

INSIDE STORY

BY DAN NERI

A Stream of Interrupted Consciousness

I know that refrigerators don't float. But God damn if I wasn't seeing one a quarter mile to windward in the midmorning glare. I stared right at it for 30 seconds, closed my eyes, shook my head, and looked again. It was still there. I refocused on the horizon, felt my stomach rise up against my diaphragm, and, by learned reflex, braced for another crash. The boat slammed, shuddered, and lurched forward, and my brain sloshed back to reality. The refrigerator was gone. I was in the Gulf Stream. I was alone and if I didn't resume steering my Aerodyne 38 *Calvin*

around the monstrous waves I wasn't going to reach the other side of the Stream with the rig standing.

That particular hallucination came near the halfway point of Leg 1 of the 2001 Bermuda One-Two, a biennial stage race, singlehanded from Newport to Bermuda and doublehanded back. This year, with a predominant southerly, the course was upwind for nearly all of the singlehanded leg and downwind for the race home. In the language of modern buoy racing, the course was: windward, finish to leeward, 165 degrees, 635 miles.

The dirty little secret of singlehanded sailing is that it messes with your head. I heard voices day and night, treated the autopilot as an imaginary friend, and shouted the all purpose word when I was startled by seabirds and then jumped at the sound of my own voice. The other 32 competitors

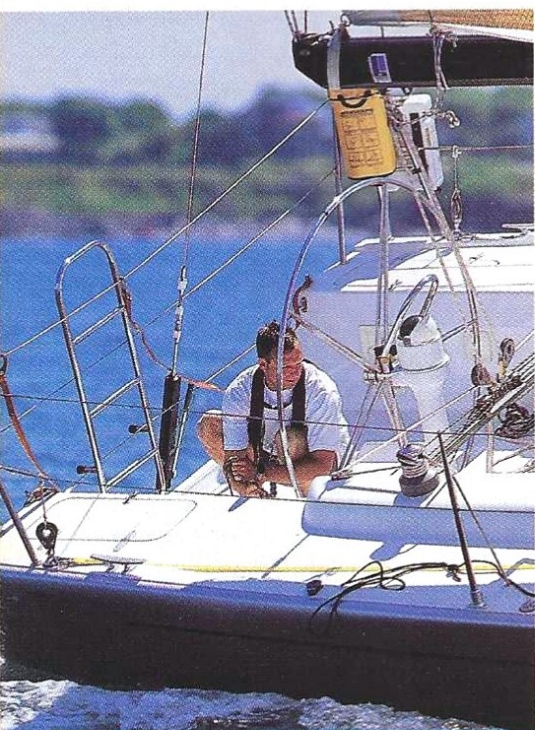
fared no better. Cheryl Cameron caught herself slumped over the wheel, irritated with crewmembers lounging about while she did all the work. Mario Biagioli connected telepathically with a flying fish. They made eye contact as he rescued the fish from his cockpit and it sent him a message of thanks. So he's got that going for him. These experiences are certainly related to the sleep deprivation and the

20 hours of pounding both boat and body endured while traversing the great weather machine that is the Gulf Stream.

On the singlehanded leg of this year's One-Two, the Stream ran along the rhumb line for 140 miles, hurtling the fleet toward Bermuda in as much as 4 knots of current. Hanging in there for as long as possible looked good on paper, but as the fleet reached the north wall of the Stream we were greeted with a 25-knot southerly, which was directly opposing the current. The resulting wave trains were sickeningly steep, with sloped north faces and vertical drops on the south sides. Near the edges of the Stream the waves bounced off the walls of colder water and came back at odd angles, piling up to twice the normal wave height where the trains collided. Occasionally finding yourself to leeward of one of these mountains of water was unavoidable. On *Calvin* the worst encounter filled the cockpit so high with water that it



AUTHOR DAN NERI on his Aerodyne 38 *Calvin*. Neri is an experienced ocean racer, but the singlehanded leg of the 2001 Bermuda One-Two, a down-and-back race from Newport to Bermuda, was his first foray into serious offshore singlehanded racing.



