

The Perfect Crash



“We pushed on with our tails between our scuppers and our reefed enthusiasm.”

AN ALBACORE ON THE EDGE

By Charles Stone

The concept was simple: to find a willing friend and sail our Albacore 15 *Shark Bait* around Kent Island. The execution of this plan would be anything but simple. The venture began two years ago when I had the idea to enter our boat in the annual Run What You Brung Regatta. The race would begin in Eastern Bay, south of Kent Narrows, and end just north of the narrows in the Chester River, a course of about 32 miles. We dropped out due to light air that year, and two years later I began the preparations for my second attempt in the 2007 event on September 29.

I sailed the little boat several times, even in conditions up to 15 knots, checking the

new layout—with reconfigured control lines and replaced halyards—to be sure she would be comfortable for what my crew Mike and I expected to be about six hours on the water.

The day before the race, we were both charged up with excitement. With a front coming through, the winds were holding and predicted to be 15 to 20 knots from the north. It meant that we would have a long beat up the Bay with three- to four-foot chop. I decided to change the main to the smaller sail. Just in case, I stowed the larger main and the alternate jib in the forward compartment. All the important stuff was placed in water-tight bags: flares, radio, identification, cell phone, food, and drinks.

Friday night we went to the captains meeting to get the instructions. There was a serious tone in Chris's voice as he revealed the 20-knot prediction for the start. Billy was quite jovial about the whole affair, since he had spent a lot of time organizing it. I told everyone at the meeting that someone had better have a camera ready, because it was very likely that we would not be able to keep our little boat upright. Either way, up or down, it would be spectacular.

I did not sleep well that night. I could hear the wind roaring outside the window, calling me. The alarm was set for six, but it would not be necessary. There was no chance I would miss this day. My heart

raced in tune to the rise and fall of the wind speed all night. I was running scenarios through my head. Tacks and gybes and even the possibility of setting the chute once we rounded the north end of the island. Finally, I could not take it any longer. I got out of bed at about 5:30 a.m., dressed in the dark, and went to the kitchen to make some coffee.

Once the daylight came, I was able to look out over the water. It was impressive. With a cloudless sky, the wind roared from the north pushing the water with it down the Bay. The predictions had been true. I stared at the water listening to the wind, hearing the fluctuations as it rose and fell off. The Bay was filled with white caps. At about 7 a.m., Mike came by, and we hooked up the trailer. Before we left, I kissed my wife, and she told us to be safe. All the time I was just thinking that we would be lucky if we could stay upright.

We launched the boat at the yacht club just south of the Narrows and proceeded to get all the gear aboard: foul weather gear, harnesses, life vests, food, and drinks. We rigged the sails and set off downwind to the start line. We were in for a ride. With some difficulty, we were able to set the smaller main, after making some adjustments since it hadn't been used. Once the sail was set, our speed increased dramatically. The boat quickly got up on a plane, up the back side of the three-foot chop off the top, and through the trough, never coming off plane the whole time. The water passed under us so quickly that we could not focus on it. We looked ahead to see how much room we had before we would need to tack.

At this point, we were just holding on. I had no intention of being anywhere close to the start line where the rest of the fleet was milling about. The thought of hurdling through the water on a collision course with a boat twice our size did not appeal to me. Besides, what difference would it make if we were 100 yards behind if we were traveling at 15 knots? The wind was gusting at or above 20. We had no idea how much wind we had since there was not any instrumentation to measure it. It did not matter. We just had to hold on. Soon came the time to tack. We were running out of water fast. Mike was at the helm, as I tended to the sheets. We quickly discussed the tack, and

Mike pushed the tiller down.

At that moment, a large gust was upon us, and a large wave lifted the windward rail high above the water. The combined motion forced the downwind rail into the water. As I looked in horror and amazement, the water poured into the boat, and the main hit the water. It was the perfect crash. Mike and I found ourselves in the water, entangled spider-web-style with all the lines. I reached in the boat to release the main sheet and to release the line that secured the scuppers on the transom. It did not take long for the little boat to become inverted, as the mast filled with water.

Fortunately, we had tied everything to

2007 RWYB REGATTA RACE RESULTS

The Run What You Brung Regatta, which coincides with the brightest full moon of the year, the harvest moon, was started nine years ago by two sailing buddies who decided to circumnavigate Kent Island. This year, 30 boats showed up for the memorably breezy September 29 event, which is one part PHRF race, one part cruiser's sail.

1. *Kestrel*.....Olson 30.....Al Holt
2. *Huck's Finn*.....Dehler 36.....Jeff Leigh
3. *Surprise*.....C&C 34.....Paul Behnke
4. *Carpe Ventum*.....Hunter 43 Legend..Chris Shultz
5. *C'est La Vie*.....Beneteau 345.....Jeff Leininger
6. *Sea Ya*.....Catalina 30.....Gordon Learn

To learn more, visit www.rwybregatta.org.

the boat. As Mike placed some pressure on the centerboard, we heard a crack. So, we did not place any more pressure on it. A passing boat asked if we needed them to call for assistance, and I asked them to give us about 10 minutes to get her up again. We got our weight on the rail, and the little boat slowly began the roll as the water passed over the main sail.

In no time *Shark Bait* was upright. The scuppers were open, and we sheeted her in to gain some speed in the water to get the automatic bailers to suck out some water. The water was up to the seats, and the boat plowed through the water. Mike used the hand bailer to assist. Within 10 minutes, we were back to a dry boat. We decided that maybe it was not our day for going around the island. We then made the decision to

make the upwind sail back to the yacht club landing and to abandon the race.

It was quiet on the boat as we focused on the task of getting upwind. We pushed on with our tails between our scuppers and our reefed enthusiasm. We dropped the jib and proceeded under main only, tacking back and forth in the wind against the ebb tide and our ebbing spirits.

As we sailed, we pushed toward the more sheltered side of the Bay close to Kent Island. We knew that there was shallow water in that area, so we were cautious about making sure to tack at the slightest sign of the shallows. Suddenly, the centerboard bumped. We heard a crack. The board broke off at the hull. Mike quickly jumped over to hold the boat, as I dropped the main sail. We proceeded to walk the boat to shore and drag her up on a mud flat to figure out what to do next.

We were fairly close to our destination, but a deep channel lay between us and the yacht club. As it would happen, the club was hosting a Hawaiian outrigger paddling race that day, and the paddlers were pushing past us as we stood on the mud flat. We ended up accepting a bumpy tow back to the club, which included running into the mud, rowing, and getting back into the water—unusually shallow from two days of wind blowing out the Bay—to pull *Shark Bait* to shore.

After a hot shower, we returned and pulled *Shark Bait* onto the trailer and home. We were saddened by not being able to make it to the start line. Various articles were strewn about the boat,

and the majority of the centerboard was floating somewhere south of Kent Island. We took our trophy, the upper stub of the centerboard, and regaled the events of the day to the partygoers at the after-race party.

One day we, "the little boat people," as some called us that day, may actually achieve the "round the island" goal that has eluded us. Until then, we can only look back on a very exciting day on the water.

About the Author: Charles Stone has been sailing for more than 20 years, including coastal cruising and club and offshore racing. He says, "I have never lost my love for a small boat. It is a very intimate relationship that is sometimes lost on a larger craft." He and his wife Tracey own an O'day 272 in addition to their Albacore 15 *Shark Bait*.