

A tale of heros...today and yesterday

The little Sonic that could..Where racing heroes really come from

by Rich Luhrs

There were 3 races held this weekend. One in New Jersey, one in North Carolina, and one on Long Island. While I am sure that the races in NJ and NC featured heroic performances, bedazzling talent, and nail biting, though speed controlled, finishes.... and included local iconic favorites, including legendary, Billy Martin, Joe Sgro, Peter Meyer and others whose presence would have tripled the impact of the the local event, the story of the weekend occurred today in the waters off Long Island.

Let me set the stage for you.....

The Around Long Island Marathon, conceived by Billy Frenz and Charlie McCarthy, as a tribute to the late Don Aronow, was set on a fabled course that many of the most respected water warriors in powerboat racing history had battled on. It is a humbling course to say the least. Historically Around Long Island has captured the minds and hearts of a legion of true racing fans because it's grueling length and unpredictable conditions has left a trail of champions scratching their heads and soothing their aching limbs after attempting to conquer its challenging layout. It's a course for true boat racers, conceived by boat racers, and only mastered by the best the sport has ever seen. Bakos, Sirois, Bianco, Lewis, Genth, and Aronow, have all earned their stripes on Long Island's beautiful but dangerous coastline. There were years when the heavy, well funded favorites fell by the wayside and smaller, humble boats helmed by weary, bloody, stubborn, competitors who all but dragged their hulls across the finish line to victory....like the time that Rick Stein won the event in a single outboard 16 footer over boats up to 35 feet in length with many times the power..... Like I said, a humbling course with ghosts of racing's past haunting it still.

Clearly the majority of the current bunch of racing teams preferred partying at Atlantic City before going out to run side by side in GPS limited formation, or running in single boat classes in Morehead City. Many of the other armchair warriors, who, intended to shake off the rust and enter, had second thoughts or failed to get their equipment ready in time. It became clear the very few guys really have the onions needed to take on this grand daddy of racing challenges.. The bottom line was that only 5 race capable boats made it anywhere near the starting line and only 3 entries actually had the capability and GPS tracking beacons to make a race out of it. One of those was badly outclassed..... and therein lies the root of this amazing story.

Outer Limits was represented with two dreadnaughts, each capable of breaking Stu Hayim's 3 hour and 20 minute record time for the 257 mile course. One was a new 50' OL Cat with dual 1250 Mercruisers, a world class throttleman, and all the lovely bells and whistles that go along with such a craft. The other was a brand new, purpose built quad diesel 50 foot V bottom sponsored by a major executive consulting group and owned by a professional British team intent on racing in the Round Britain, Cowes Torquay and other iconic European point to point events against big bucks teams with International cash and flair. In short, either of these boats were enough to make the event World class.....Both hulls were crafted of the gold, frankincense and myrrh that OL's mysterious craftsmen layer carefully into micro finished molds before baking them to perfection in an

impressive autoclave. Hardware was crafted of exotic materials calculated to endure anything that Mother Nature could dish out. Billet handiwork abounded in both creations and rumor has it that secret NASA metals brought back from deep space exploration was forged into the alloys for the drive components. To say these boats were Uber craft underestimates their true potential. I think they actually exhumed Picasso to lovingly apply the paint on the buttery surface of these extraordinary marine starships.

And then there wasthe other guy.

Joe De Fusco (Sonic30SS on various websites) brought his modest pride and joy over from Connecticut. He and skilled sail boat navigator, Jonathan Tobin, also saw fit to add some weight and experience by inviting veteran racing star, Charlie McCarthy, along for guidance. Joe was a veteran of a few poker runs and often journeys on Long Island Sound's turbulent and confusing waters. Certainly this team was eager and capable of racing, but you have to also consider the knife they brought to this gunfight. Joe's screen name describes his aging 30 foot Sonic, powered by twin 310 small block PCM V-8's which he installed himself a few years ago. These modest power plants hooked up to the water through Mercruiser Alpha SS drives.....! You read me correctly....Alpha drives...in an Offshore Race!!!!!!!!!!!!!! The boat has been in seasonal service for decades and while in good shape, was smaller, slower, and clearly outclassed by its mind bending rivals from somewhere north of engineering nirvana..... This race was clearly lopsided.....against the Sonic 30's crew.

