



MARION TO BERMUDA

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## PROFILES OF MARION-BERMUDA



### A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

BY LISA GABRIELSON

*We were waiting for the starting gun to begin our 645-mile marathon race to Bermuda. I was perched on the bow pulpit as we watched the clouds roll in. What the heck am I doing up here? I thought. A number of boats had doused their Jibs and were reefing their Mains. Lyra, my dad's 50' Yawl, bombed along under half a Jib, half a Main, and a Mizzen. I had one boot wedged in the anchor windlass and one jammed under a cleat as she heeled to port. This better not be how this entire race is going to go, I worried, No one is going to sleep.*

*We rounded up toward the line as the horn sounded for our one minute warning. There was a lot of yelling, "STARBOARD!" and the commotion of luffing sails. Finally, a starting gun! Lyra's bow bore down off the wind and we were off.*

My participation in the Marion Bermuda 2011 race was somewhat of an anomaly- I am a woman, I was 20 years old, and I had no offshore experience. What I did have, however, was a boat full of "old" guys who were willing to take me 645 miles from New England and share with me one of the most incredible sailing experiences I will undoubtedly ever have.

Lyra had up until recently been a favorite reading and nap spot of mine, and not much else. In college, as the world of competitive sailing slowly opened up to me, I wanted more. When my dad walked up to me one day in our kitchen and plainly stated, "I'm going to race the boat to Bermuda this year," I knew I had to jump on board. The crew was assembled: the Skipper, a lifelong sailor; the Navigator, an MIT engineer; the Tactician, a six-time race veteran; two Watch Captains, both seasoned sailors...and Me! My first



offshore and long distance race was certainly exciting. We experienced it all, from knockdown force winds to dead calm, from near freezing temperatures to burning sun. We tore a sail, blew out a halyard, and ate A LOT of fruit snacks - maybe that was just me! I learned that personal space is a blessing but the bond that a crew shares after six days together in that small space is even more incredible.

The fleet bore down out of Buzzards Bay in a clump. The sea was angry, the air was cold, and yet, somehow by morning not a single boat was in sight. "It's a big ocean," said my dad with a shrug. Not only that, we couldn't see land either. There is a certain take-your-breath-away feeling that comes with knowing you are suspended over hundreds of feet of empty- or what you hope is empty- blackness. Until we crossed the halfway mark to Bermuda, it was almost impossible to avoid imagining not only the things beneath us but also the distance between our boat and the nearest person. The ocean is vast and there is little room for error. I was reminded of the months of meticulous preparation and of the importance of on-board safety and began to appreciate my Dad's attention to detail.

Seasickness is no joke I had never felt as horrible as I did those first 36 hours of the race. I was equally sure that if it continued, swimming the 100 miles back to Massachusetts would start to look attractive. In the Marine Medical Manual, one of the symptoms of severe seasickness is a loss of will to live. It used to sound like an exaggeration.

My dad was at the helm, windblown and smiling, as the navigator told him we would soon be at "the stream". His salt and pepper hair stood straight up from his head, stiffened with the salt spray. As the hours past, the seas began to calm and turn the most incredible sapphire blue, a color I had never seen before. This sea creature

highway brings not only calm sweeping seas but also the warm weather and, as we peeled off our layers of foul weather gear, my nausea subsided. I began to feel more in rhythm with the boat. We flew down the Gulf Stream towards Bermuda with Lyra's wheel lightly feathering in my hands. Our watch schedule allowed me to be on the helm for about an hour at a time, with breaks for naps and snacking. Under the watchful eyes of the experienced sailors on the boat, I learned how to notice wind moving across the water, how to take a site with a sextant, and how to steer with no points of reference on land.

By reading the sun and the stars with the guidance of our navigator, I gained an immense amount of respect for sailors of past eras. Learning to handle a sextant is something I can say, without a doubt, no one in my college class has ever done. I also gained a great appreciation for the GPS, but it was liberating to realize that I would never need one.

