



# SURVIVING ST. CLAIR

A solo-sailing rookie experiences some hard knocks and good times while competing on the Great Lakes

BY **JOSH ADAMS**; PHOTOS BY **PETER MCGOWAN**

**C**ome on, autopilot. Don't fail me now. Time is running out before my start in the PHRF B class of the 40-mile St. Clair Solo race. So far, the way things are going on board *Taz*, a borrowed Tartan Ten, my first solo race is turning into the Debacle in Detroit.

After punching in commands for the pilot to make a 40-degree turn into the eye of the wind, I move forward in the cockpit to shake a reef out of the main; the strong northwester generated by a fast-moving low-pressure system has dropped to under 20 knots, and my class competitors—two Abbott 33s and a Kirby 33—are carrying full main. In my final stride to the halyard winches my attached tether goes taut, tugging me to the cockpit floor just as the boat swings through the wind and unexpectedly turns to a run. There's no time to figure out what went wrong with the pilot—operator error, I figure—as three

**Calm before the storm: The author practices on the Tartan Ten *Taz* (above) on the eve of his first solo race**

boats approach me from three different directions, with no helmsman in sight on any of them. I disengage the pilot, hand-steer to avoid a collision with a Corsair 31, a J/41, and the Kirby, and sail away from traffic to gather my thoughts. The 5-minute gun sounds as storm clouds darken the morning sky. This is obviously going to be a long day.

About 30 seconds after the start off Crescent Sail Yacht Club, I push *Taz* across the line. So much for my starting advantage as a round-the-buoys sailor. My plan now is to hand-steer to the first turning mark, a channel light 2 miles from the start. Once I'm there, I can bear away 10 degrees, set the pilot's course for the next mark 15 miles away on the Canadian shore (in this part of Michigan, Canada is to the *south*), and do some housekeeping. *Taz* appears to have a small advantage on this point of sail, but I can't imagine hand-steering for much longer without a break. One of the Abbott sailors has gone to his pilot, and already I'm making a mental list of things I need to do once I get away from the tiller—prepare the first reef, eat some food, add a layer of clothing, review the course numbers for the next leg.

*Taz* enjoys a small lead at the light. The waves are getting bigger, rolling under the hull's port quarter. I set the pilot, unclip, and head below. As I reach the

companionway, a large wave lifts the transom and throws the bow to windward. While the pilot struggles to correct *Taz*'s course, the boat falls down the back side of the wave, doubling the pilot's steering action to leeward. The boat is about to gybe. I rush to the tiller and regain control, panicking as I realize that in this sea state I can't leave the helm. I seem to be the only one having this problem. As Judge Mangile's Abbott 33, *Trilogy*, rolls *Taz* to windward, he waves from his comfortable seated position in the cockpit while his boat steers itself.

After several attempts at getting the pilot to work in these waves, losing boatlengths every time, I revert to the Joshua Slocum school of auto-helming and tie a line to a stern cleat and then to the tiller. I set the boat on a slightly high course to load the helm. It works long enough for me to get below and grab the things I need, but doesn't give me time to hit the head or tuck in a reef for the long beat back to Michigan. At the turning mark I'm standing last in class, feeling battered, and my mind has me believing the upwind course to the finish at Clinton River is literally uphill.

Things get harder on the beat—a tack that turns into a gybe, too much main up, and so on—before my fortune starts to change as the skies open up and the wind drops off a bit. No longer struggling to survive, I can now think tactically. The fleet is compact—in the span of 20 minutes, *Taz* crosses tacks with the J/41 *Big Red Dog*, a C&C 34, the Abbotts, a Shark 24, and *Ratso*, a Cayenne 40 cutter. I decide that nibbling away at small windshifts was producing only marginal gains on the boats in my class. With 12 miles to go, I need to make a move.

A gambler running low on chips, I put it all on black and sail west of the fleet. My interpretation of the pre-race forecast tells me there should still be some west left in the wind by late afternoon, as the low moves out and the sky clears. Here's a contrast from racing round the buoys. On a short racecourse, betting on a windshift to the left usually means sailing 2 to 5 minutes on starboard tack. I hang out there for 45 minutes, coaching the wind all the way: "Come on, west. Come on, west." Fortunately for *Taz*, the wind swings left, and for the first time in hours I feel in control, enjoying a slight lead in class that I hold onto to the finish. Everyone on board agrees: this is beginner's luck.

**T**WO HOURS LATER, I STOOD IN THE HEART OF U.S. AMATEUR singlehanded sailing—around an open barbeque at North Star Sail Club with members of the Great Lakes Singlehanded Society. We admired our extra-large steaks cooking on the grill and shared the satisfaction of having completed a windy solo race. Conversation rarely strayed



Good things happened to *Taz* when the sun started to shine

from three main topics—racecourse war stories (the Abbotts' short-tacking prowess, the odd upwind sail configuration of a #3 *only* on Bill Dembek's *Big Red Dog*, and the slippery Shark 24, winner on corrected time); solo races to Mackinac Island (the prize challenge in Great Lakes singlehanded); and the ever-popular subject of auto-helming. It turned out I wasn't the only one with pilot problems on the long reach to Canada. Many others gripped their helms for the entire downwind leg before getting a break on the beat, where underpowered pilots performed better in the waves.