Equipped with GPS tracking beacons and a web based software package designed to track America's cup races. The competitors idled out of Manhasset Bay towards the entrance buoy that marked the start finish of this fabled event. After a brief pause the race started at 9:13 AM and, as expected, the big 7 figure cat hurtled to triple digit speeds as it disappeared into the salty haze in the general direction of the sun. Meanwhile the 4 Euro Diesels in the massive monohull struggled mightily against their own weight to finally bring the bow over and began to spool up to its near century mark cruising speed.

Oh yeah....the other guy headed east with them at about 60 mph..... Seas seemed to be ideal, 2 to 3's with an even pattern out of the northeast

By the Smithtown Bay stretch it seemed obvious that Outer Limits was going to have a good day. The GPS beacons were beaming locations, direction, and speed (in knots) back to race HQ and all was right in the Hi performance stratosphere that only a few individuals can experience or afford. The ghosts of Long Island races past seemed millions of miles and many years.....away. And then these spirits returned carrying an ironic sense of humor.

First the cat, clearly on pace for a record although navigating on the rougher southern shore of the Sound made an abrupt turn into Port Jefferson and appeared to be stopping at the town dock. Reached by cell phone the crew announced that the water was "too rough" to set a record, and they had stopped for breakfast... I swear at that moment I heard a groan emanating from Sam Griffith's grave.

Then the mighty British diesel entry made an abrupt reversal in course and slowed to 7

knots.....Later communication revealed that some failed pieces in their unobtainium laden drive train had rendered two engines useless..... I swear I heard Carl Kiekhaefer laugh out loud simultaneously.

All of this happened out of sight of the Sonic whose crew were running right down the center of Long Island Sound in a perfect course for Orient Point. Later they reported that there had been no seas of any significant size in that leg of the race... Perhaps, Red Crise or Bob Nordskog were calming the seas in front of them from their perches in heaven's race control?

We watched spellbound as the little global mapping widget moved inexorably into the lead!!! We high fived as it passed one, then the other of OL's million dollar duo. We watched with excitement as it picked its way passed Rocky Point, Matittuck, and Green Port...and honed in on Plum Gut for what had to be the roughest leg... Orient Point to Montauk.... where racers are separated forever from posers, wannabes, and never weres.

And then the little Sonic icon on the map disappeared.....

Knowing the course as I do, I realized that this is where we actually lost boats for up to two days in the past. This was where the Sound begins to meet the ocean.....this was where the bad things live.

We waited, we worried, we wished,.....

And then just as all seemed to be lost, that this iconic race might be reduced to Frenz's folly.... That nobody would even reach half way... a little shape appeared on the screen...the Sonic was on the South Shore heading Westbound.....they had turned at Montauk and were still in the race. We saw her head into Shinnecock...and I took a chance and called Charlie...he answered after what seemed a thousand rings on his cell phone and I heard a sort of defeat in his voice.... The power steering had failed, a trim pump had gone away, and they felt weary and defeated by the two juggernauts that had ran away and left them behind..... I took a pause and said..."Charlie, tell those guys not to quit,,,You're winning this damn thing!!!!!!". I heard amazement, joy, and strength all soaring back into his voice. They fueled up, fixed the steering and blazed their way into history..... Because a couple of hours later they had won the Don Aronow Memorial Around Long Island Marathon!....

Not bad for a hopeless underdog, who had no chance and nothing going for them but desire and respect for the historical opportunity that comes along so rarely in a racers life.

Joe and Jonathan earned my respect today. Charlie already had it. You see there are 3 heros tonight, probably rubbing liniment on aching limbs and bandaging the deeper gashes. I imagine the boat will never be quite the same either..... They have no sponsor or backer, They had no mega boat, or big budget team. They had no support trailers, helicopter, or bikini clad groupies. They didn't have star struck fans drooling over the cash invested in their efforts. All they had was heart, desire and a sense of history. But they are winners... real winners.....and by God they are champions in an event that has reduced the great ones to mincemeat time and time again.

They can sleep well tonight and smile with satisfaction.

I know somewhere Don Aronow is smiling too.....