

The 2010 Don Aronow Memorial Race...

From behind the bolsters

by Charlie McCarthy

I was very fortunate to be offered a crew position on a boat that was entered in the Don Aronow Memorial Around Long Island Race this past weekend. It is a mid 80's Sonic that is 30 feet long and powered with twin small blocks with Alpha Mercruiser drives with cooling showers on them. It is a production boat, not a special one off race boat.

The owner of the boat Joe De Fusco is not only the rigger, chief mechanic and truck driver for the team, he is also the driver and throttleman on the boat. He invited a friend of his to be the navigator. His friend Jonathan Tobin is not a power boater, but he is a highly experienced racer from the world of offshore sailboat racing with many experiences including a Trans Pac race under his belt. Jon has gone on a few poker runs with Joe, so he kind of knew what to expect...not really, as he found out quickly, poker runs and offshore races are very different.

I was the last member of the crew and as Joe explained very clearly up front, the boat only had two bolsters and the only place for me would be to stand behind the bolsters and astride of the life raft case mounted on the floor. I did have grab handles on the backs of the two bolsters but no lean back bolster. Knowing exactly what I was getting into I readily accepted the very generous invitation.

I won't go into the various promises by both individuals and boat companies to enter the race, but when race day dawned we had just 5 boats. Two big state of the art Outerlimits, a cat and big deep vee, with a British Team on board. The third boat was an 18 foot Donzi entered by a team that had never raced before, but had driven all night from Virginia just to get here and be part of the event. Unfortunately on the trip up, the water pickup for the engine had broken after rubbing against part of the trailer. I believe the trailer was borrowed, so they could make the journey and they didn't realize the boat had shifted en route. Another single engine boat, a 27 footer was entered, but the owner stated beforehand that he was only going to run with us at the start and go down the sound a short way. Last but not least was our little 30 foot Sonic.

The big 53 foot Magnum owned by Guy La Motta was our pace boat. As we rumbled toward the start, one of the boats jumped the start by not waiting for the green flag and our driver started to go also. I tapped him on the shoulder and told him to wait for the green, he backed off and in a few seconds the Magnum was abeam us and soon the remaining boats lined up and then the green was up and the race was on.

The Outerlimits cat was soon just a dot of spray ahead of us and we began to settle into a nice pace. The navigator was holding a hand held GPS unit and was signaling the port or starboard adjustments to our driver. We had a newly installed front fuel tank with 50 gallons in it and our plan was to burn that off first so that when we hit the ocean, we would just be using the factory installed fuel tanks and not have to worry about the weight sloshing around this jury rigged front tank. It would also shift the center of gravity further back.

The inevitable happened next, the 52 foot, quad engine deep vee British entry Outerlimits had spooled up and was now passing us and headed off to catch the cat on the horizon. We realized this

was the first run for the deep vee and there might be some bugs still to be worked out, but we were hoping they would do well after the enormous expense they had in coming to support our race. We waved good luck to them on and watched as their spray began to grow in the distance chasing the cat.

Now the hard part of the race began. This is the time when you need mental discipline to be alone and not have a boat to race against or the crowds to cheer you on. Only the crew on the boat knows for sure if you are pushing or not. Are you babying the boat and yourself or are you pushing as hard as you can and going for the win, regardless of what the facts are telling you? I am very happy to report this crew was pushing just like they were old hands at this stuff.

At this point on the north side of the sound, the water was fairly calm and I took advantage of that fact, to actually sit down in the rear bench seat and get down out of the wind over the deck.....this was a big mistake as I will explain later.

We ran through the front tank in about 50 minutes....so I informed the crew that our burn rate was 1 gallon per minute at the speeds we could run in calmer waters. We stopped briefly to switch the fuel lines from the front tank back to the rear tanks. At that point, I was able to give Joe some old school tips about small adjustments that he could make to his driving style. He understood immediately and used them for the rest of the race to our advantage. I say at that point, because the intercoms in the helmets stopped working at about the same time the green flag was raised...old school forever, yell louder and deeper.

When the fuel was switched and we were ready to take off again, we discovered that one trim tab was no longer working, it was stuck in the up position. So Joe, very expertly began rocking the boat to trick it to make it think it was a flat bottom and head for the trough of the waves and pretty soon we were up and running again. I tapped him again and said sincerely.."Nice job buddy."

