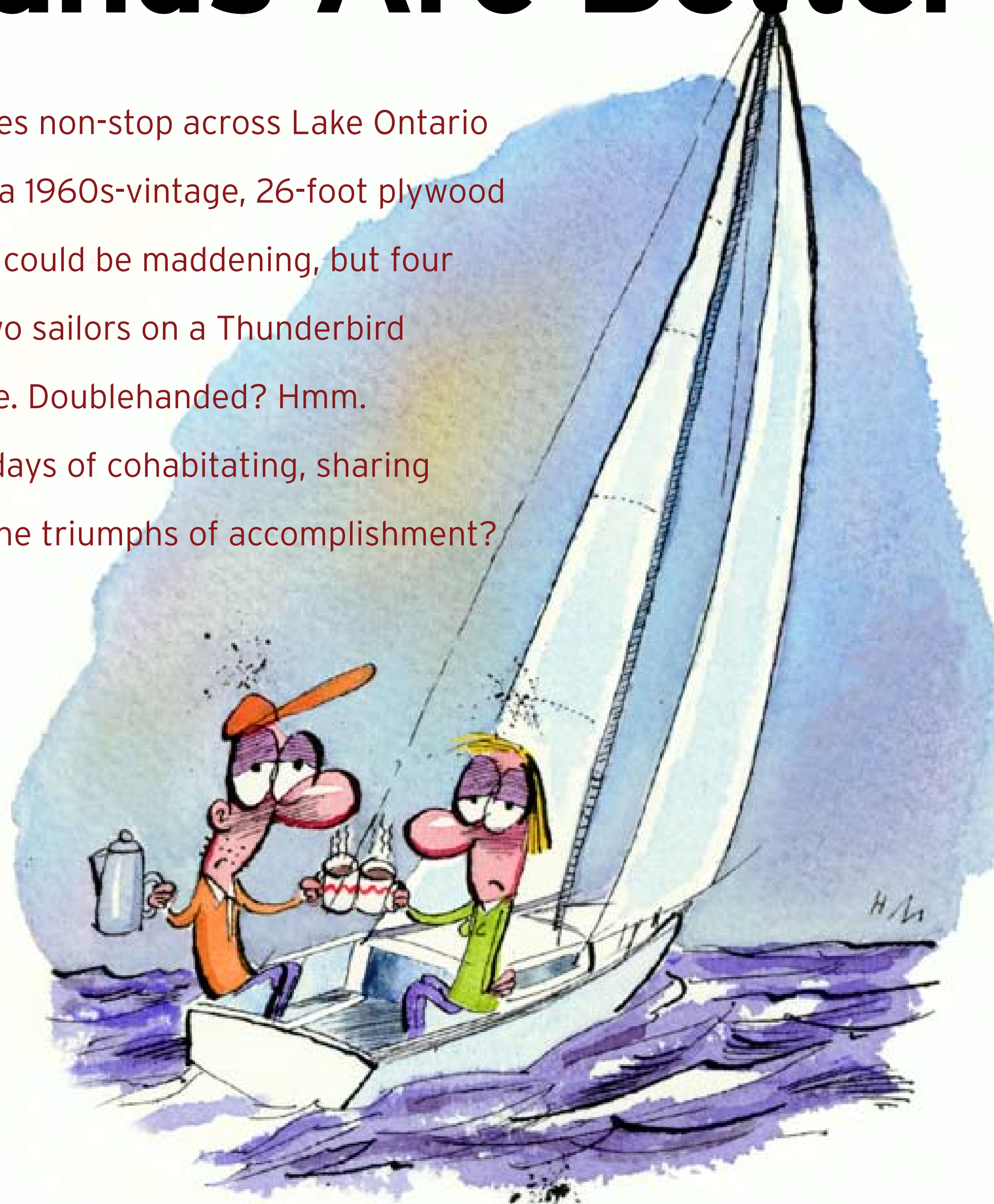
Four Hands Are Better Than Two

BY DIANE REID
WITH BILL RUSSELL

Three-hundred nautical miles non-stop across Lake Ontario is a lot of water to cover in a 1960s-vintage, 26-foot plywood Thunderbird. To do it alone could be maddening, but four days with any more than two sailors on a Thunderbird would be utterly unbearable. Doublehanded? Hmm. That's interesting. Several days of cohabitating, sharing the agonies of defeat and the triumphs of accomplishment? OK, sign us up.



