

The focus is always on working with Mother Nature to make the boat go faster than the competition.



• BY LISA STAMOS •

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN MCCONNELL

Steve Knoop Sets Sail for the 100th Running of the Mac

LAKE MICHIGAN BECOMES SAILING'S NATIONAL STAGE on July 19, when the Chicago Yacht Club hosts its 100th running of the Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac, presented by Lands' End Business Outfitters. It's the longest freshwater sailing distance race in the world. The race begins near Navy Pier in Chicago, with the racing yachts required to pass in review by the pier before heading out to the starting line just beyond the breakwater. Some 333 miles north of Chicago awaits the end of the line for more than 4,000 sailors this year: Mackinac Island, Michigan, where the finish is located between the Chicago Yacht Club's race committee's position on Mackinac and the lighthouse on nearby Round Island. Throughout the event, sailors will gather their own unique tales of adventure of one of the grandest sporting events that Chicago and the Great Lakes have to offer.

The Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac, also known as "the Mac," is the premier event of the Chicago Yacht Club. An international regatta, the world's most competitive and experienced sailors and boats are invited and come great distances for this historic event. A record 460 boats are registered for this year's race. Weather, which often includes violent thunderstorms – or worse, no wind at all – often decides the finish. We turned to Barrington's most experienced Mac skipper, Steve Knoop (who is preparing for his 32nd Mac this summer) to get an inside look at the exciting sport of sailboat racing, and to get to know the Mac from someone who's seen more than most.

PHOTO: LUCILLE O'NEILL





Above and top left: American Flyer, Steve Knoop's sailboat, which will be entered in the 100th running of the Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac on July 19. Left: The crew (back row, from left): Keith Bainbridge, Julie Hawkins, John Huff, Chris Huff. Front row: Steve Knoop, Richard Martin.

 THE PASSION

SAYING GOODBYE TO TERRA FIRMA

“Each time I leave the dock to head out to the starting area for a Mac race, I think that this is the last time I will be touching land for awhile,” says Steve Knoop, who started his race preparation back in March for this July’s race, which typically takes 50 to 60 hours. “I will be detached from civilization, far away from any immediate help, and totally dependent on my boat. I always wonder what adventure lies ahead.”

Why does sailing gather such passion in people who stay with the sport long-term? “Sailing is a passion for so many reasons,” Steve says. “First, the whole man-against-nature element is a huge draw. It can be a very lonely and serene feeling at times when you’re looking out into the blue horizon or occasionally witnessing a fantastic display of Northern Lights. Suddenly, a storm comes along, and you wonder what you’re doing out there.” The focus is always on working with Mother Nature to make his boat go faster than the competition.

According to Steve, each race is totally different. Highly competitive, Steve looks upon the race as a personal test against his own skill, experi-

ence, and stamina in dealing with forces of nature that no one can predict. He also adores the competition of the event.

As a crew member sailing the Mac with other skippers, Steve crewed on an overall winning Mac boat four times. Steve and his Tartan 10 (“T-10”), *American Flyer*, have won many races and honors, including the National Offshore One-Design Championship, Season Championship(s), Boat of the Year, and the Best of Lake Michigan title, most recently in 2007. While Steve has won over 100 trophies with *American Flyer*, he has only kept a few. He says he gets more satisfaction with the competition knowing his record and reputation and that he doesn’t need a bunch of “silver cups” to prove it to others. Like his dad, who dropped his many winning medals into a bar drawer at home, Steve races for the thrill of the competition both against others and himself, and not for some trophy prize. At the awards dinners, he usually gives his trophies to members of his crew.

Steve’s competitive nature on the water is also evident in his business and entrepreneurial spirit. He is founder and managing partner of the SEC-



American Flyer crew member John Huff shows the look of intensity you'll find on almost every sailor's face.

recognized First Chicago Advisors, Inc. First Chicago Advisors specializes in assisting both public and private corporations with corporate development solutions such as mergers, acquisitions, and corporate financial strategy. Steve holds an MBA from Kellogg's Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. His ability to work with complex financial and legal structures is also reflected in his ability to rapidly assimilate the critical sailing variables.