Larry Pierce aboard his Aerodyne 38 *Bob's Yer Uncle*. Pierce shadowed Neri for the first 400 miles of the singlehanded leg to Bermuda, but then got caught in the Bermuda High and didn't finish the leg.

ran over the top of my sea boots before vanishing out the open transom. Jan Brandt's Olson 29 *Kokopelli* took an even more direct hit. The water collapsed his dodger and filled the boat enough to float the EPIRB. Jan found Sargasso weed in his spreaders the next morning.

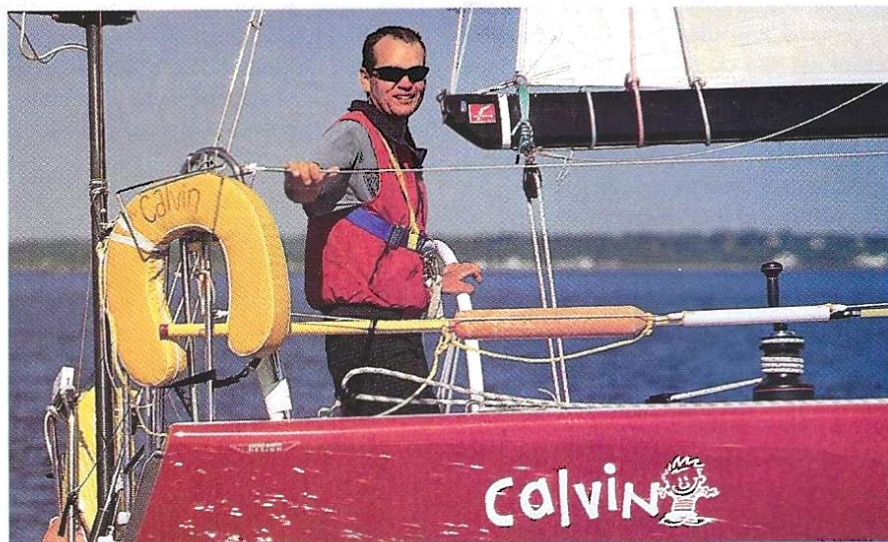
But the unwritten code of singlehanded sailing preaches stoicism—we're not to complain about the discomforts of the sailing, or the background anxiety about the sturdiness of our boats that we all experience. While relaying the Class 1 positions to race headquarters, mid-Gulf Stream, Murray Danforth pronounced the conditions "a little bumpy." Murray has sailed in several Bermuda One-Twos and crossed the Atlantic by himself. He knows the rules of conduct. I am a singlehanded rookie and I am here to tell you that the conditions in the Stream were not "a little bumpy." They were horrible.

The rest of the race, however, couldn't have been more pleasant. The beat to Bermuda belonged to Bjorn Johnson on his Nelson/Marek 45 *Shere Khan*. Built for singlehanded transatlantic racing, *Shere Khan* was the largest entry in Class 1 and optimized to excel in upwind and headsail-reaching conditions. A veteran of four Bermuda One-

Twos, and one of the most savvy onboard weather forecasters in the event, Bjorn had his boat in the right place for the important weather events of the first leg. He arrived in Bermuda four hours ahead of Mario's J/130 *Pegasus* and Cheryl's new Nelson/Marek 40 *C Spray*. Our one-design fleet of three Aerodyne 38s, which made up the rest of Class 1, shadowed that lead group for most of the race. Calvin and Larry Pierce's *Bob's Yer Uncle* sailed in tandem for the first 400 miles. To that point the race tactics had been straightforward; we'd been aiming at Bermuda and going fast. After we cleared the south wall of the Stream, information gathering started to pay off. Calvin is equipped with a Single Side Band radio, a Globalstar satellite phone, Internet access, MaxSea routing software, and radar. *Bob's Yer Uncle* has a killer stereo system and a bizarre collection of CDs. While Larry rocked out to the Beastie Boys for motivation, I logged onto the Internet, updated my routing package, and watched it draw a big red line toward the building southeast flow. I tacked the boat onto starboard, sagged the rig, and footed for 12 hours to get left of the fleet. Larry spent the rest of that day tacking down the rhumb line. By getting furthest east before the left shift, I eventually pulled to within 10 miles of the Class 1 leaders, fin-

Bermuda High. The breeze shut off so completely that 30 hours passed before the next boat finished. The rest of the fleet straggled in over the course of four more days, some by sail, most by power. Fifteen hours after I finished, I walked around the island to the north shore and looked over the reef in the direction of Newport. The sky was unbroken, the perfect blue dome of the Bermuda High. I knew that all racing had stopped. Thinking about my competitors baking on deck, motionless except for the slatting sails, I felt a little guilty. Most of them had family and friends waiting in Bermuda, hoping for a few days of cruising before the start of the doublehanded leg. The decision to engage the prop, and withdraw from the race, involved weighing months of preparation and days of sailing against the realization that the people waiting for them in Bermuda are the same ones they ignored while getting ready for the race. It's a decision I'm glad I didn't have to make.

