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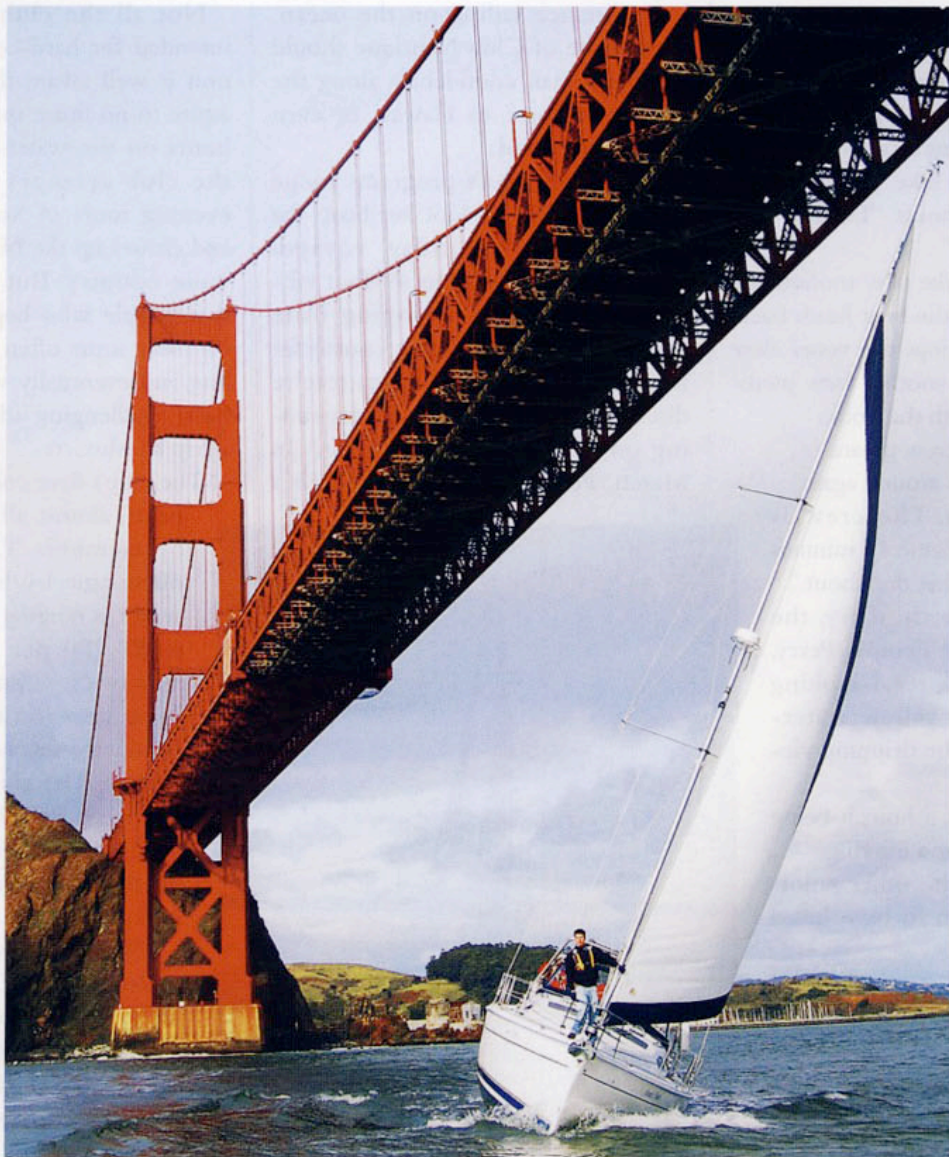
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Boat Camp

This sailing school's number one lesson: A trip on the ocean is no day at the beach.

BY MICHAEL SCHULZE

“**M**AN OVERBOARD!” Electrified, the crew members leap into action. On this blustery March day in the Pacific Ocean off San Francisco, the water temperature stands at about 50 degrees Fahrenheit. If a sailor remains in the water for only a couple of

minutes, he could suffer cold shock and drown.

When a passenger or crew member falls overboard, you turn the sailboat around, return to him, snag him with a long-armed hook, and drag him onto the vessel's aft end. The fastest way to reach an MOB—to use the nautical

Club Nautique's students test themselves in the rough seas off San Francisco—and sometimes fail.

vernacular—is by motoring to him, but the engine on this boat has died.