Steve is also very active in his community. He serves passionately as a publicly elected trustee of the Village of Barrington Hills, is a member of the Kellogg School of Management's Alumni Advisory Board, and is a board member of the alumni foundation of Sigma Chi Fraternity at his alma mater, Denison University. Steve has also served as head coach for both of his sons' separate flag football teams. In the world of sailing, Steve also is the Chicago Tartan 10 Fleet Measurer, ensuring his sailing class' one-design nature, a boating class where boats are designed with the same specifications and therefore have equal racing advantages within that class.

THE MAC

SETTING SAIL FROM CASUAL BEGINNINGS TO WORLD-CLASS EVENT

The Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac began in 1898 as a get-together of five boats. The second Mac didn't occur until a few years later in 1904, and then the race was held periodically until after World War I. Since 1921, the Mac has been run consecutively each year, with 2008 marking its 100th running (taking into account all the years the race was not run). The race usually features about 300 boats, though this year breaks all records, with 460 boats competing. The Mac race is strictly amateur, so no prize monies are won.

The race is divided into four main fleet divisions: the Chicago-Mackinac Trophy Division, the Mackinac Cup Division, the Multihull Division, and the Cruising Division. The official timekeeper of the 100th Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac is Rolex Watch USA. To commemorate the race, Rolex will give watches to the overall winning skipper in each division. As is done each year of the race, division winners also receive a plaque, a "brag" flag, and of course, the chance to tell their story a thousand times over.



PHOTO: COURTESY CHICAGO YACHT CLUB



Above, left: Keith Bainbridge sets sail on American Flyer. Left: The coveted prize is awarded to the winner of the Mac. Above: Julie Hawkins mans her position on the foredeck.

The Mac features different classes of boats, including the ultra-competitive One-Design divisions, where the world's best compete. To give each skipper a fighting chance for the title, a comprehensive handicap system is applied to each boat's elapsed time on the racecourse. The handicap is applied to the boats that finish the race, with the adjusted time determining the winner. This way, an entire fleet can truly compete.

The fastest Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac record on file was set in 2002 by Roy Disney, who owns and skippered the 80-foot monohull *Pyewacket*. Disney's record of elapsed time was 23 hours, 30 minutes, and 34 seconds. The multihull record was set by Steve Fossett in 1998 with *Stars and Stripes*, the catamaran previously sailed by Dennis Connor in the America's Cup. Fossett's time came in at 18 hours, 50 minutes, and 32 seconds. Most of the fleet finishes the race between 40 and 70 hours. *Stars and Stripes* is returning to race the 2008 Mac this year, chartered by Chicagoan Don Wilson.

Sailors who have completed 25 Mac races or more get the distinction of becoming an "Old Goat," a name conjured up in 1959 by three veteran

racing sailors who organized themselves to preserve the Mac tradition. The formal name of the organization is the Island Goat Sailing Society. Tales are told and retold with great humor about the absurdities sometimes found in the Old Goats' sailing adventures. These brave souls have each surpassed a milestone of 8,215 total sailing miles on Lake Michigan. Steve Knoop is the Barrington area's most distinguished Old Goat sailor, with the most Macs raced on record at 31 races.

All the fun is hosted by the Chicago Yacht Club, which is considered to be in the top ten of yacht clubs across the United States. Sailors from the East or West Coast yacht clubs underestimate the sea-worthy challenge that Lake Michigan offers.

No other story illustrates this better than entertainment magnate Ted Turner's first Mac race in 1970. At the time, his world-class sailing credentials included winning the America's Cup, but when he decided to race the Mac he called Lake Michigan a "milk pond." That year was possibly the worst on record for weather conditions, and Turner retracted his every word upon reaching Mackinac Island. Later, he was so impressed with

another Chicago boat, *Dora IV*, that he bought it and renamed it the world-famous *Tenacious*.

