



BY JAY SHARKEY

# Alone

## Reflections on my first Bermuda One-Two Race

I couldn't pull myself aboard. I was clinging to the transom, too exhausted and too cold to muscle myself up and over the boat's diminutive freeboard. I had been in 63-degree water without a wetsuit for 25 minutes, trying to cut my 21-foot Mini Class raceboat free from the tall fish-trap buoys my spinnaker had fouled. Only minutes before, at 0500, I had gone below to make a log entry and eat something while the autopilot drove. Things couldn't have been finer, and my first Bermuda One-Two was on.

I'd just finished writing when the boat crash-gybed. In the cramped confines of the cabin it sounded like Armageddon

was being unleashed topsides, and the boat started flailing miserably in the 15-knot west-northwest breeze. Moving by instinct, I scrambled on deck, cut the asymmetric spinnaker's halyard and tack line, and dropped the main.

Reeling in disbelief, I saw that the jumper struts that support the mast's top section had torn free from their brackets during the gybe and the fish trap's long line was wrapped around the keel. Not good—especially because one of the buoys was slamming against the Mini's ultralight hull. I raced below to check the hull's integrity and found, to my horror, that there was water in the stern of the cabin. Lots of water. I frantically ripped everything out from under the cockpit—sails, emergency gear, food. Then I found an empty water jug that had been full prior to the gybe. I dipped my finger in the sloshing water and tasted it: Fresh—no salt. I wasn't sinking. Yet.

The scene on deck was chaotic. The mainsail was draped everywhere, and the boat was pitching like an enraged rodeo beast.

I wrestled with the buoys for what seemed like an eternity, all the while knowing that this situation required the one thing that scared me the most—going swimming. Leaving the boat, 100 miles off the eastern seaboard, alone in the murky predawn hours, was the last thing I wanted to do. I tried to calm down, but my mind kept conjuring scenes from a certain 1970s shark movie.

Then I realized that in my haste I had neglected to pack a snorkel mask and a wetsuit, and I loudly berated myself for my lack of good preparation. Each second of hesitation put the boat in increasing danger of being damaged by the buoys, so, with the *Jaws* theme playing in my head, I stripped, donned both my climbing and chest harnesses, and gingerly lowered myself into the ocean, knife in hand.

The initial shock of the cold was balanced by a surge of adrenaline, and I reassured myself that I could do this job. Then I opened my eyes under water and both contact lenses floated away, leaving me blindly groping for the line that had wrapped around the

keel. I knew that the only way to cut it was to take a deep breath, swim along the bottom of the boat, then hack away at it until I ran out of air. Because I couldn't see, I was only partially cutting the line at different places on each dive, making no progress.

Several attempts left me exhausted and shaking violently. I swore the next dive would be my last, regardless of the outcome. This time my hand found the line almost immediately, and my blade was swift. Now unfettered, the boat immediately stopped its bucking and began slowly drifting downwind. Great—but I was being dragged along, 30 feet astern. I took a deep breath and began reeling myself in, hand-over-hand. By the time I reached the boat I was too weak to pull myself into the cockpit. My body dragged limply in the water, and consciousness began to fade as my core temperature plummeted. Summoning all of my will, I powered myself over the transom and curled into a shivering ball, too tired to even feel relief.

I can't remember how long I lay there.

Light air in Newport Harbor shortly after the start. Josephine is the black boat, number 179



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The author ghosts out of Newport Harbor, en route to Bermuda

I knew that I had to get moving again, and I remember thinking, This is going to be the easy part. The “easy part” was re-hoisting the mainsail (reefed, because of the jumper-strut failure) and jib so that I could continue racing the remaining 535 miles to Bermuda. On a 21-footer. Alone.

**M**ercifully, the remainder of the race was fairly uneventful, though my lapses in preparation continued to haunt me. The next day the corroded (I should have known) autopilot drive arm snapped, forcing me to use my backup. This promptly burned out its motor because of the unbalanced sailplan. For the next 41 hours I hand-steered until exhaustion took over and I hove-to for an hour. I rested and also cobbled together a working autopilot

from the remainders of the two broken units. Unfortunately, the relief that my now-working autopilot provided was short-lived; I couldn't keep the battery voltage high enough to power it. So it was hand-steering and dead-reckoning for the next few days, with the occasional fix from the handheld GPS to verify my position.

Finally, after five days of sailing, I broke the 100-miles-to-the-finish-line mark—exactly as the wind died. This synchronized with my fresh water running out (remember that water jug spill?) and, as a consequence, the end of my food, as my only remaining provisions were freeze-dried. A hundred miles, I thought, I can sail that long. But it wasn't to be. Between day 5 and day 6, I covered a whopping 30 miles over the bottom, and my 24-hour run between day 6 and day 7 brought me only

20 miles closer to the Onion Patch. As I watched the barometer steadily rise on the morning of day 7, I knew I was beaten. At 0800 I hailed the race committee to inform them of my situation and to tell them that I was retiring. The one fortunate thing about the glassy conditions was that they were perfect for motoring. Ten hours later, I chugged into Town Cut.

To say that I was gutted is a massive understatement. I had dreamed about single-handed offshore racing since I first read the books by Robin Knox-Johnson and Bernard Moitessier, and this was certainly not how I had pictured finishing my first solo race. The events became a non-issue when my girlfriend, Suzanne, and my friend and fellow Mini sailor, Drew Wood, met me at the dock. I was happy to have arrived, happy to be alive, and I knew that there would be another battle, another day.

Reflecting on the events of the race after the stateside finish, I realized that I'd just had the best learning experience of my 30-year sailing career. I had spent many miles offshore working professionally as a yacht captain and as race crew aboard some of the world's most sophisticated thoroughbreds, but this was different—this was my experience and mine alone. When I told my tale to friends after the race, most of them asked if I would do it again. My answer is a resounding yes. There were moments—and I admit they were fleeting—when everything felt perfect. I can't wait to be alone and offshore again, trying to string one perfect moment into the next in what will hopefully be a seamless rhumb-line course to Bermuda. **F**

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Jay Sharkey grew up sailing on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay and works for North Sails. He is seeking funding for a full-blown Mini campaign.