



Beware the Lee Shore

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I came to sailing late in life and maybe, for that reason, my obsession with sailboats is a passionate, sometimes unreasoning, fixation. I would like to think of sailing as a hobby or sport. Most of us have something else we do when we're not working or with family. A couple of my in-laws bike every chance they get. Some folks are into football, others tennis. Yet my family tells me, and anyone else who will listen, that I am obsessed with things nautical.

Nothing in my childhood foretold of this coming obsession. I was born and raised in inner city Detroit. There is a yacht club there but neither I nor anyone I knew ever entered those hallowed gates. I recall having a one foot long sailboat as a child for which I had lost both the sail and keel. The Sunday afternoons we spent walking around the huge water fountains at Belle Isle Park with the boat in tow are sweet memories. However, nothing could predict what sailing would become for me decades later.

I remember the precise moment I fell in love with sailing. We were up at Cape Cod for the Labor Day holiday. It had rained the day before and my daughter and her cousin had made a small pond boat from a kit. I was relaxing in a pool and their little sloop drifted gracefully across the water, backlit by the waning rays of a golden sunset. It was an epiphany for me. Please do not misunderstand me. There are certainly other events in my life I hold more dear like the birth of my two children, the first time I met my wife, my youth back in Michigan with my parents and brother, to name a few. Nevertheless, I know some of you will understand that sailing is special. It induces memories of wonder and adventure that are too sweet to fade.

After that moment six years ago, I have been mesmerized by sailboats. I started making or buying model sailboats, all sorts of model sailboats. There were pond boats, display models, boats in bottles, pewter boats and radio control boats with dacron sails I fashioned myself. Some hulls were plank-on-frame wooden models, others were ABS plastic. The LOA of my miniature fleet ranged from a mere inch to 40 inches. My wife thought me crazy when I bought an aged wooden pond boat from a New England antique shop. But, under the dust and broken rigging was a thing alive, waiting for a fresh coat of polyurethane and new canvas. I would spend pleasurable winter hours in our cold attic occupied with cyanoacrylate glue and thumb-sized bottles of paint. While the wind blew through the bare tree branches, I heard the sound of waves and the rustle of sail canvas.

Most, including my fellow New Yorkers, would be surprised how many places there

are in the Big Apple to sail model boats. The boat pond in Central Park is world renowned, but there are other places known only to those aficionados who mess about with very small boats. I learned the value of waterproof tape when my first R/C sloop sank in Bowne Pond while sailing on a beam reach. Waders are handy at Kissena Lake where the seaweed clings to keel and rudder like wet oatmeal or at Oakland Lake where the marsh ensnares the unwary.

After a few months it finally dawned on me that maybe I should learn to sail real sailboats. I prepared by learning to swim after work at a dimly lit pool in the basement of an apartment building on Manhattan's West Side. My determination was severely tested some winter evenings when I left the pool to catch the subway in the driving snow. I persevered. Winter gave way, as it always does, to spring.

After the last gallon of gray slush slid down the sewers and the ice on the city's ponds and lakes melted, I enrolled in a Red Cross approved basic sailing course on Meadow Lake in Queens. Meadow Lake lies in a triangle bordered by three of New York City's busiest highways, the Grand Central Parkway, Van Wyck and Long Island Expressways. The latter is better known by natives as the world's longest parking lot. From a distance, it sometimes looks like sailboats share the roadway with buses and trucks. To those in those boats on the water, the lake is an urban aquatic oasis. The boats were cat-rigged aluminum hulls of unknown pedigree held together with patch upon fiberglass patch and years of red paint. Under-canvassed but stiff and forgiving, they were kindly vessels to all of us landlubbers new to sailing. The instructors were unpaid volunteers who enjoyed spreading the sport to others. The students were firefighters, office workers and other working people from the city. We all learned starboard from port and a clove hitch from a square knot while sailing on the lake surrounded by highways.

Upon graduation, we joked about buying yachts of immense proportions and sailing to ports with exotic names. As for me, my dream boat was 13'8" long with a centerboard. One of my neighbors refers to my Capri-13 as "a Laser for old guys," a description with which neither my boat nor I find any offense. My weekly voyage took my trailer to a public boat ramp in Long Island at the end of a street ominously named "Gravesend." Whether the street name referred to the raw sewage runoff that appears in the Sound after heavy rains or the proximity of a toxic waste site, I do not know. I do know that for five years the bay was my refuge and retreat. It was here that I capsized my first dozen times, all in one breezy afternoon. I sailed no matter what the forecast. I went out on those hot August days, when there is plenty of heat but no wind, that Long Island is notorious for. I sailed in the rain, enjoying the solitude of an empty bay. I sailed early in the morning when the bait fish they call "flashers" rippled the water in the first sunlight of the day.