Though at times my 7-hour race seemed to rival some of the more difficult offshore miles I've sailed on crewed boats, the St. Clair Solo is one of the GLSS's easier races. It's a popular fall event—30 entries this year—and a good launch pad for first-timers. To help new singlehanders get up to speed, the GLSS has a mentor program and runs a safety seminar in the spring. The mentor helps you meet safety requirements and prepare for the two long races to Mackinac Island, which start on the same day in June from Port Huron, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois. You need to log at least 100 miles solo, including 24 hours consecutively, and submit a résumé and application to enter a Mac race; it's not uncommon for the GLSS to reject an applicant for lack of experience. Completing a Mac earns you lifetime membership in the GLSS. There are 200

Off to a rough start, *Taz* gets rolled by an Abbott 33 (left). Veteran singlehander Dave Evans on *Ratso* uses the St. Clair Solo to tune up for a transatlantic race (right)





All kinds enter the 40-mile St. Clair Solo. *Wildcard*, a Gougeon 31, was one of six multihulls (above). Luke Brockman paced his speedy 24-footer to first overall on corrected time (right)

members—or, as one sailor points out, fewer than the number of people who’ve been in outer space.

The racing spirit is noncompetitive, a result of the organization’s cruising roots and safety-first attitude. Twenty-five years ago, a group of cruisers wanted company while sailing their boats long distances to popular cruising grounds, like the North Channel. They would race to a designated harbor, meet their families, and continue on extended cruises. The sailors became hooked on the shorthanded challenge, and word spread. Though it remains a grass-roots sailing organization, GLSS occasionally produces a solo star—Steve Pettengill and Tim Kent, for example—who goes on to race around the world.

The first Port Huron-to-Mackinac Singlehanded Challenge was held in 1979. Of the 22 starters, only five failed to reach the island. According to GLSS history, many of the skippers in the inaugural race “swore never again. However, 11 veteran skippers plus 34 new solo adventurers decided to try it in 1980.”

Motivations for racing solo on the Great Lakes vary.

**Well done: The fleet of Midwestern solo racers celebrated their day-long challenge with an all-you-can-eat steak feast**



Bob Van Eck, who sails a J/40 out of Lake Huron, offers a racer’s viewpoint: “You’ll learn more about your boat in a 50-hour solo race than you would in 10 years.” Lake Erie’s Wally McMinn, who sails a Catalina 400 adequately equipped for cruising, competes to complete. “I’m the cruising representative in the society,” he said. “I keep my anchors up front, dinghy in the back, and my boat has a fully enclosed cockpit.”

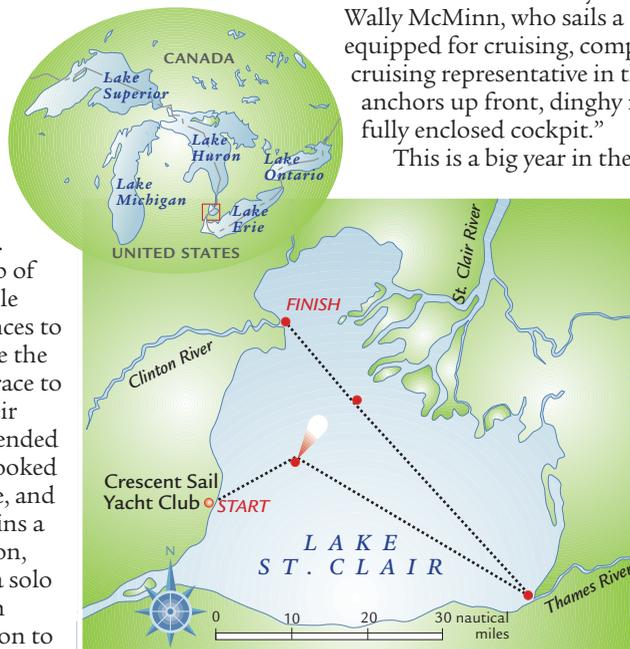
This is a big year in the GLSS. The Mac races will run

as usual. In addition, the 380-mile Trans-Superior race debuts in August and the 600-mile Super Mac is held for the few Mac racers who decide to sail past the island and continue to the opposite harbor. This race is held every three years, and only 20 sailors have completed it since its inception in 1981. “The hardest part is passing up the island and the party,” said McMinn.

Canadian Dave Evans, a veteran of 22 Mac races, will be conspicuously absent this

year, but with good reason. He plans to sail *Ratso* (OSTAR backwards) to Plymouth, England, and enter the amateur transatlantic race. He raced the OSTAR (then titled Europe 1) in 1996 and has completed two Bermuda 1-2s. Now the solo transatlantic race is divided into two races—last year’s mostly professional group of trimaran and Open Class racers and this summer’s race for, in Evans’s words, “also-rans,” amateur sailors with boats of all types.

As Dan Pavlat, race chairman and *Taz*’s owner, prepared to hand out GLSS burgees to class winners, a range of moods filled the room of singlehanders. I, like many others, was in a pleasant steak-and-beer coma. Evans bounded enthusiastically around the room trying to sell T-shirts to raise money for his transatlantic adventure. Viking 28 sailor Noel Brockman, the father of young Luke, who crushed the competition on corrected time with his 24-foot *Loanshark*, sat quietly and seemingly satisfied—a proud dad. Ken Blyth appeared to be the only person in the room feeling a sense of urgency. He planned to sail home to Canada—that night—which he estimated was a four-hour reach in 5 to 15 knots of wind. “I promised my wife I’d play with her in a golf tournament tomorrow,” he said. “But I had to get my steak first.”



Map illustration by Pip Hurm

 For a complete calendar of U.S. shorthanded sailing events in 2005, go to [sailmagazine.com](http://sailmagazine.com)