When we were stopped for a quick moment I took advantage of that time to grab a trail bar and get it down for some more energy, that I knew we would be needing in the ocean. As the trip went on, I began feeling very sickly and could feel my strength starting to drain away. I thought for sure the trail bar had been bad and was making me sick. As we rounded Orient Point and heading for Montauk, I was having a hard time holding on the bars behind the bolsters and was trying to find a more steady position to brace myself.

Suddenly just as we rounded Montauk, and on one of the bigger waves that was rolling under us with a lot of energy, the boat veered to the left and we all were thrown hard against the starboard side. Joe quickly informed us the power steering was gone and he was going to look under the hatch to see if a belt had popped off.

While Joe was checking the engines, I changed positions with Jon and I took my helmet off and sat in the cold breeze and really started feeling ready to heave that trail bar. Joe realized that it wasn't a belt, but he did spot oil spray all over back there and knew we had a leak of the power steering fluid from one of the hoses. The waves were much too big to do much more so we headed off for our fuel stop at Shinnecock. Jon graciously allowed me to stay up front in the bolster and he assumed my old position as the navigating here was just a run down the coast to the inlet. I told them if I didn't feel any better drop me off at the gas dock and they could continue on as I didn't want to

hold them up from going as fast as they could.

When we got to Shinnecock, the waves were very big, very big. I'm not going to get into size here, but they were big. As we approached the inlet, the waves were breaking a way offshore and then surfing into the inlet itself. Joe managed without power steering or both trim tabs to bring the 30 foot boat in front a just the right wave and then proceed to use the power to surf the wave all the way into the inlet. At one point the entire length of the boat was on the face of the wave and heading down faster and faster, but he managed to keep it straight and true and we made it safe and sound.

When we entered the inlet, we could see a lot of boats, bit boats that would rise and fall with the waves. Sometimes we could see them and other times they were down in the trough. I thought to myself...this is really great to have this many boats to welcome us here at the gas stop, that Billy Frenz really put the word out. As we got closer we could see they were the day charter fishing boats loaded with people who were fishing in the inlet. We found out later, that the waves were too big for them to get out, so they just fished right there.

As we pulled into the gas dock Jon roused himself from the rear seat and said that it wasn't the trail bar that made me sick, it was the gas fumes in the cockpit and that he now was very sick also. Since I had been riding up front in the bolster, I was now feeling much better. When we stopped we could clearly smell the fumes from the front tank. The two front positions were free of much of it as the breeze over the deck cleared it away, but the person in the back had the fumes swirl around them especially if they sat down and got lower in the cockpit. Just then the phone rang???????????

It was Rich Luhrs. He said why are you stopped? I said we were at a fuel stop and had a couple of problems...one trim tab wasn't working, the cockpit was filling with fumes, the power steering had failed as we lost fluid and even though it was cold, Joe was soaked in sweat as he had been driving from Montauk in very big water with no power steering. Rich responded as only an old racer would...Well, get it all fixed quick and come on home as your in the lead!!!! What did you say? I asked him. "You guys are in the lead, the other boats have dropped out on the north shore, no one even made it to Orient Point, so come on home and you're the winners."

So here is the scene at this point. We are stopped for fuel and repairs and we just found out we are in the lead. Jon had jumped up on the dock and was getting as much clean air into his lungs as possible. Joe had started the fueling process and I was trying to make mental checklist of priorities to get done. Meanwhile all of my experience was trying to do me in at this point. I kept thinking, never quit, never quit, we didn't really know what was wrong with the other boats and I thought they too may be just stopping for some necessary repairs and they would soon be up and coming after us. I could already hear their engines as they tried to pass us in the ocean. At this point we just had to slow down and focus our efforts on what needed to be done.

I stopped Joe and got his attention and said... remember..Fast is Slow and Slow is Fast. Just do one task at a time and work slowly on it so that it is done the best way possible. He repeated... Fast is Slow and Slow is Fast, back to me and just grinned. I got it, he said.

