

SOUNDINGS®

Racing to Alaska for a pile of cash

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The Hitia 17 catamaran of the Searunners team might not be the fastest boat in the Race to Alaska, but it's versatile, with a simple sailing rig, two paddles and, possibly, a bicycle-like propulsion setup.

"The most engaging conversation is an argument." That's how Jake Beattie frames his proposal, which, of course, is a take on messing about in boats. Beattie is executive director of the non-profit Northwest Maritime Center in Port Townsend, Washington, and he advanced the idea for the Race to Alaska: 750 miles, no engines, no support, no excuses.

Open to any and all vessels using wind and/or muscle for propulsion, the Race to Alaska (www.r2ak.com) starts June 4 outside Beattie's office window and takes the fleet across the Juan de Fuca Strait to Victoria, British Columbia. From there the race will continue north through the Gulf Islands, the Strait of Georgia and up the Inside Passage. The finish line beckons in Ketchikan, Alaska, where the winner stands to collect a cash prize of \$10,000, nailed to the trunk of a spruce tree. The trophy for the runner-up? A set of steak knives. Simple and straightforward, yes. Easy? Not so much.

It started with some brainstorming at the Wooden Boat Festival a couple of years ago — mildly infused by microbrews — in a small circle that included folks who'd give their right arm for almost anything, as long as it involves small boats and big adventures. "This thing got sticky," Beattie recalls. "I let it simmer for nearly a year before I committed."

His original inspiration came from a month cruising the Gulf of California on a Hobie Cat he'd bought for \$600 on location and sold at the end of the trip. But the idea was just the start. He then managed to tap private donors through crowd-funding and corporate sponsors who got on board to promote boating in its purest and perhaps most exciting form: man and nature, or man against nature, and not much in between. Reconnecting with the water and "our inheritance" is an important metaphysical aspect of the race, Beattie says, adding that he wanted to "make it wide open and unpredictable."

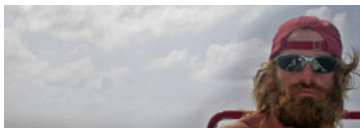
Why not call it the Race for Forrest Gump's Box of Chocolates? If anybody can show up and bring any vessel, anything can happen. And that is precisely what fuels the desired argument. Besides, it's reminiscent of the legendary Sunday Times Golden Globe Race of 1968, the granddaddy of extreme sailboat races, which was open to all comers, provided they sailed around the planet via the great capes, solo and non-stop. Their prize money: 5,000 pounds (around \$121,000 today).

It attracted a gaggle of colorful, heroic, poetic and tragic characters, including the likes of Bernard Moitessier and Donald Crowhurst, and a diverse assemblage of boats. Those who could have or should have won didn't. And the guy who did, Robin Knox-Johnston, took home the big check, not because he was the fastest on the water but because he managed to hold boat, body and mind together.

Simmered down to the essentials, that's what Beattie hopes to re-create on a more modest scale — a race for mildly (or wildly) eccentric characters, people who know how to build boats, know the ocean, seek adventure and can take care of themselves without phoning Mom. People who go small and simple and who revere the journey more than the finish. And Beattie is not entirely sadistic, as evidenced by the fact that there is a short course, a 40-mile prologue to Victoria, with a separate classification. Most participants probably will call it quits then and there. After a lay day, it's showtime for the fools, freaks and fighters who'll tackle the 710 remaining miles to Ketchikan.

What makes matters even more unpredictable is that June is neither spring nor summer in the Pacific Northwest. The days will be long, and fog might linger off the coast. It could be calm; it could be breezy. It could be sunny, or there might be lashing rain. The only guarantee is that the water will be cold and the currents fierce, especially at Seymour Narrows, one of the two mandatory waypoints.

That area stuck in the memory of Thomas Manby, who sailed as a mate with Capt. George Vancouver, the man who in the late 18th century charted these waters, which resemble a placid millpond one moment and a raging river with supersize eddies and whirlpools the next. Their vessels — the Discovery and the armed tender *Chatham* — "stood through the narrow pass, the tide rushing along like lightning, it running at least ten knots an hour," Manby wrote. If that sounds over the top, consult the chart of the Inside Passage and count the place names that contain the word "rapids."



Made to measure for adventurers

"You might have to wait it out," says Canadian adventurer Colin Angus. "I had 10 knots of tide [pushing] when I went through there, but it picks up quickly, so exact timing and tide strategy



Canadian adventurer Colin Angus (here rowing across the Atlantic) will be one of the nortable entrants in the race.

will be important.”

