

Tom & Diane Might on *Between the Sheets*

Crew: Ian Jones

SHEETS finished first in Performance Cruising Rally Class I and Earned Line Honors as First-to-Finish

Thursday, November 06, 2008 9:06 PM

We finally set sail tomorrow from Hampton, after an agonizing five-day wait. The storm we have been "waiting out" blew by with 50 knot winds and enormous seas yesterday. We are glad we stayed in port this time. However, it felt like we were actually sailing as the strong winds healed the boat in the slip.

We have waited long enough for a new tropical storm, soon to be Hurricane Paloma, to form in the southern Caribbean. Most models have it crossing Cuba and then heading straight for our rumb line with a Tuesday intersection. Commanders Weather is very certain it will be knocked down over Cuba and then never regain hurricane status due to the unusually cold water in the Bahamas and wind shear at higher altitudes. If they are wrong, we will divert to Bermuda, arriving long before the storm does. So don't worry!

Saturday, November 08, 2008 3:11 PM

We are off to a great start. After a disappointing light air start, we found great wind just when we began crossing the Gulf Stream at 2am AST and have been reaching at 8 to 10 knots ever since in delightful following seas. Our 15 knot southwest winds will quicken to 25 tonight - time to reef.

We are currently flying towards Bermuda, knowing that the winds will shift to the west tomorrow allowing us to round down towards Tortola at full speed. We need some "easting" in as they say to avoid having to beat into the trades winds starting Tuesday. By being east, we will be able reach comfortably on the last ½ of the course. We are hoping for only one day with light air the rest of the way and it looks like Hurricane Paloma will be toast by the time we get south.

Prior to the Gulf Stream we did have to motor for 13 hours, but we stayed just off the coast where we found a counter current flowing south. We hit the stream just 35 miles of the tip of Hatteras, put the sails up and turned towards southeast towards Bermuda.

Sunday, November 09, 2008 5:52 PM

48 hours at 30 degrees – we need more arms and legs! Ever since we hoisted the sails two days ago when we entered the Gulf Stream, we have been close reaching at 40-50 degrees apparent off the strong SW winds. The wind maxed out at 25 knots last night and SHEETS ate it up! Trying to sleep below, I thought we were part of the Volvo Challenge! The strong winds have damaged two boats. Clover III, a Swan 56, lost her forestay, but saved the rig with spare halyards. They are motoring to Bermuda. Thank goodness Diane always prepares a few wholesome meals before we leave. Cooking at 30 degrees is dangerous.

Tonight we will finally hit some light air and have an important tactical decision. The NE trades that we want to ride the second half of the rally south of Bermuda, will be turning

north due to the remnant low from Hurricane Paloma over the Bahamas. That will put the trades on our nose rather than our beam. The longer we try to sail through the light air, the more the trades will turn north in front of us. The other option will be to turn on the engine and try to get south before they turn north. But all engine hours are added to your finish time, which is a stiff penalty. Right now it looks like we are leading the entire racing fleet (not counting handicaps) and we would hate to make the wrong call.

Monday, November 10, 2008 6:48 PM DRAMA IN THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE!
The light air brought some peace below. I had my first sleep longer than one hour since we started beating to windward 48 hours earlier. Since I have the 0000-0300 watch each night, my daily sleep is three separate naps at best.

When I relieved Diane at midnight, the sailing was as beautiful as we have ever seen. The flat, calm ocean was lit up brilliantly with the nearly full moon. Every star in the Milky Way seemed to be along for the smooth ride. SHEETS slipped silently through the still water at 6 knots in just 8 knots of wind.

As my watch began, the wind gave its last gasp and the quiet night was ruined by the roar of the Mr. Volvo down below. The forecast had changed. Paloma was now going to send us headwinds instead of trade winds, but the trade winds were about 200 miles south, through a dead zone that belonged to no high or low. It looked like all the lead boats would have the same weather, so I decided to motor-sail with the main up until we found enough air for one of our two light air sails.

The real drama began at 0600 when I woke again. Diane and Ian were changing watch in the cockpit. We decided to hoist our upwind light air sail. As I prepared the sail below, Diane and Ian were stunned to see the main sail sagging in the mast. Its steel halyard had broken. Removing the vertical battens, dropping the sail to the deck and limping to Tortola with only head sails and the engine seemed inevitable. Our race was over.

SHEETS' main sail is designed to furl (stow) in the mast. Without the head properly attached to the halyard, the sagging sail could never be furled. Ian suggested I go up to look things over before pulling the battens. Long story short – the threads on the webbing that attaches the head to the halyard had burst, not the halyard. Somehow, swaying 86 feet above a deck rolling in large swells, we managed to hoist the sail back up with the topping lift and make a temporary attachment to the halyard. We just needed it to hold long enough to get the first few furling wraps and then friction would hold the tightly furled sail to the furling rod in the mast. It worked! And we can still us about 2/3 of the main sail safely, furling it in and out.

Our race is not over yet!

Tuesday, November 11, 2008 6:58 PM

At 2200 last night Diane woke me up with good news. We had found wind after motoring just 14 hours, far less than our worst case full-day scenario. She wanted me on deck ASAP to help hoist the sails. We will be on a port tack (That means wind comes from the port or left side of the boat.) close reaching until we reach the finish line in about three days.

We are heading towards the Dominican Republic. (Leaning Republican, we thought we would give it a try after the election.) Actually, the winds are going to “back” over the next two days from SSE to NE. So we are sailing at a fast angle of 60° apparent wind and will bend around as the trade winds bend. By this evening we were aimed right at Tortola.

Right now it is time for steaks on the Barbie. Easier said than done at 30° heel, but Ian and I have counter heeled the mounting brackets. Normally we don't grill on a close reach, but this whole passage has been a close reach.

Wednesday, November 12, 2008 1:49 PM

The wind and seas are building. SHEETS is heeling and pounding hard, pushing to stay in front of the worst of it – and to stay in front of the fleet, of course. SHEETS loves it, but it is hard on the crew. It is like 24x7 Pilates.

There is not much time to write. Our graphical Sirius Radio forecasts are updated hourly right on our Raymarine chartplotter. It forecasts that in 36 hours, there will be 30 knot winds and 16 foot seas (times 2) right where we are now. We will be OK, but the middle of the fleet will get pasted.

We are hoping for Line Honors and a Division 1 1st Place if we don't break anything. (We know we are probably getting too cocky.) Our routing has been unique. We sailed a significantly longer route to take advantage of the wind patterns and it seems to have paid off.

Thursday, November 13, 2008 8:13 PM

123nm to go. 24nm in the lead. The finish line is LAT 1829 on the east end of Tortola. Estimate a 0900 finish - less than 7 days total, averaging 200nm per day.

Living life at 30 degrees is starting to feel normal. In seven days we have only motored 27 hours and have never had wind behind the beam. This was truly sailing at its best and worst! We have had a great time.

Most of the fleet is experiencing 25-35 knot winds, high seas, numerous equipment and sail failures, and one bruised rib.

Friday, November 14, 2008 5:09 PM

We are in safe, sound and first, crossing the finish line at 10:24.

It was a real beat to windward all night and morning to avoid tacking on the final leg. The squalls last night were predatory. We did OK, but several more boats lost sails autopilots and wind instruments. We will launch the dinghy to assist Special Delivery when they arrive without a motor around midnight.

We all have a very strange sensation being upright for the first time in a week.

Maybe you will all join us again on our next sail.