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Promises Kept

GEORGE TWICE TOUGAS

The 2011 Marion Bermuda Race was a huge milestone in my life. It is certainly one of those events I will never forget. Not only was it fantastic sail to Bermuda, it was an opportunity for me to keep a promise, fulfill many dreams, and develop brotherly relationships. As many people find, this is much more than just a "race."

Team Pescatore crossed the starting line of the 2011 Marion Bermuda Race in 40 knots of breeze. © Spectrum Photo/Fran Grenon

As we all know, planning for the MBR takes a great amount of time and effort. One experienced sailor told me, "planning for your next race starts the day you finish your last."

For me, planning for the 2011 MBR started back in 1983. My father was an avid and dedicated sailor. He has been my sailing hero for as long as I can remember. Watching the start of the 1983 MBR, we both decided it was time to start planning for a Bermuda Race. I was 15 years old and could not have been more excited. We talked about the race all the time – watch schedules, safety equipment, navigation, crew, etc. We attended a Safety at Sea Seminar that winter. To this day I remember the lunch break, when we were talking to other sailors. The excitement and anticipation was overwhelming.

As the 1985 race approached, my father decided we and the boat were not ready. He was asked to crew on a Bristol 45, but declined. I often wonder if this decision was based on the effect it would have had on me to be left behind. I did not start to ponder this until I became a father myself. As the years went by, the time was never "right." Our 1972 Gulfstar 41 Jane Anne III was getting older. She needed more work every year to make her race-ready. Life and time marched on. The dream was still there, but was slipping away.

The idea was rekindled in 1996. My parents decided it was time to sail the boat south! My father was going to finally live his dream, and simply sail away. The 1997 MBR became a popular topic as we were prepping the boat. I promised Dad I could get crew and prepare the boat. Dad would navigate and I would handle everything else. The dream was once again on the horizon.

After their headfoil broke the first night out, the crew performed sail changes the old-fashioned way. Left to right are Cam Tougas, Twice Tougas and Chance Jones. © Chuck Lord

I grew up sailing and had many miles under my belt. I knew our family boat well, and was comfortable or maybe naive enough, to think I could go anywhere. I am not sure my father agreed. One particular day in July of 1996, a storm was predicted to come though Buzzards Bay – southeast wind, blowing 30 knots plus. Many people were busy adding extra docklines and mooring lines. That afternoon, Dad called and suggested we take a sail, just the two of us. This was very uncharacteristic; he was typically a very conservative sailor! I jumped at the opportunity and off we went. As I drove the boat, with a reefed main and small jib, my father stood right behind me. He reached around a few times and grabbed the wheel, gently easing her in the direction he felt she should go. It was a rite of passage and a great experience. Bermuda here we come! In August, with Jane Anne sitting at the dock ready to head south, my father passed away unexpectedly. In the months that followed, I was wrestling with so much grief that the dream of Bermuda was temporarily lost. It was too painful to think about. Over the winter and into the next summer, I thought about it fleetingly, but was too busy to think more about it. But in the back of my mind, the thought of Bermuda kept nagging me. It was a promise I needed to keep, not only to myself, but also to Dad.

In 2001, Chip Johns was bringing his beautiful C&C 43 Margalo to the Caribbean. His plan was to spend the school year with his family, onboard Margalo, sailing through the Caribbean. Chip asked me to join him for the first leg, Marion to Bermuda. This was it – my opportunity to make the trip. I quickly said yes! As we sailed out of Marion Harbor I looked over at Jane Anne on her mooring. She and my father had never sailed into Bermuda.

I was doing this for both of them. The sail to Bermuda was amazing, and I learned an incredible amount from Chip. I also learned that growing up sailing on Buzzards Bay does not mean you can easily handle anything!

