

Sports

Newport Bermuda Race makes waves in 2010

A true ocean crossing with no sight of land for most of its 635 nautical miles, the biennial Newport Bermuda Race pits small boats against large and amateur crews against pros in what may be the most coveted sailing title of the North Atlantic.

The 2010 event launches from Newport, R.I., on June 18, arriving at Bermuda three to five days later, with prizes awarded on June 26 (bermudarace.com).

Although a straight line from Newport to Hamilton would be about 162° magnetic, the winds and currents change constantly, requiring sophisticated tactics. Early in the course, warm, swift currents of the Gulf Stream can either speed a boat along or throw up obstacles. They also generate violent squalls and choppy seas, which challenge crews to plan well and react quickly.

Since 2006, onboard transponders have relayed positions to a web site that gets thousands of hits from around the world. Sailors can even check on their competitors.

Later in the race, winds are lighter and concentration is the key. According to veteran Sheila McCurdy, “The water is warm, the sun is hot and the crews yearn to reach Bermuda. Only in the last 20 or 25 miles can the competitors glimpse the low profile of Bermuda rising from the horizon. Excitement builds as other boats come into sight, converging for the final sprint to the finish line.”

Once across the line, boats proceed to the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, and crew members finally get to join the party.

“If the Newport Bermuda Race is any one thing, it’s historic,” sums up race historian John Rousmaniere. Founded by Thomas Fleming Day and *The Rudder* magazine in 1906, race management has been a joint venture of the Cruising Club of America and the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club since 1926. In the early years, it launched from Brooklyn, N.Y., then from Marblehead, Mass., New London, Conn. and Montauk, N.Y., finally settling in at Newport in 1936.

Sometimes called “the thrash to the Onion Patch,” the largest fleet was 265 contenders (the centennial year of 2006); the smallest fleet was two (1910). The fastest race ever was by *Pywacket* (2002) in 53:39:22. The largest winner was *Margaret* (1909) at 93 feet. The smallest, *Burgoon* (1964) at 37 feet.

The record for most races by a single boat was 15 by *Emily* (1978–2004); by a single sailor, 30 by Jim Mertz (1936–2004, every race but two). Only two boats have ever won multiple times, *Finisterre* (1956, 1958, 1960) and *Baruna* (1938, 1946). Two boats have been lost, *Adriana* (1932, one sailor died in a fire) and *Elda* (1956, she ran up on a reef).

The first female skipper was Queene Hooper Foster (1986). The oldest winning skipper was DeCoursey Fales (74 years, 1962); the youngest, Kyle Weaver (22 years, 1992).

Why do so many endure the sometimes-gruelling Newport Bermuda Race? McCurdy counts the ways: “I am competitive. I am drawn to the sparse simplicity of life on the ocean. I love the teamwork and friendship of the crew. I love weighing the strategies and tactics. I love seeing Bermuda rise from the horizon on a starry night or pink morning. I love the stories of triumph and excuse at the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club as the fatigue and frustrations of the race wash away with the first shower and cold drink.”

Anchored by the Newport Bermuda Race, the Onion Patch Series is a triumvirate starting with the New York Yacht Club Annual Regatta’s fast-paced, round-the-buoys sailing, moving on to the transatlantic Newport Bermuda, then winding

down with the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club's Anniversary Regatta on Great Sound. Amateur crews in smaller yachts fare quite well since the series combines a diverse range of skills that tend to level the playing field.