ANCHOR THE COMMITMENT

A SERIOUS SKIPPER AND HIS FEARLESS CREW

Steve Knoop says that his best opportunities for learning to skipper his own boat came from time spent with his dad, Frank Knoop, as well as veteran sailors Dick Stearns and John Huff (see sidebar on page 93). The bonding experience that this sport bestows upon those who set sail together, especially during the life-or-death situations required to successfully crew a boat, create friendships that last a lifetime.

“Once you’ve done a Mac with someone, there is always a special bond with that person,” Steve says. “Your crewmates experience things during the race with you that only can be understood and felt by someone else who went through it exactly as you did. Even many years later, when you see that person on the street or the dock, there is this unforgettable look you give one another that says, ‘Yes, I know you in a way no one else does – I got a glimpse of your inner core.’”

Knoop’s *American Flyer* crew for this year’s Mac is in place. They train throughout the spring and early summer in the offshore races sponsored by the various Chicago yacht clubs. Before heading to the Mac on July 19, the crew will have completed two months of racing and one national regatta.

The *American Flyer* crew will see the return of John Huff, who Steve trusts to handle the best and worst of conditions like a pro. John is the other “watch captain” on the boat, who will trade places skippering the craft with Steve so he can rest. John holds the record for sailing a Tartan-10, *Glider*, up to Mackinac the fastest. *Glider* was the first T-10 that Steve sailed on. After John sold his boat, he now sails on Steve’s T-10. John’s son, Chris, has also become a valued crew member, continuing the multi-generation tradition that is built around the sport.

Chuck Flader, who has done many Macs with Steve, now lives in Denver and will come back to Chicago to join the crew for the race. “He’s the best ‘chute flyer’ on the lakes,” reports Steve, who holds a prize spot for this fearless sailor. He adds, “The Mac is generally a downwind race, where you’re flying the spinnaker most of the time. It takes intense concentration and coordination with the helmsman to catch each wave in heavy air or each puff in light [air]. That is how you win the race – besides having a lot of luck. It’s about being in the right place at the right time with a lot of concentration in between. It’s an awfully big lake.”

Mike Rutkowski is another crew member that Steve appreciates having on board in good times and bad. “Mike has sailed with me for many years,” Steve says. “He’s an extremely bright engineer. We call him ‘MacGuyver,’ as there is nothing he can’t fix, and nothing rattles him. He’s a natural leader and great to have on board at all times.”

Julie Hawkins, whose father was a racer, is the only female on Steve’s crew. “This is my fourth year with Steve,” she says. Julie is the *American Flyer*’s foredeck person. “Steve is a great teacher. He’s very competitive and tough in a good way. His expectation is that if he offers you a spot on his crew, you’d better be there every time there’s a race.” This is typical for the serious skippers who train to win the race. Like many of the crew, Julie lives close enough to the Belmont Harbor (where Steve’s boat is docked) to walk or bike to the races.



Once a sailor has completed 25 Macs, he or she becomes an “Old Goat.”

The biggest myth that crew members want to dispel is that sailing is an elitist sport. Crewing is an ongoing education that is paid for with a 100 percent commitment to the skipper who invites you aboard. It’s hard work, and it can be very dangerous. The crew is only compensated for their commitment with the opportunity to participate and learn. Like their skipper Steve, they aren’t in it for the glamour – they love this world-class sport, and most stay with it for years, building lifelong friendships that they rank as the best part of sailing. They also don’t mind when Steve hands them over a trophy!

ANCHOR THE PRIZE

A SINGULAR FOCUS ON WINNING

Steve is most proud of his ability to maintain an intense focus during the race while pulling his crew together for each task they must complete – every effort being designed to win the Mac. Steve’s boat is no place for the unprepared or unfocused. Neither he nor his crew partake in any pre-race parties, and his strict rule of no alcohol on board will never change so that everyone maintains a singular focus on winning.