About 20 feet away, the MOB floats silently in 4-foot swells. With every second, his distance from the boat increases. “Don’t take your eyes off him!” someone shouts. “Do not take your eyes off him!”

In what seems like slow motion, the boom swings and the boat heads back. The helmsman brings the vessel close by the MOB, and another crew member reaches out with the hook.

He misses. The crew groans.

The boat swings around again.

Another miss. The crew is hushed this time. Some 10 minutes have passed since that first shout.

Finally, on the third try, the hook catches, and Thomas Perry, a straight-backed, regal-looking man in a bright yellow waterproof suit, yanks the dripping victim from the sea.

It is not, in fact, a human being but a proxy for one: a life ring.

Perry regards the other sailors gravely. “You seem to have killed your man,” he says.

PERRY IS A sailing instructor with Club Nautique, a yacht club on the small island of Alameda on the east side of San Francisco Bay. Like the Bay Area’s other sailing schools, Club Nautique’s has good cause for conducting rescue exercises, as evidenced by an incident in January of this year. Software executive James Gray, a skilled sailor (not affiliated with Club Nautique), disappeared during a solo trip to the Farallon Islands, located about 27 miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge. Searchers have found no trace of his 40-foot sailboat, *Tenacious*.

Fog shrouds San Francisco Bay frequently and quickly. Beyond the bay, winds regularly reach 35 mph, and waves of 15 feet are common. These conditions are well suited to Club Nautique, which yachtsman Don Durant founded in 1990, as its school teaches passage making, a term for

long-distance sailing on the ocean. A graduate of Club Nautique should be able to sail confidently along the California coast, to Hawaii, or even around the world.

Club Nautique’s programs range from classes on 25-foot keelboats for beginners to multiday voyages through open ocean on 49-foot sailing vessels, at costs ranging from about \$500 to \$2,600 per course for nonmembers. (Club members receive discounted or free courses, depending on their membership level.) In March, Perry led five students in a



weekend trip on *Horizon Hunter*, a single-masted, 46-foot sloop, to test their skills at coastal passage making.

“Yes, we’re rigorous,” says Daniel Glennon, Club Nautique’s membership director, as he settles back in his office chair on the afternoon before the trip. “But would you want it any other way?” A thin, friendly man, Glennon joined the club in 2002 after working for about two decades as a sailing instructor. “Things can turn bad so quickly,” he continues. “Once, I saw a boat approach a fueling dock too fast. A crewman tried to slow the boat by grabbing a rope and wrapping it around his hand. The rope cut off three fingers—they just popped off.”

Not all the club’s activities are intended for hard-core sailors. Glennon is well aware that many people aspire to no more than a pleasant few hours on the water. For this reason, the club arranges events such as evening tours of San Francisco Bay and cruises up the Napa River to visit wine country. But Glennon notes that people who begin as passengers on these tours often catch the sailing bug and eventually want to study for more challenging adventures, such as a trip to Mexico.

The club’s fleet consists of about 50 boats, almost all of them owned by members. The organization offers nine levels of membership, at prices ranging from about \$600 to \$7,250 per year. It focuses mainly on sailing but maintains some powerboats as well, and it conducts a few courses on motorboating. The club operates facilities in Sausalito and Richmond (both located on San Pablo Bay north of San Francisco Bay), as well as Alameda.

“We take a very synergistic approach,” says David Forbes, the club’s vice president and general manager. “Essentially, we develop our own members, and the best sailors among them often become our instructors.” Forbes, who once served in the British Royal Navy, focuses heavily on instructor training. “I love working with local sailors,” he says. “They’re among the best. Many of them go on to win the Sydney Hobart,” one of the world’s most challenging sailboat races. “When you learn to sail in San Francisco, you can sail anywhere.”

JUST BEFORE the *Horizon Hunter* trip, the students gather for a briefing in the Club Nautique office, a two-story building facing San Francisco Bay. “The safety of the crew is paramount, the safety of the boat second,” Perry says. “We can have fun, but that comes last. Remember: The lives of your colleagues are in your

hands. The ocean is unforgiving, and if you make a mistake, you can die."