Regardless of how people arrive in Bermuda, everyone is treated immediately to a Dark and Stormy, a potent mix of dark rum and ginger beer, and a small hero's welcome. In fact, the best welcomes are for the later arrivals as more of the fleet and the visiting entourages are on hand. My landfall was well after mid-

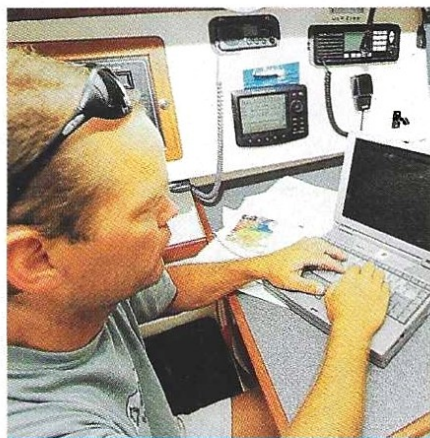
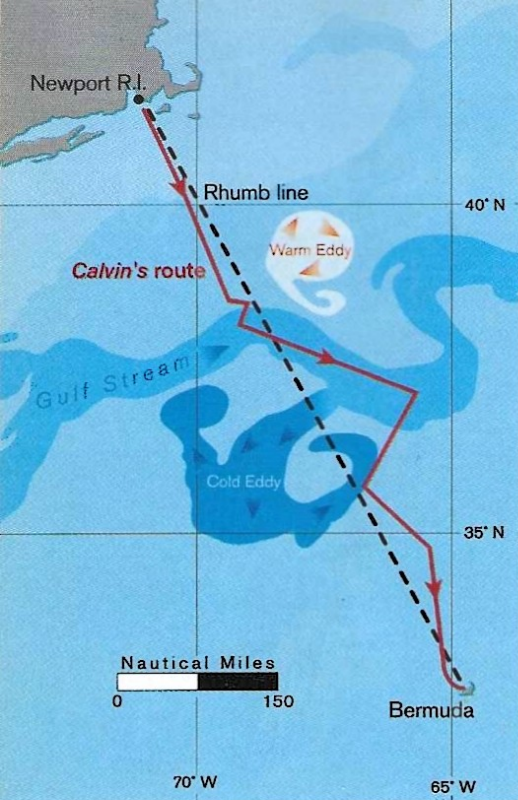


Before the roller-coaster ride through the Gulf Stream, the key decision to skirt around the Bermuda High, and the midnight finish, Neri enjoyed a sunny start in Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay.

ishing 2 hours behind *Pegasus*. By staying along the rhumb line, *Bob's Yer Uncle* missed the southeast flow altogether.

That was pretty much the story of Leg 1. Calvin was the fourth boat to finish, and the last one to reach port before the southeast flow evaporated and was replaced by the glassy calm of the notorious

night and the low point of my race. The three competitors who beat me in were off to their hotels and the island residents were all asleep. I tied up to the dock, drank the one Heineken I'd carried from Newport, and read *European Car*. It was a little depressing in comparison to the raucous endings of the crewed Newport-



During Leg 1, Neri used a Globalstar satellite phone and MaxSea routing software to plot the fastest track to Bermuda (see map at top). This involved sailing about 140 miles in a southeast-flowing meander of the Gulf Stream and then getting to the left of the fleet to take advantage of the southeast breeze that filled late in the leg.

Bermuda races. The sleeping was easy though and I woke up to meet Mario, who had been my closest competitor of the previous two days. We talked about the racing some, but mostly about the things we'd seen along the way. The whales, the dolphins, the changing sky, and the weather. Our conversation was short, but there was an undercurrent of shared experience and real friendship that I would recognize again and again as the fleet reassembled.