Angus, who circumnavigated the globe on muscle power only from 2004 to 2006 by rowing, paddling, biking and hiking, plans to participate in a DIY boat, a tandem rowing trimaran of sorts that he’s building to his own design. But he also kicks around what-ifs, the strengths and weaknesses of certain types of boats leveraged against the grab bag of conditions he expects along these 750 miles. “Under ideal circumstances, a sailboat might win,” he says.

On his blog, he compares elapsed times of long-distance rowers and sailboats that have raced around Vancouver Island. The fastest times for this 580-mile multistage contest (73 hours for a rather dated Formula 40 catamaran) don’t induce vertigo, considering the potential speeds of some sailboats. The 131-foot trimaran *Spindrift 2* (the former *Banque Populaire V*) covered more than 900 miles in 24 hours at an average of nearly 38 knots, so a stretch of 750 miles would constitute a decent day at the office. Even at half that speed or half that size, a modern multihull probably would win this thing hands down. Last year, a MOD70 trimaran won the 1,800-mile Race Around Britain and Ireland in three days and change, averaging better than 23 knots.

One can only hope that the multimillion-dollar rockets won’t show up for the first edition of the Race to Alaska, aka R2AK. They’d be the guys who bring a gun to a fistfight because most contestants will be on tight budgets, such as the Seattle-based team of Thomas Nielsen. Nielsen is an adventure paddler, sailor and former member of the Canadian Coast Guard, and teammate Scott Veirs is a marine scientist. They call themselves the Searunners and plan to campaign a garage-built Hitia 17, a traditional James Wharram catamaran design made of plywood and fiberglass. It sports a small Polynesian crab-claw rig, and it might get fitted with a leg-driven mechanism that resembles a recumbent bicycle. “We don’t want to put all our money on one horse,” Nielsen says, “so we’ll carry paddles, too.”

Being able to fix things using simple means also is important. If the mast breaks, Nielsen says, it could be fixed or replaced by chopping down the right size timber on shore along the way. For emergency gear, they’ll carry a SPOT satellite tracker, personal locator beacons, a VHF, flares and mobile phones, some of which is mandatory, some optional.

The boat also has enough space to lie down inside the hulls and to stow provisions — 160,000 calories of food (“enough for 15 days”) but no watermaker. Instead, Veirs and Nielsen hope to collect rainwater from their sail. “We did some analysis and a data crunch of the weather forecast (and) believe it will be more about sailing than paddling,” Nielsen says.

They estimate a winning time of around 10 days but maintain healthy respect for the venue. “In the Johnstone Strait, with current running against the wind and big standing waves, I once put the mast of a Westsail 28 in the water,” Nielsen says. That’s the equivalent of a rollover in a tank.

Open to all, but with limits

There won’t be an arms race, at least not for the Searunners. They spent about \$2,000 on the construction of their cat and plan to do the whole adventure for around \$5,000 total. To them, Nielsen notes, it’s “more about the adventure,” not about the money. That, in all likelihood, is also true for Shane Perrin, one of the 16 entrants at the time of this writing, who plans to do the “full Monty.” His vessel? A custom 19-foot standup paddleboard.


Beattie hopes for 80 entries — for both courses — who’ll pay an entry fee by the close of registration April 15. Participants will be vetted by a committee that scrutinizes all applications and interviews the prospective racers. Since there will be no support boats and competitors will be responsible for their own safety, that’s a prudent step, designed to keep rescue and towing operations to a manageable level. To collect stragglers and strugglers along the route, a slow sag wagon will leave Port Townsend as soon as the first boat finishes in Ketchikan. One who won’t be thinking about that option is Luke Yeates, from Southampton, England, whose resume includes a sail around Great Britain in 27 days on a Formula 18 catamaran in 2006. “Finding a suitable and fast boat locally is a challenge,” he says, “so we are looking for other European competitors to share a shipping container.”

And that’s how it has to be. For many, the Race to Alaska will be preceded by a race to the race. But if they make it, they will have a voice in the argument Beattie invoked. And settling it conclusively could be one of the most amusing affairs to watch unfold this year.

Although most folks will be dying to know who’ll peel the stack of Ben Franklins from that spruce tree in Ketchikan, my sympathy is reserved for whoever will have to settle for the steak knives. My heartfelt condolences. And a big hug.

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