Perry, a marketing executive for AT&T, is a soft-spoken man, a crack-erjack sailor, and a demanding teacher. When a trainee disappoints him, his expression of mingled sadness and reproof can make the recipient cringe. He joined the club in 2003, and school director Gary Walker recruited him as an instructor last year. On this Friday afternoon, Perry is simultaneously preparing the crew members and evaluating them. To qualify for the coastal passage making class, each has completed several beginners' courses, including ones on basic cruising and coastal navigation. But those classes took place some

graduate trying to pass a bar exam.

At this meeting, each of the students briefs the others on his area of responsibility. Weber, for example, discusses the routes the boat will take and the likely challenges that lie ahead. Perry leans forward, pointing to weather and navigation charts and asking questions.

"What is the wind strength on this chart?"

"What is the wave height?"

"What does it mean when the isobars are close to each other?"

Perry asks particularly demanding questions of Jensen, who, as the skipper, will take charge of the crew. Perry examines the passage plan, which summarizes Jensen's intentions for the trip.

"If there's an accidental jibe during this trip, the person responsible will fail the course."

—THOMAS PERRY, SAILING INSTRUCTOR, CLUB NAUTIQUE

time ago, and the students undoubtedly have forgotten some of what they learned. So today, Perry intends to establish what they remember.

The five students are males. They include Jan Weber, a physician from Menlo Park, Calif., who will serve as navigator, and Patrick Fletcher, an attorney from Alameda, who will focus on sail handling and helmsmanship. Ray Jensen, a software executive who also lives in the Bay Area, will be skipper. To pass a coastal passage making course, each student will take about five trips (the school requires at least three), during which he must demonstrate his skills as a crew member, navigator, and captain. Once he proves his competence in these roles, he will receive certification in coastal passage making from U.S. Sailing, the national governing body that devised the instructional programs used by Club Nautique. If he fails a class, he can continue trying until he succeeds, like a law school

"Tomorrow night, what direction will the wind blow?" Perry asks.

"From the northwest," Jensen says.

"So if we anchor in Drake's Bay [a body of water about 35 miles north of San Francisco], will we have a lee shore?" (A lee shore is the shore toward which the wind blows. If a boat anchors near a lee shore, it could drift onto rocks.)

Fletcher peers at a personal digital assistant. "This says the wind could come from the southeast."

"My information says northwest," Jensen says.

"This is serious, you guys," Perry says. "If the wind blows from the southeast, we will be on a lee shore. Do we have another source of information?"

The crew studies documents from the National Weather Service. They conclude that the wind will blow from the southeast tomorrow afternoon but switch to northwest in the evening.

"Ray," Perry says. "Where do we anchor tomorrow night?"

Jensen hesitates. Finally he points to a map. "The north end of Drake's Bay."

So it goes. Do we have a ditch bag? (A ditch bag holds food, water, flashlights, a GPS system, and a radio, in case the crew must use the life raft.) Who is responsible for the EPIRB? (An emergency position-indicating radio beacon emits a radio signal in an emergency.) What frequency does the EPIRB use? (No one knows.) What channel do we use to call Mayday? (Channel 16.) What kind of fire extinguishers are on board? What kind of personal flotation devices do we have? Who takes watch duty, and when? Who cooks the meals, and when?

"Remember," Perry concludes, "you're all experienced sailors. This is college-level course work, and the skipper and navigator are in graduate school. If there's an accidental jibe [an unplanned swing of the boom] during this trip, the person responsible will fail the course."

Sobered, the students prepare to board *Horizon Hunter*.

The trip will begin Friday evening and end late Sunday afternoon. During this time, the boat will not touch the shore. The students will sleep where they can find room, and to conserve water, they will not take showers. They have brought several layers of clothing, because the weather will be chilly and, despite the protective suits that they will wear while on deck, they expect to get wet. Each also has a life vest that can attach to the boat's jack line, a yellow strap that runs the length of the vessel. If a student steps on deck, he must attach his vest to the jack line.

Friday night they will anchor in the relative calm of San Francisco Bay, near the channel leading to the Pacific. On Saturday they will set a course toward the Farallon Islands, then head north along the coast. They will sleep in Drake's Bay on Saturday night and head back to San Francisco on Sunday. During the trip, Perry will

conduct a number of emergency drills, and he also may sabotage the boat in some fashion to see how the students react.

FRIDAY NIGHT, as *Horizon Hunter* rocks at anchor in the bay, the skyscrapers of San Francisco loom to the south, dotted with countless lights. Terns fly in long V formations past a half-moon, uttering high cries. The crew beds down: two in the boat's one bed, the rest on the cabin's furniture and floor, except for Fletcher. He tries to sleep on deck, but the night is cold, and so he spends most of it awake.