The singlehanded leg breeds most of the passionate loyalty for the One-Two. Singlehanded competitors from past races attend the skipper's meetings and awards gatherings and they recruit and mentor new entrants. To complete both

legs takes at least three weeks, enough time to make the One-Two the major event of the year for most competitors. It's also enough time to allow for a complete decompression from the structure of real life, and some introspective examination of what it's all about. When we get to know each other during the layover, stereotypes and preconceptions fall away like flakes of sunburned skin. The buttoned-down financial advisor turns out to be a big wave surfer and extreme skier. The goofy Italian is a professor of the history of science at Harvard. The trauma ward surgeon is a cancer survivor.

With no family there to share the Bermuda experience, I might have been the loneliest guy in the fleet during the layover. But I had lined up the best return crew in Phil Garland, winner of the 1999 doublehanded leg, renowned navigator, and, unofficially, the World's Most Laid Back Sailor. Phil arrived the day before the restart, packing Gulf Stream maps, books, and more car magazines. Larry laughed when he saw *Calvin's* library and reminded us of Giovanni Soldini's exclamation after winning the Around Alone Race in 1998: "I brought with me a book. I read not one page!" So Phil and I discarded the reading material and got down to the business of winning the return leg. If the singlehanded leg is about safety, harnessing personal demons, and racing, the doublehanded leg is only about racing.

Since only four boats were able to finish the singlehanded leg before the breeze shut off, and because *Pegasus* was heading for the Azores and *C Spray* was saddled with a hopeless rating, the race for the overall corrected time trophy came down to *Shere Khan* and *Calvin*. To make up the difference from Leg 1, we had to beat the faster-rated *Shere Khan* into Newport by 67 minutes. While this looked like a stretch according to the rating sheet, our routing software showed at least three days with breeze aft of the beam. With masthead asymmetric spinnakers set on a seven-foot bow sprit, this is where *Calvin* really sparks to life. As long as the breeze stayed aft, *Shere Khan's* length, displacement, and water-ballast system was baggage. We liked our chances in the skimming dish.

By the morning of the restart the center of the Bermuda High had pushed far enough east that we had a building 12-knot southeasterly. After rounding the

reef we changed from our reaching kite to the new 1,700-square-foot runner, which Phil dubbed "the weapon." We aimed *Calvin* at the south wall of the Gulf Stream and watched the fleet sink into the horizon behind us. We had a great sail home, eating well, surfing through the Stream, and staying ahead of *Shere Khan* the entire way. By the time we exited the Stream, we had built our lead to about 25 miles, more than enough to get back the time I'd lost on the singlehanded leg. Then, with about 200 miles to go, we watched helplessly as a thick jumbled mess of clouds indicating a low pressure trough built between us and Newport. We logged on and accessed the most recent National Weather Service surface map. It showed an amoeba-shaped cloud mass the length of New Jersey moving slowly across our path. The pressure was just barely lower than the surrounding air mass; low enough to attract all the moisture in the region, but not low enough to create any circulation. Troughs suck, that's for sure. But this one wasn't going to suck enough to get the air moving.

Phil and I worked every little downdraft we could sniff out, slatting with the jib until there was enough breeze to get to 2 knots, changing up through the spinnaker inventory as the speed built, eventually outrunning the wind, and restarting the cycle. We were there for the birth of the trough and stayed with it through the gestation and maturation period and finally saw its demise. By the time it began to break up, 24 hours after we'd sailed under it, *Shere Khan* and the Class 2 leaders were clearly visible astern. We had 150 miles to the finish in light-air fetching conditions. With 90 miles to go, the breeze backed to the point where we could get the kite up and we started adding to our lead again. When we crossed the finish line we could no longer see *Shere Khan*, but as we motored into Newport Harbor we heard Bjorn calling in their finish time, 57 minutes behind us.

The 10-minute overall elapsed time shortfall made our doublehanded-leg win feel like something other than victory. But the race results were quickly forgotten. I was sitting on the dock that night, wide awake at 2 a.m., when someone asked me if I'd do it again. I thought about the pounding I endured in the Gulf Stream, the lightning squalls, and the hours of sweltering boredom. Then I thought about the preparation, the cost, the time away from work, and how bad I smelled at the moment. "Sure," I said. ♦