

GUEST ESSAY | BY STEVE KNOOP

A Diary of the 100th Mackinac — July 19, 2008

SATURDAY, JULY 19

5:30 a.m. | I wake up a little groggy from being up until midnight the night before doing last minute prep for the race. It's raining hard. Oh joy. Fortunately, my family is spared from this weather as one of my childhood friends, Jim Corboy, who introduced me to sunfish sailboats in junior high school, is picking me up at 6:30 a.m. In the 32 years of doing the race, I can't remember it ever raining so hard before the start. I hope the rain dissipates — this is going to be a mess!

6:30 a.m. | Jim picks me up in a blinding rainstorm. He knows better to ask what I am going to do about the rain. He thinks it is somewhat exciting that it's such a mess outside because he knows my intensity is such that I am not going to let it affect me. Inside, all I am thinking is that we are going to be cold and wet before we even get started on a 60 hour race. Great — packing the boat is just going to be neat, too. Tartan 10's (our class boat) are not known for being dry or comfortable. During the ride downtown, I convince myself this weather is good for *American Flyer* — it will weed out the wimps in the fleet. Still, I hope it stops pouring!

8:30 a.m. | Crew arrives — I am already drenched and tell them to get their foul weather gear on and start handing me the provisions as I ask for them. While doing a final safety check of each of the crew's personal gear, we discover several of the guys have not brought the right type of personal safety gear. Two times I send Jim off to West Marine in a hurry — I need to be off the dock by 10:15 a.m. to make my 12:15 p.m. start. Jim is starting to feel part of the crew as now he is soaking wet, too. What a lifesaver he is here.

Noon, the start | The rain has died but so has the wind. The entire fleet is faced with sloppy seas and little air. It is extremely difficult to effectively maneuver the boat, especially with 36 other boats just like us all looking for the perfect start — one could easily either be over early or late for the start. It's turned into a downwind start, so setting the spin-

ner just at the right time will be critical. I look for an opening in the line so I can get some clean air. Three of the back of the fleet boats get in my way and almost foul me and I don't get the start I was hoping for as there is dirty air everywhere. My primary competition have taken off toward the beach. OK, settle down and let's start working some magic with my best chute trimmer, Chuck.

7 p.m. | A new system the Chicago Yacht Club instituted called iBoattrack allows tracking the progress of all the boats on the Web. This is the first year we are allowed to call someone to check how we are doing in the fleet. It's been dark and foggy all day and we lost sight of who we think is our primary competition going up the Wisconsin shore on the beach. The weather models before the race all conflicted with each other so it made race strategy very difficult — my fear is that the wind is going to quit in the middle of the lake. I desperately try and call my wife, Jackie, before we get out of cell range. Despite not knowing we have worked ourselves into the front row, I still am kicking myself for such a terrible start. I wish I were going up the Illinois/Wisconsin coast with my primary competition. OK, settle down — take what Mother Nature is giving you and always follow the course to get you north toward the island the fastest.



PHOTO: JIM CORBOY

SUNDAY, JULY 20

3 a.m. | Wind is all but dead — my worst fear realized. We are in the middle of the lake, too. The fog has not lifted; it's wet but surprisingly not too cold. We just concentrate on keeping the boat going — the boat that does will come out way ahead when the sun comes up.

6 a.m. | It's light enough to take our first observation of how we are doing by looking for other boats. The problem is we still can't see over one-fourth of a mile due to the fog, and it's a big lake. It's been slow, but the boat never stopped. What happened to those guys on the beach?

4 p.m. | Continued slow and foggy all day. The crew concentration is great. We finally get close enough to the Michigan shore to pick up a cell signal and get a hold of Jackie. She and my sons have been tracking us closely most of last night and today. They estimate we are in sixth and are confused as to why one of my competitors, *Wombat*, is keeping in to the middle of the lake. I know why — they are hoping for a northwesterly wind to come in and smash us all. It's a daring strategy but could pay off huge for them. There is nothing I can do about it; at least our spirits are high. With all the bigger boats around us, we know we are doing well and are in the running, but there is a long way to go.

7 p.m. | My dad taught me stay off the beach in a westerly breeze and so we do. We keep our course north to northwest as much as possible as the wind picks up. It turns out to be the absolute correct strategy as more of my competition hit the beach off Little Sable Point in Michigan and become becalmed. I wish *Wombat* wasn't sailing out there in the middle of the lake. Let's hope they get headed by a northeasterly!