In the morning the boat sets out, passing beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. The crew members have started the journey later than they had planned and now must contend with traffic, including a fast-moving barge and an early morning kayaker who forces *Horizon Hunter* into a 360-degree turn. Consequently, the boat barely beats an ebb tide as it enters the Pacific.

Perry focuses on navigation. He and Weber check the maps. Each line in the course begins and ends with a bearing, which Weber can establish through various means: with a buoy, a landmark such as a tall tree, or a point derived by having the helmsman turn the boat in a circle while he studies a compass. He also can use a GPS device, but Perry wants his students to learn traditional navigation because a GPS can fail, and indeed, the boat's system does not work at the moment. Some of the students speculate that Perry deliberately broke it. (Later they will discover that someone inadvertently had rested his elbow on a button in the cabin, turning the device off.)

The morning is clear. "This is rare," says Fletcher, whose home in Alameda faces the bay. "We almost always have fog this time of day." As the boat sails west, it is followed first by six sea lions and then by a pod of bottlenose dolphins. The crew looks for whales, a common sight in these waters, but none surfaces.

At about midmorning, Perry approaches Jensen. "We have a fire," he says.

The blaze—imaginary—is located in a cabinet beneath the cabin stairs. A crew member jerks open a door in the cabinet wall, making the mistake of feeding oxygen to the fire and rendering it uncontrollable. The sailors have not handled their first emergency well.

Calmly, Perry points to a tiny hole in the cabinet door.

"You insert the fire extinguisher's nozzle here," he says. "That way the door stays closed."

At midday, the Farallon Islands come into view, tall and jagged. The islands are a bird sanctuary, and the crew members want to sail around a bit to see the wildlife. But given their late start, they do not have time and must head up the coast. During this part of the trip, Perry conducts the ill-fated MOB drill.

In the late afternoon, the boat approaches Drake's Bay. Because the wind, as foreseen, is blowing from the land, the crew must tack into the bay from a good distance offshore. The water is choppy, and several of the crew members are suffering from mal de mer.

Most students of Club Nautique find that Dramamine, scopolamine, and other antinausea medications work only so well. Navigators are particularly susceptible to seasickness, because they must study fine print in a rocking boat. Weber has sagged into bed, and another student has assumed his duties. One of the skipper's jobs is to identify a backup for each crew member in case he becomes ill. In some cases, the backups have backups.

For those well enough to appreciate it, Drake's Bay is a serene place. *Horizon Hunter* floats on still green water near the north shore. Deer graze on the empty scrubland. Coyotes howl, but the deer seem not to notice. With a soft plop, an elephant seal surfaces in the middle of the bay.

The sight of the seal jogs a memory in Fletcher. "Once I was scuba diving,

fishing for lobster," he says, "and a 7-foot elephant seal came within inches of me. The fellow was using my light to look for lobsters. He followed me for about an hour—I didn't catch many lobsters. The seal took them all!"

Night falls, and Fletcher cooks a spaghetti dinner. (Jensen has assigned one meal to each student.) Now that the boat has stopped rocking, the men who had fallen sick feel somewhat better, and they gather with the rest of the crew in the cabin to eat and banter.

"We could be fogbound tomorrow morning," Perry says. "If that happens, how do you sound the air horn?"

"One long, two short," someone answers.

Perry smiles. "Good."

No fog appears on Sunday morning, but there is no wind either. After conferring with Jensen, Perry decides that the boat will motor home.

The trip back is not a cakewalk. Before noon, Perry conducts another MOB drill, and at one point he announces that the boat has sprung a leak. The crew members feverishly check the vessel's through-hulls—spots where water is most likely to pass through—and finally find the leak (a pen wrapped with blue tape) next to the bilge pump.

That afternoon, *Horizon Hunter's* steering purportedly fails, causing another scramble. Fletcher leaps to the boat's aft end and yanks up a steel plate, exposing the rudder. He inserts a steel bar in the mechanism and steers the boat manually, swinging it away from a buoy to which it had come dangerously close.

The Golden Gate Bridge appears, and the crew members sag with relief. Privately, Perry is asked if any accidental jibes have occurred during this trip.

"Two," he says.

How many students have passed?

He hesitates.

"Two." □

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