In 2005, I was asked by Sam Vineyard to do the race on his family's J/46, Hawke. After talking to my very understanding wife, I accepted Sam's offer. I left my wife, Becky, standing on the dock with our two sons. Cam was 10 and Luke was 4 weeks old. It was at that moment that I first saw the desire in Cam's eyes. He asked a question that ultimately led to me writing this article: "Dad, when can I race to Bermuda?" I made a promise to him that day that we would do the race together. I

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could tell that he believed me, and had faith I would someday come through. I would not let him down.

The team encountered more heavy air while crossing the Gulf Stream. © Jamie Ciffolillo

We had a great race in 2005. Hawke finished first in Class A! We worked hard as a team and Sam skippered the boat with great confidence and ability. Sam's father, Dr. Gordon Vineyard, was our navigator. As I watched Sam and Dr. Vineyard together, I could not help thinking of my father, and also of the promise I had made to Cam. The race was great, the finish was great, and the rum drinks at the Royal Hamilton Amateur Dinghy Club were great. But it had become very apparent that I needed to fulfill my promise – to reach the goal set in 1983. Somehow, some way, I would find a way race to Bermuda with my son. A new dream was also established; I wanted Becky waiting on the dock when we arrived! Having her there to greet us would make it even better.

Years passed and life rolled on, Cam continued to grow as a sailor and continued to remind me of my promise. In 2010, destiny stepped in. I bumped into a very old friend, Joe Ciffolillo, the older brother of one of my best friends. Joe mentioned he had recently bought a sailboat. Of course I asked what he had bought and he responded, "a Hinckley Sou'wester 59." The first thing out of my mouth was, "Do you want to do the Marion Bermuda Race?" Without hesitation he replied, "Yes."

A few weeks later, we met for dinner and finalized the decision – we were racing to Bermuda. I would do the all the organization, prepare boat and crew, and skipper the boat during the race. Joe is ultimately our Captain – the entire crew respects him as such, but he was going to allow me to run with this one. I started by assembling our crew. This was actually easy; I reached out to old friends and family first. Cam was obviously on my list, but since he would be just 16 at the time of the race, I felt I needed Joe's blessing. Joe, a dedicated father and family man, had no problems and Cam became official crew. Our crew of 10 consisted of old friends, new friends, brothers, a father, a son, and a boat named Pescatore (Fisherman in Italian).

I had sailed to Bermuda before, but never as a skipper and never as the one who organized and prepared for the entire race. I was responsible for safely delivering our crew to Bermuda. I took this responsibility very seriously, and knew I needed some help. I decided the best method was taking advantage of the great mentoring program that the race offers. I was delighted to see David Risch's name on the list of mentors. I had known David for several years and was always impressed with his attitude and abilities. I reached out to David and he quickly signed on as our mentor.

David went above and beyond in his role as mentor. We met several times throughout the winter to discuss the preparation process. If you know David, you know that these meetings were usually fun! We met at restaurants and onboard Pescatore. David put our minds at ease, sharing all his secrets (I think) including meals, navigation tips, medical tips, clothing, rigging tips and even cigar suggestions to our cigar-smoking crew. One day in April 2011, I walked into David's office – unannounced – carrying charts, parallels, sailing instructions and a look of being lost! He immediately sat me down and spread out all my charts. After listening to my questions and concerns, he loosened his tie, put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a look that said, "Sit down, junior. School is now in session!" An hour later, I walked out feeling confident and ready to head for Bermuda. In the weeks before the start, David touched base weekly, making sure we were ready to go. It was great knowing he was watching out for us.

When the start of the Marion to Bermuda Race arrived on June 17, Pescatore was ready and the entire crew was ready. Our crew consisted of Joe Ciffolillo, Jamie Ciffolillo, Jon Ciffolillo, Sam Robinson, Jeff Egger, Chuck Lord, Chance Jones, Ed Basse, Cam Tougas and me. We had worked hard for over a year preparing for the race, and the day had finally arrived.