The serious race crews and their skippers are always talking about how to make to boat go faster no matter what the conditions. Some racers are satisfied with just crossing the finish line, similar to a runner’s marathon. Not Steve. His crew is constantly engaged in the singular purpose of win-



The American Flyer, with Steve Knoop at the helm, heads into Belmont Harbor.

ning – whatever it takes to win the race while doing it with high-class sportsmanship.

“Intellectually, it’s like a physical, moving chess game – not only with your competitors, but with the weather as well,” Steve says. “Strategy is a huge part of racing, with knowledge and skill as well as the other parts,” Steve says. “We realize that we’re doing something really unique here. When a blast of bad weather rolls in, mental toughness is the only way you’re going to survive.”

He continues, “The peaceful tranquility of the sea makes you introspective, but all of that can turn on you in an instant.” For Steve, there is nothing better than seeing a sunset in the middle of the lake during the Mackinac race. It’s such a serene feeling, he says. But quick as a flash, the serenity can be interrupted by a thunderstorm that rolls through in the blackness of night that will test the entire crew’s seamanship skills.

Focus is the name of the game. Steve’s wife, Jackie, knows this well. “Having prepared for so many Mac races, Steve has the drill down to a science. A few days prior to the race he can be very intense, but he knows exactly what needs to be done and executes with precision. As skipper, he is

not only responsible for himself and the boat, but for the safety of all of his crew members as well. He takes this very seriously.”

It takes a supportive family to help a sailor build his crew and maintain a lifestyle of owning and racing a boat. Steve’s family comes first, and he credits Jackie and their four young children for their interest and support in his active lifestyle of both sailing and community service. One of Steve’s dreams is to have a competitive all-Knoop crew going to Mackinac. Jackie explains, “Sailing is very important to Steve, and like many people who are passionate about a sport or interest, it’s part of what defines him. Our family, and particularly our eight- and nine-year-old sons, are finding their place on the boat and have already been on several races with Steve. Our goal is to someday execute a Mac race as Team Knoop; all six of us racing on the boat together.”

THE FINAL DAYS

COUNTING DOWN TO JULY 19

Along with hundreds of other racers invited to this year’s Mac, Steve has been working on his race application and related technical form submissions since March. Safety lists, including harnesses and extra equipment, are checked and rechecked. At the end of the race, the winning boat can be disqualified if the race committee’s spot inspection determines that a boat is missing a safety-list item. At the very least, they can lose critical minutes or hours off their recorded race time.

Another safety form documents the requirement to conduct a “man overboard” test drill. Imagine a crew member falling out of the boat in the dark of night while speeding downwind at 13 knots. “It’s a sailor’s worst nightmare,” Steve says. Sailboats do not have brakes and cannot suddenly turn on their engines under full sail. If a crew member goes over, the number-one priority turns to rescuing the crew member from the water. Sportsmanship dictates that in such an event, even the fiercest of competitors or other nearby boat crews must stop to help if at all possible. Their race is not jeopardized, as the time taken to assist in rescuing someone is added back into their overall handicapping upon arrival at Mackinac Island.

As he counts down the days until July 19, Steve is coordinating final crew issues, working on the crew menu, and using his safety inspection sheet to assure all items are shipshape and on board. He’s also studying the weather patterns, as the biggest variable of all is the weather. There are no shortages of weather sources available today, especially with the Internet. However, weather is so important in the race that many skippers will hire professional forecasters just for the race to detail hour-by-hour wind shifts in every quadrant of the lake.

Each race is different, Steve says about his last 31 Mac races. This year will be different on Mackinac Island, as well. After the post-race party, glorious fireworks are planned to brighten the sky over the Straits of Mackinaw to celebrate the 100th running of the race.

The people of Mackinac Island have welcomed and supported the Chicago Yacht Club and its sailors for more than 100 years. Together, both have created and sustained one of the greatest traditions in the world of sailing, and Steve Knoop and his dedicated crew will be there in July 2008 to take part in the celebration. U



which are large, two-man winches that crank in the trim on the sails. My dad thought I would be perfect for the task.