Of course, when my family left for vacation, the boat followed. Some of those memories are painfully embarrassing to remember. There was the time the boat did a 360 degree somersault on the beach. We were down at Cape May on the South Jersey shore. The week we were there I snuck out every morning at sunrise while the family slept to take out my Capri-13. The beach was deserted early in the morning. The rising sun beckoned while the incoming surf played at my feet. I had tried preparing for this moment by reading everything I could on launching from and returning to a beach with surf. One book flatly said not to do it. The author didn't give a reason. He just said not to do it. Another book suggested that with the right timing and reflexes it could be done. Most small boat sailing books failed to mention

the topic at all.

The first few times I went out the surf and wind were mild and I had no problems at all. On our last day the surf had picked up but I felt I just had to go. Despite the waves and a lee shore, I left easily. For the next couple of hours the conditions could not have been better. While sailing offshore, I kept pace with a trio of dolphins that I could almost touch. It just did not get any better than this. Finally I had to return. I was certain the family was waking and I had responsibilities. I planned to use the same technique that worked before, pull up the centerboard, ease the wing nut on the swing rudder, jump off where it might be shallow enough to stand, pull the painter and the bow into the wind and walk the boat back to shore -a piece of cake. While contemplating where would be the best place to jump off, a wave caught us and drove the bow into the back of the wave in front of us. As this was happening, I thought to myself, "Oh, this is what pitchpoling is." That I was more bemused than horrified was more a function of inexperience than bravery. The force of the wave flipped the boat on the head of the mast in a full somersault (see illustration). I had somehow either jumped or been thrown out of the boat to witness the whole gut-wrenching event in slow motion. Luckily enough, the only damage was a detached outhaul and my pride.

By now I can just hear someone shouting 'boat abuse' as they read this, but in all fairness to myself you never really know what you can do till you try. That's not to say it may have been a stupid thing to do. Like the time the Coast Guard rescued me, that was the direct, immediate result of my doing something stupid.

Last fall after I had already hauled out our 23' keel boat for the season, I took my Capri-13 out on Little Neck Bay. The wind in autumn is a welcome relief from the doldrums of the Long Island summer and, unless there is snow on the ground, I always wonder when the absolutely last day of my season is. I climbed into my trusty wet suit, dinghy boots, insulated sailing gloves, PFD with whistle and warm hat. In deference to the white caps, I rigged my custom-made storm sail. The foot of the sail is shorter but the luff is the same height. It has about a third less sail area. I had used the sail before in Hempstead Bay when the wind was honking like it was now. My buddy and I flew across the bay on a screaming reach and came back the same way. Actually, the screaming was done by both of us - two parts fear and one part exhilaration. So, my storm sail had proven itself in the past and was just the right engine for the last sail of the season.

I was speeding around the foot of the bay, hiked out flat. It seemed to be a glorious finale to the season until I capsized. As I have intimated, I am no stranger to capsizing. I have spent as much time in the water as on it. I deftly climbed onto the business end of the centerboard and to my bewilderment nothing happened. I was once again on a lee shore, a situation I have developed an increasingly healthy respect for. Each white capped wave pounded the masthead more deeply into the mud at the bottom of the bay. I had retrieved my sister-in-law from exactly the same spot with the same boat in the same predicament the month before. There were no whitecaps then but I did not think I would have any more trouble righting the boat now than I did then. I was wrong. I sat on the centerboard patiently, certain that the mud would slowly release its captive if given enough time. The minutes passed. A half hour passed. A lee shore had been my undoing once again. I finally surmised that the bay wanted my mast and I was not going to get it back. Maybe drifting with the hull back to shore and returning to retrieve the mast at a later date, like next spring, would be the better part of valor. I started to unfasten

the hull from the mast by de-rigging the mainsheet and Cunningham. I was just about to cast off and drift to shore when the Coast Guard arrived, seemingly out of nowhere. Some unseen Samaritan had placed a call reporting some idiot, i.e., me, standing on a centerboard in the middle of the bay. I tied a bowline around my gooseneck and after 15 minutes with the Coast Guard launch at full throttle, the mast won free with a good four feet of mud covering the top of it. Unfortunately, Congress has cut back Coast Guard service and they may not be there for me or someone else next time. The Coast Guard came to the rescue. Though a few might argue my life was never in real danger, I will always be grateful.

A few lessons can be gleaned from my misadventures. Safety should be paramount. My wife always knows where I am going sailing and when I expect to return. Always wear your PFD. Hundreds of Americans lose their lives each year because they do not. If it is cold, dress warmly in a wet or dry suit. Hypothermia can rob you of the strength and judgment it may take to get you back home. Last but not least, beware the lee shore.