The first problem we encountered was the gas dock had no power steering fluid for the power steering pump. So we decided that the lowest grade of motor oil was the next best thing and we got

a few quarts of that. (I remembered when Bobby Saccenti and Sonny Miller won the first Benihana in La Tortuga, they were running low on oil and when they needed more and didn't have any, they used anything they could find that was close to it, like transmission fluid). When our pump was full again, we started the engine and I turned the wheel back and forth until Joe, who was under the hatch could spot the leak in one of the hoses. We shut the engine off and took stock of what we had onboard to repair the problem. No replacement hoses, but we did have another hose that was slightly larger than the broken one. Okay, slice the larger hose with a knife down the length and put it around the leaky hose, then put on as many hose clamps as we could scavenge and it would at least slow down the leak for awhile.

Next problem was the trim tab that would stay in an up position. Joe found a piece of wire that he used to hot wire the pump to go down to the lowest setting. For some reason the pump worked lifting the tab, but it would not push it back down again. While he was back there, he also discovered that the old return lines from the original Mercury fuel injection engines, was leaking. That was part of the fume problem, but most of it came from the front tank for some reason. He secured the return line the best he could and we were ready to go again. Jon was back, good and healthy and I had recovered fully from being away from the fumes for a while.

I told Joe that so far he was running the boat as good as anyone could. I sensed that he had some frustration with some of the brutal wave conditions between Orient Point and Montauk. I told him the only problem he was really having, was asking this little boat to handle those conditions at speed. The only solution for it was boat length. He was doing just fine.

We now faced the exit out of the inlet. We had some hearty cheers from the fishermen on the charter boats and we started out. We couldn't determine where the no wake zone ended, but we were already being lifted by the rollers, so Joe just nailed it and off we went. The boat rolled onto a plane and he began to trim up the problem tab...it all worked beautiful. The face of the waves coming in were a sight to behold, reminded me of Argentina in 1978, Big Momas for sure. Joe kept it steady and didn't rush anything, but just felt our way out past the breaking surf line and still out even more just to be safe. When we finally turned west, we were at least a half mile out and clear of all the breaking waters.

The new riding position for me now, was standing directly behind Joe with my head leaning out over the side to keep inhaling clean air. As we encountered various conditions and seas, he would ask for some suggestions regarding trim and I gave him my best guesses and it seemed to work just fine.

The beach along the south side of the island would go out of sight as we dropped in a trough and then would reappear as we came up again, over and over we repeated this same scenario. I watched in amusement as the two new offshore racers experienced the weightlessness of the jumps. Back in the days to pass the time of the long legs, we counted the seconds we were in the air as 1001, 1002, 1003 etc. And as in all races, there is that one wave that we all remember. When our turn came for the biggest wave to find us, both Joe and Jon just looked at each other when we landed and went... Whoaaaaa!!!!

By now the boat was starting to come undone a bit. Remember this is a family cruiser, not a purpose built race boat. At the fuel stop, we carefully stowed the cabinet doors that had come flying off and

repositioned the other items that had come loose. Before the rear seat was stowed again, the extra quarts of motor oil were put safely away for future use later in the race. This was also the official burial of the intercoms. This was a safety move, as on one wave off Montauk, we came down so hard the intercom unit on Joe's belt flew off and came right in front of me. I grabbed it by the cord as it was headed over the side and managed to flip it forward so that Jon could catch it and shove it in a compartment near him...all this while holding on with one hand and trying not to throw up on my new Lifeline jacket. Great fun, better than golfing, for sure.

On the run toward Manhattan, we were amused by the two strings of white something or other that kept flapping over the deck of the boat. I guessed the Don Aronow race stickers had come to tatters, but we found out that the calking between the deck and the hull had loosened with each crash and was now flapping back at us like long tethers of a spider web. My hands were now starting to cramp up as the grab handle behind the bolster was fine for my left hand, but the thin grab rail on the right side of the boat was too small for that hand and I couldn't get a good grip

Meanwhile up front, Joe had forgotten to put his gloves back on and was now driving and throttling with bare hands. I thought that somebody is going to have a big blister tonight. Jon was trying to adjust to the conditions as best he could, but he was still in the process of learning how to do a smooth reentry by using your legs for shock absorbers and every now and then I could hear a loud groan or sound over the engines, as he caught a bad landing again and again.

