! Its beam is not powerful enough to much past our heads and the twisted halyards fade into darkness. Its time for a bigger and brighter flashlight, I dash below to grab it out of my sea bag! With persistence and lots of pumping adrenalin, I patiently untangle the jib and spinnaker halyards. (And no matter what they say, the funny looking spring that kind of looks like a hair clip at the top of the forestay did not cause the spinnaker to wrap. Yes, I got my hair clip back and how it got there is a whole other story)

On the backside of a race, which will stay in my memory long after the bruises have faded, are mixed emotions. It still saddens me that we missed our last mark in what started out as an awesome race. At the time, when we chose to figure out where we were and head in instead of finishing the race, it was a wise decision. I'm glad we won battle against the sail that went to the "dark side" and we are in relative good health. The health of the crew comes first; there will be other races. Jeff's Back is all-better. Bernice and Harry have both been to the doctor to get medicine for the coughs and colds that followed their return home. I have a doctors appointment tomorrow to make sure the marble size knot on the back of my left hand is not a piece of floating bone.

Lesson learned: Do NOT gybe before its time.