10 p.m. | It's a dead heat with four other boats now off Big Sable, Mich. *Wombat* is still sailing in the middle of the lake. Still, heavy fog but with 12 knots of breeze — strange. We hear a freighters fog horn and engines getting closer — oh great. Where is it? Radar can see me ... right? Keep pressing away from the beach!

MONDAY, JULY 21

4 a.m. | Point Betsy's lighthouse, the first significant mark in the race, is clearly visible. A northwesterly has come in and we are fighting to make it around the light. Almost all of my competition has been sucked into the Michigan beach other than *Wombat*. We don't know it but we are neck and neck for the lead with *Wombat*.

5 a.m. | I am desperately trying to clear Point Betsy. The wind is building and the entire crew is on the rail keeping *Flyer* on her feet. We are literally only 200 yards off the light and I am growing anxious about going aground. A tack out into the lake will cost us time with *Wombat*, but I've got to do it. I have spent years perfecting *Flyer's* hull and keel. I can't risk this.

7 a.m. | I have been on watch since 2 a.m. We are around Point Betsy and heading for Sleeping Bear Dunes. Skies have cleared but it's a windy, cold morning. I turn the boat over to John Huff and try and get some sleep. I fear that *Wombat* has gotten this northwesterly first and took off. No sooner am I in my bunk when the crew starts yelling at me, "We just crossed *Wombat* by 100 feet!" Holy cow! I know for the first time that we are the lead boat. After 200 miles, we are seconds ahead of my longtime fieriest competitor. After the elation, reality sets in — for the next 130 miles, it's going to be a match race with one of my nemesis. Who is going to have the stamina? I am! John and I quickly set up our strategy: cover, cover, and cover — don't let them get away. No time for sleep, have to keep pressing.



PHOTO: JIM CORBOY

11 a.m. | Each boat starts playing the wind shifts off the islands and landmasses. *Amateur II* is third and taking advantage by watching who makes out going where. Suddenly, it's a three boat race with three more boats a few miles behind. I am sure they are hoping for the wind to die so they can steam up from behind. It's intense racing — one design racing at its best. With every wind shift there is heartbreak or elation as the lead changes constantly back and forth. I am surprised to be getting calls and messages from my friends across the country watching *American Flyer* on the race tracker, all with the same message, "Keep it going!" It's exhilarating but exhausting.

Noon | Wind is getting fluky and light. I have to get some sleep. I know it's going to be a long night that will decide the race. Chill, Steve, don't burn out and sprint too early. Let John beat them up for a while.



PHOTO: JIM CORBOY

3 p.m. | I come up to see how we are doing. I am told a big boat has been messing around with us, trying to get by and give us dirty air. Unfortunately, this has caused *Wombat* and *Amateur* to move ahead. The wind dies and we fall into a "wind hole" ... the competition leaves us behind.

8 p.m. | It's gray and cold as the wind has picked up considerably and blowing out of the north. Everyone's on the rail and I am trying to catch up to *Amateur* and *Wombat* before the last major turning at Grays Reef light. Because it's a northerly, I am afraid it will become a parade the last 25 miles to the Mackinac Island, leaving me little tactical options to make up ground.

9 p.m. | We get our first break — we take advantage of a temporary wind shift that has put us significantly ahead of *Amateur*. One down, one more to go. It's getting dark, windier, and we are about to make the turn at Grays Reef. Now I need the wind to die, but it keeps building.

10 p.m. | We round Grays Reef. The wind has picked up to about 17+ knots. It starts to rain so hard and cold that it stings and is difficult to see. In the distance, I see a white beacon approaching. In the dark and rain it's confusing at first as to what it is, and then it comes to me — it's an iron-ore freighter coming right at us. I have the entire crew on the rail gutting it out. Because of the closeness of our competition, they haven't slept in 20 hours, have had little to eat, and are now shivering in the rain on the rail, keeping *American Flyer* going as fast as possible and wondering if a freighter is going to run us down all the while. What a great crew!

11 p.m. The finish | About five miles from the finish, the rain stops but not the wind. We have shaved five minutes off of *Wombat's* lead but it's not enough. After some 60 hours of straight racing, we finish second to *Wombat* by 5.5 minutes. We are tired, cold, wet, and hungry but we gave it all we had. Later we learn that we finished 14th out of the entire 400+ Mackinac fleet, which lifts our spirits a little, but it's not enough. We like winning and at a midnight dinner we start talking about next year. ☺