HAL MAYFORTH

Daylight is barely breaking. Our eyes are adjusting to the new and brightening light. The wind is dying fast . . . again. A handful of fishing boats are heading out as they do every morning, just as you or I would drive to work. People are walking their dogs along the lake front, looking out and probably wondering what such a little sailboat is doing out so early in the morning. They have no idea what we've endured over the last 91 hours and 300 nautical miles. We are clammy. Our gear is sodden and strewn from stem to stern. The toilet paper is depleted, though there's still dry ice in the cooler. We are tired, mentally exhausted beyond imagination and a little ripe, too, despite our best efforts with baby wipes. The finish line is so close we can almost touch it. We want to finish. We need to finish. We need a shower, a stable porcelain head, and a meal not served "boil-in-a-bag" style. We need to end this race.

Rewind 55 hours. My crewmate Bill Russell and I are close to putting behind us the first leg of the Solmar 300. The Solmar is a circumnavigation, if you will, of Lake Ontario, the easternmost of the Great Lakes, which bears nearly 7,000 miles of sailable fresh water. This annual race was created for, and has long been a staple event for, the region's shorthanded sailing set. Bill and I are on our second attempt in as many years. Our craft of choice in the doublehanded division—an unlikely choice for others, I'm sure—is the 26-foot Thunderbird. *That Damn Thang*, No. 647, is a 1964 edition. It's plywood construction, hard-chinned, and fractionally rigged. Inside you'll find only a head with a four-liter holding tank and one, long continuous quarter berth. No running water, no alternator, no nav station, no galley, no standing headroom, no furling anything. Its accommodations are neither palatial nor luxurious, but luxury doesn't complement such an addictive test of character.

Our course on this is east, to Main Duck Island, located in the far northeastern end of the lake. The kite has been up and down countless times, and the No. 1 is eased. We've covered 150 nautical miles in about 36 hours. A Thunderbird is not a Mumm 30, but as we approach Main Duck we can see a Mumm 30, a J/109, and a Cartwright 44 coming toward us from the backside of the island. They've made it around, and they're only a couple of hours ahead of us. We're close enough to be a challenge to them, but we have our own challenge at hand, including getting around that island before dark.

Last year, at the 36-hour mark we were only 67 miles into the race. We were becalmed, being eaten alive by flies that left half-inch welts. We'd had absolutely no sleep and were suffering caffeine withdrawal headaches beyond tolerance. We calculated that if we continued racing, we'd be rounding Main Duck in the dark, in the shoals, and in possible danger from sleep deprivation in shipping lanes, so we retired, determined to fix our problems for the next time around. Our to-do list included companionway netting, bug suits, bug spray, his and hers French-press coffee mugs, better sleeping accommodations (a longer berth for Bill) and watches to which we'd adhere.

Ocean sailors have rituals when they first cross the equator. As we cross the 36-hour line, we cheer our first accomplishment of the race. In celebrating our achievement, we're also observing the result of our better preparation for this race, which I promise you, had no end. One need only read the "mandatory safety equipment list" for the race to get a better appreciation. For *That Damn Thang*, the labor started one year earlier with construction on the boat's cabin-top slider and all of its hatches. They needed to be watertight, easily locked, and very much a secure and integral part of the boat. So we built new ones—by hand. Wait a minute. What's this on the list about lifelines? Thunderbirds don't have lifelines. But we do have a jack line system, so it had better work. But what if either Bill or I go overboard? How hard would it be to get back on the boat?