As I had plenty of free time I could let my mind wander to the great racers of the past who covers these same waters in their quest for glory. As good as the win was going to be, I trembled having to face Brownie who could now say, "Good show, but I won that race in a smaller boat (28 foot Donzi) and in less time (under 5 hours) over 40 years ago."

I also remembered my phone call with Bobby Sacenti just before I got on the boat to go out to the start. He reminded me of the trick we used to pull on new drivers when they first showed up to race in Open class. They would be there with all new equipment and beaming from ear to ear with eager anticipation of joining this new fraternity. We would sidle up to them and say..."It is kind of secret with the Open class guys, but there is a \$1,000 prize for the first guy who can get to the first checkpoint, just wanted you to be aware of it." Our hope of course, was they would go all out and blow up before the real racing started. Bobby said to go and tell the two Outerlimits guys, it would make their day.

Back to the race...we are still heading west...damn that is one long beach. I have now started to visualize the towers of Manhattan on the horizon. I knew we still had miles to go but I could dream couldn't I? I also kept looking back over my shoulder, just in case the repairs had been done to the Outerlimits boats. Joe was still pushing and the waves were still building and the little Sonic was still looking good. My new job was to take one of the water bottles that had now broken loose and was rolling around the floor and squeeze enough water out of it to clean Joe's glasses, as they were coating over with salt with each major hit and spray blowback we were taking. I managed to do this by letting go and squirting while we were in mid air...then grabbing on for the landing and then wiping dry on the next launch.

As we closed toward New York City I could see that the power steering was running low on fluid and Joe was fighting to keep the boat straight on the landings. We would soon be stopping and topping off again, hopefully we could make it out of the ocean waters and into the harbor, where that kind of work would be much easier. As we passed Coney Island, we took one of the biggest landings

of the trip and I could both hear and see Jon physically take it all the wrong way. Without the helmet, I'm sure he would have tears in his eyes on that one. But soon we were into calmer waters and things started to look up.....until we passed a ferry and heard a loud pop and the boat lurched to the port side.

We came off plane and checked under the hatch and found a missing belt on the power steering. We used this stop to fill up the power steering pump again and put on the new belt and of course hot wire the trim pump again to get that tab down so we could get on plane.....pretty soon we could do this in the dark.

As we got moving again, I checked with Joe to remind him to not lose this race by doing anything stupid. slow down for every boat wake, be careful in the East River for refrigerators, dead horses or whatever else may be coming down. He said he was already thinking that way and we took off for the final leg. At this point I must confess, I became a bit weepy as we passed by the Statue of Liberty and I thought how blessed we were to be able to defend this cup from going over to Britain. How this is what America is all about, not having the best or even being the best, but never, ever giving up or losing the confidence in ourselves that this can be done and will be done.

The East River was deceptively calm for a while but then coming toward us, there was a big red fireboat from the NYFD, putting up a wake like we were back at Montauk again. Joe handled it very smoothly and we were then looking for the last few bridges to go under.

There was a bit of confusion in the many waterways of the river but thanks to Jon's careful navigational preparation, he knew exactly where to go and where to stay away from. We were out from under the last bridge and heading toward the finish. We swept past the finish line and Joe threw the boat in a dramatic 180 degree turn. (Kind of like the NASCAR guys do after they win) We high fived each other and just let the victory sink in. David against Goliath. One for the little guys. If you can conceive it and believe it, you can achieve it.

We headed back into the harbor and were met by the guy from Virginia in his Donzi that he fixed up enough to be out there to welcome us in and little Sam (Minihawk) in his little outboard. As we pulled up to the marina, we could see that not only were our own friends and family there, but the entire British crew had made their way back from the harbor where they left their boat, to be on hand to welcome us back in and congratulate us on the victory. Real show of class there for sure.

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I would like to thank once again, all of the competitors who stepped forward to support our effort in bringing back real open ocean racing again. We had some long discussions with the Brits and they would like to have a place to race over here. New York is ideal for them as it allows easy access for both flights for teams and shipping of their boats. They view this race as part of a worldwide circuit going forward into the future.

They have no interest whatsoever in the beach style of racing and hope that some Americans will share their desire to race the way the sport started. The look forward to coming here and hopefully some of our teams go over there for many years to come. They are the very best of competitors, we were very lucky to have them with us this year.