The first day was challenging, to say the least. We crossed the starting line in 40 knots of breeze. A squall had come though 15 minutes before our starting time. Trial by fire! The crew jumped into action and we quickly shortened sail. Pescatore handled it beautifully. The wind laid down a bit, but we were still sailing out of the bay in 25 knots of breeze. When we got south of Martha's Vineyard, we were greeted by big seas and thunder and lighting. This is where we made out first mistake, by not listening to our mentor. David had stressed the importance of the first dinner at sea. He told us that on his boat, a C&C 40-2 named Corsair, they eat a very light and gentle dinner the first night out – nothing heavy or greasy – and he strongly urged us to do the same. Sadly, we did not listen. The crew was hungry, and we all put down several bowls of lasagna, the kind that leaves a puddle of grease at the bottom of the bowl. That evening, most of the crew had lost the lasagna. The others came close. When it comes to your diet, listen to your mentor!

One of Pescatore's many beautiful attributes is her hydraulic roller furling jib. When the wind picks up, it is very easy to shorten sail. On our first night, however, our headfoil snapped! This left us with no way to furl the headsails. We were now going old school, on a cruising boat that carries big, heavy jibs. I do not mean to sound arrogant; I realize this is reality for many sailboats, but it was not our reality until 2100 hours on June 17. But the crew rose to the occasion, changing headsails whenever we felt it was necessary. If we felt we could gain a knot by dropping the #3 and going to the #2, we did it.

The entire crew proved to have an incredible work ethic and desire to compete. Everyone was always early to his watch and willing to do whatever was needed to keep us moving fast. No one slipped into "cruising mode." All of us, including Pescatore, watched out for each other. We all gave 110%, all the time. In my opinion, this is how Brotherhood is born.

One morning we were in 30 + knots of breeze in big Gulf Stream seas – conditions that require focus. I was driving at the time. I found myself watching the wind speed gauge as it rose – 33…34…35…36… In those few seconds, I lost focus on my job and Pescatore rounded up. Twenty-three tons doing 10 knots suddenly out of control! I was turning the wheel, but it was useless – the rudder had lost its hold. Pescatore heeled over to an alarming angle. Cam very calmly eased himself from the windward side down to leeward and released the staysail sheet. That was enough to allow us to regain control. As the color returned to our faces, Cam looked at me and said, "Don't worry about it, Dad. It's OK, but you really need to focus in these conditions!" My mind quickly returned to an evening sail on Buzzards Bay in July 1996. I was once again sailing with a calm, gentle and confident sailor. I guess some things are truly in the blood, even though they might skip a generation!

We crossed the finish line on June 21 at 05:20, 86 hours, 50 minutes and 57 seconds after the starting gun in Marion. We were 3rd to finish, 2nd in class, 2nd overall, and the fastest New England boat.

The other day, while on Pescatore, I pulled out the logbook for the 2011 Marion Bermuda Race. The last entry I made, on the morning of June 21, was, "I am so proud to be part of this crew." I think that log entry is more important to me than our results. I was and still am truly proud of the entire crew. The morning we finished, I sat on the bow with Cam as we motored into Hamilton. Our dream had become reality! I shared a moment with my son that I will never forget. I am sure my father was there, too. When we arrived at the Royal Hamilton Amateur Dinghy Club, Becky and Luke were standing on the dock. Another dream had come true.

I would like to thank the entire Marion to Bermuda Race Committee, the Mentoring Program and David Risch for helping me accomplish this goal. Team Pescatore will be racing to Bermuda in June, and we are once again counting the days. By the way, I have made a promise to Luke that he and I will also race to Bermuda together – another promise I intend to keep! See you at the starting line.

Editor's note: The 2013 Marion to Bermuda Cruising Yacht Race starts on Friday, June 14. Participating sailors are encouraged to attend the 2013 Safety at Sea Symposium at the UMASS Boston in Boston, MA on March 23 & 24. This event, which includes in-water training, a medical seminar and a seminar on the Gulf Stream, will be sanctioned by US Sailing and moderated by John Rousmaniere. To register for the symposium and enter the race, visit marionbermuda.com.

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