So off we went for some experiments. We motored out to the bay, dropped anchor, donned our floater suits and harnesses, and each took our turn going overboard while tethered to the jack line. All up, I'm 5'2" and about 150 pounds. Bill, on the other hand, is beyond six-feet and weighs about 215 pounds dry. Suffice it to say, the only way I found I could get him out of the water if he was unconscious would be to disconnect the mainsheet, swing it out with the boom and "hoist" him out of the water. After our recovery practice, Bill and I set the ground rules. Rule No. 1: Stay on the boat. Rule No. 2: Stay on the boat.

I'm reminded of this on our second night. It's dark and the shoreline is unfamiliar. The bright city lights are disorienting and play with our night vision, and the glow illuminates an approaching storm. This time, though, our concern is less about staying on the boat, but rather knowing where we are. The sea is too rough to allow us to plot, and we don't have a precise idea about how close we are to the approaching shore. Next time we'll study the charts better.

We may not know exactly where we are all the time, but we're comfortable in knowing we have enough battery power and food to finish, unlike last year when we were only 20 hours into the race when the generator decided to stop recharging the batteries. We didn't have enough battery power to complete the mandatory six-hourly VHF check-in with the Coast Guard. And if you don't check in, they eventually send helicopters out to find you.

There may be two of us onboard, but doublehanded racing is essentially singlehanded racing. With exception to the mid-day and dinner-time hours, I'm alone on deck while Bill attempts to sleep below, and vice versa. Deep sleep never comes to either of us. Eyes closed, bundled below alongside the mast, there's always a gentle drip, drip happening somewhere inside the boat, and just enough crashing and bashing or intense sweltering heat to deny anything close to REM.

And on a Thunderbird there is no privacy. I'm comfortable with my baby-wipe routine in the cockpit. Fortunately, my teammate is, too. This is after all a team effort, and collectively we bring enough talents to make up for a full complement of crew. We are tactician, bowman, driver, navigator, trimmer, and rail meat.

With such responsibilities spread across two individuals, we accept that the boat simply can't go as fast as it could fully crewed, no matter our expectations. Our reaction times are delayed, our decisions are delayed, weight doesn't balance the boat, and we regularly decide where to compromise and "what's good enough, under the circumstances." Fully crewed, it would only take us four minutes to change from a No. 1 to a No. 3 in 25 knots. But that's not how it goes on *That Damn Thang*. Instead, picture Bill, straddling the bow like a rodeo cowboy. He tucks the new sail under one butt cheek while he unhanks the old one. Then he switches sails and cheeks, hanks on the new sail, lugs the old sail to the back of the boat, and stuffs it down the companionway. Twenty minutes doesn't seem that bad. We'll do it again in an hour anyway: back up to the No. 1, then to the blade, and again back to the No. 1.

Shorthanded racing makes you a better sailor faster. Each race teaches us something new. This time, it's that a fire on a wooden boat is very bad, indeed. Bill is behind the traveler, or about three feet from the transom, reaching to leeward and rinsing out our coffee mugs. The stove is lit for the morning's coffee with the pot of water on to boil. Bill looks up and shouts, "Fire!" With a clumsy leap (remember he's 6-foot and the cockpit is only five) he flings himself forward to the companionway, trips over the traveler, and lands on the plastic coffee container. It explodes and coffee grounds go everywhere. But with a mighty thrust before the final wipeout through the companionway, he flings a mug of lake water at the little burner, instantly extinguishing the flame. With the fire out, the boat and our lives are saved, but the stove is definitely out of commission.

I'm afraid to ask, but I do anyway. "Do you think you could scoop up the grounds off of the cockpit floor and use some of that lukewarm water to make us some coffee?"

We never could figure out what started the fire. We will never know, and besides the stove seems to work fine now. That's the way it is in shorthanded racing. They say it gets in your soul. Well, the coffee grounds also get in your pants.

Ed.'s note: Reid and Russell finished in 3d:18h:45m, and over breakfast the morning they finished, they planned their next attempt.