The other incredible characteristic of the Gulf Stream is the experience of riding it at night. You can stare out ahead, behind, and in any direction and see nothing but luminously blue water, alarmingly starry skies, and seas flecked with phosphorescent plankton. If you're lucky, you'll spot the occasional dolphin dorsal. One night, as Dave and I sat quietly looking up at the stars, a dolphin started a conversation with our squeaky mizzen boom. They chattered back and forth for a few minutes until the dolphin, probably bored with the conversation, moved on.

Perhaps the most pulse-raising part of our journey was when our spinnaker halyard blew. I was on the foredeck in the middle of day four of the race when suddenly what sounded like a gunshot rang out. Like a sheet of paper fluttering from above, the spinnaker began to

slowly collapse and drift down into the sea. I know as much as any other kid that one of the priorities on a boat, besides keeping it afloat, is to not lose things overboard. So, without thinking, I grabbed the foot of the sail and held on for dear life as the snuffer filled with water, acting as a sea anchor for Lyra. A 50 ft boat going nine knots does not slow down without a lot of force. As the snuffer filled with the warm water of the Gulf Stream and strained against my shoulders, I quickly realized this. Luckily Dave, our tactician, managed to clamor his way around the foredeck chaos and also take hold of the foot. Together, with a good amount of wriggling and expressive language, we wrestled the rascal sail aboard.

It turned out the riggers had used the wrong size spinnaker sheave that had, under the stress and motion of the sail, sawed through the halyard. So, like any resourceful sailor would do, we got up there and duct taped it so that it fit and put the sail back up. Off we went on our merry way southeast, with one eye on the horizon and the other on the masthead waiting for the tape to blow. Calm sneaks up on you. It is not jarring like slamming on the brakes but the result is the same. After the past few days of maelstrom a quiet descended and everything stopped. I was off watch in my berth and woke up when I realized we had stopped moving. My first thought was that we had docked in Bermuda and no one cared enough to tell me. But, considering when I climbed into my bunk a few hours earlier we were still about 250 miles from the island, it was doubtful. No, what we did was sail right into the middle of a big, fat low-pressure system. Nothing was moving except the Portuguese Man-O-War jellies we saw bobbing past.

We were in finger-tap mode and helpless to do anything about it. While sitting still in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean is frustrating, it

is also the point of the race I remember most fondly. I heard about Dave's goofy grandkids, Mark's sailing adventures, and countless of other stories including plenty of teasing aimed at my dad.

One of the challenges of the Marion Bermuda race is reading weather systems and knowing where - and where not - to go. We made a mistake. Instead of aiming above where we thought a low pressure system would be, and then pull us down toward Bermuda, we landed smack in the middle of it. As irritating as this can be it is also one of the most challenging lessons of the race. Learning to read the wind, the waves, and the GRIB files, and making tough choices about course and strategy, were all interesting and exciting. On the second day of our hot weather siesta we all sat in the cockpit eating our lunch and looking hopefully out over the glassy water for signs of a ripple or a puff. Suddenly, off of the starboard crosshairs, I saw something. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. Slowly, so as not to scare it away, I made my way over to the helm and switched the autopilot off. My college dinghy experience came in handy and with a light hand Lyra started to come to life moving only a few tenths of a knot at first. As we reached the edge of the low a few hours later, she was moving at a few knots. Slowly but surely, we were again making headway to Bermuda. A haze of light reflects off the ocean and sky surrounding Bermuda. It signals you nearing the end of our journey and is strangely disconcerting. After six days seeing no one besides your crewmates the glow of streetlamps from 50 miles away makes the world seem strangely small. Approaching the dock, I suddenly felt an urge to leap off, run up the hill and roll around in the grass. The second I stepped on the dock and was presented the first of what turned out to be a week full of Dark N'Stormys, the first thought that came into my mind: "When does the next MB race start?" 🍌



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