During the latter part of high school I was a part-time crew member. During college, I joined the *Dora's* crew full-time and didn't realize that I had immediately jumped to the top of the class in offshore sailing. *Dora* was known internationally, and we did such races as the Newport-Bermuda on her. *Dora* was subsequently bought by entertainment magnate Ted Turner and became the world-renowned *Tenacious*. My dad laughed at me at the time and said that I had reached the pinnacle of racing, and I was only in college. Every other boat, he said, would be less than *Dora*, a model of which is now a Mackinac class trophy. But he was wrong.

After college, while living and working in New York City, I sailed on a number of world-class yachts in Long Island Sound doing the foredeck position. One of the sailors who would occasionally fly in as the top pro on the boat I sailed on was Chicago Yacht Club member Buddy Melges (of America's Cup fame). But I loved Chicago and Lake Michigan, and in later years I would fly back every summer weekend to go sailing. I often joked to my New York City work colleagues that I could commute to Chicago and go sailing faster than they could get to the Hamptons – sometimes a three- or four-hour commute.

When I moved back to Chicago in the late 1980s, through Lynn Williams, I met John Huff and Dick Stearns. I was introduced to one-design sailing and John's Tartan 10 sailboat *Glider*. Dick Stearns, a 1960 Tokyo Olympic silver medalist and sailing professional, became my mentor, and I soaked up every piece of knowledge that I could from him. Dick is the godfather of the Great Lakes, the master; in fact, we often joked that Dick had the power of "the force" with his innate ability to win sailboat races. On *Glider*, we had a tremendous racing record, and I felt honored to be Dick's number-one sail trimmer. When *Glider* was sold, Dick helped me pick out my own Tartan 10 – which I named *American Flyer*. In 1994 I did my first Mackinac race as skipper of my own boat, and I did it with my dad – his 44th and last to date.

It was a great feeling.

When I was in grammar school, my dad, Frank Knoop, would often ask me to do a boat delivery across Lake Michigan with him. Dad was a well-known, avid offshore racer who started racing the Mac in the 1930s when he was in high school. He sailed on some of the most prestigious racing boats in the Great Lakes. Many of these boats were stored in Holland, Michigan, and he would occasionally invite me to sail with him across the lake on boat deliveries.

Many times these deliveries were on bitterly cold October nights, and the seas were rough. The trip often took roughly 9 to 12 hours. I went so I could spend time with my dad and create my own adventures with him, some of which still get told today – like the time when a freighter almost ran us down in the dark. Many times, however, I got sick and hated it. This was my introduction to sailing.

After several crossings, I decided that I wanted nothing to do with getting sick on a sailboat – Dad or no Dad. Growing up in Winnetka, however, we lived blocks from the Lake Michigan beaches, and I had junior high school friends who had Sunfishes. I begged my dad to get one, and he relented on the condition that I took sailing lessons. As a graduation present from junior high, I received a Sunfish. I loved it.

I sailed that summer before high school come rain or shine, wind or no wind, seven days a week. Many times when swimmers weren't allowed in the water due to high-storm

surf, I found a way to get my boat out past the breaking waves. It was exhilarating and truly a challenge. My parents had no idea what I was doing. I had a part-time summer job at a local animal hospital, and I couldn't wait to get to the lake after work. Dad was smart enough to leave me alone, and he never pushed the sport of sailing on me. During most of the following summers, I did the small-boat thing on my own, and he did the big offshore class downtown.

At New Trier High School, I played four years of football, hockey, and lacrosse, and I was a weight-lifting advocate, setting a school mark for my weight. Dad crewed on a boat named *Dora IV* at the time. *Dora* was the queen of Lake Michigan, a "maxi" owned by Lynn Williams, a renowned businessman in Chicago. *Dora* was 62 feet long and at the time (in the 1970s), she was considered the most technically modern boat on the lakes. In 1973 she won 24 out of 28 races, a Chicago Yachting Association record. Due to *Dora's* size, she needed strong, young guys to be "grinders." Grinders on a boat that size are often referred to as "coffee grinders,"