

North,

ON A WING AND A PRAYER



Clockwise from left: *Mad Dog* cruises through the San Juan Islands; Ryan Breymaier fixes a cabin window; the “bio boom crutch” and patent-pending axe-tiller on Team Bunny Whaler; Team Ketchikan’s Santa Cruz 27; modified Farrier trimarans are a popular choice of vessel

A **weird** and **wonderful** collection of **boats** and **sailors** tackle a **tricky 750-mile race** in the **Pacific Northwest**

By Dieter Loibner

The Bermuda Race, the Fastnet, the Sydney-Hobart, the Transpac and the Transat, the Route du Rhum and the Vendée Globe—these are the classics of bluewater racing, with epic destinations, famous waypoints and treacherous bodies of water that have to be traversed. Now there is a new kid on the block: humble, weird, a bit awkward, but spunky as hell and proud of it. It’s not yet a classic, but it’s an epic just the same. It’s the Race to Alaska, aka the R2AK, which was inaugurated in 2015 after the idea was hatched during a long night in the beer tent at Washington’s Port Townsend Wooden Boat festival.

Barstool fantasies typically have short legs, but not this one, because it combines high adventure with high uncertainty. “It’s like the Iditarod on a boat, with a chance of drowning, being run down by a freighter, or eaten by a grizzly bear,” is the bold promise of this delicious mess of a boat race that espouses self reliance and exposes participants to 50-degree water,

tidal rapids, glassy calms, choppy seas and stiff breezes—either in rapid succession or all at once. Thomas Manby, one of the mates in Captain George Vancouver’s party, who charted these waters in the late 18th century, observed that their ships “stood through the narrow pass, the tide rushing along like lightning, it running at least 10 knots an hour.”

The elemental rules fit on a cocktail napkin: race 750 miles from Port Townsend, Washington, to Ketchikan, Alaska. Stop in Victoria, BC, for a taste of Canadian sanity before you slog up the Inside Passage, including the Johnstone Strait. Tick off the waypoints at Seymour Narrows and Bella Bella. Bring any vessel, as long as it is powered by wind and/or muscle only. Go solo or with a platoon of friends. If you are a sail robot, you’re welcome, too. If you’re Alaskan, beaver pelts are no longer considered legal tender for the entry fee. You can stop along the course to hunker down, fix your boat or get supplies. You can ask other racers for a hand, but you can’t have a coach trailing you with spares, tools, candy bars or baby wipes. First boat in gets \$10,000 in cash, nailed to a hunk of wood. Second gets a set of steak knives. Now come hither and sheet in.

This year marked the second running, and 65 entrants followed the siren song of R2AK, most from the region on both sides of the international border, but also some from California, the East Coast and one entry from France. “It’s less of a blank slate, which was the intrigue of the first edition,” says Jake Beattie, executive director of the Northwest Maritime Center and Grand Poobah of R2AK. “Teams are better prepared and of higher caliber, and Version 2.0 has a tighter feel.” More photo choppers and video drones, too. He and race boss, Dan Evans, keep a leash on a fleet of mind-boggling diversity, while letting the elements decide who is worthy and who isn’t.

“You should not have to choose between difficult and fun, it has to be both.”

— Jake Beattie
(race organizer)



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“It’s therapy, I need this breath of fresh air.
I’m 67 and who knows how many times I get to do this.”
— Bill Gifford (Team Excellent Adventure).



The R2AK fleet sets out from Victoria, British Columbia, at the start of the long leg to Ketchikan, Alaska



The “navigator” aboard Team Hodge (above left); Brian Croll and Ryan Wegwitz getting cozy on Team Nordica (above middle); Alula crew member Bruno Hansen reflects on the action on the docks (right)

Looking at last year’s results, small trimarans were the rage. They sail well, offer shelter and can be rowed or pedaled at a decent clip when necessary. Some battle-hardened race vets returned with better, faster, beefed-up boats. Then there were the crazies who brought whatever they found in their backyard. Among these was Team Hodge fielding *Oozegooze*, a ménage of plywood, numerous rig styles and a stuffed monkey doing the chart work, a dude on a standup paddleboard, and a solar-powered drone. And then there was *Mad Dog*, a fire-engine red modified Marstrom M32 catamaran from the San Francisco Bay area that could be on the World Match Racing Tour, but came here to exercise one of two options: getting the cash or cracking up in spectacular fashion.

“If they don’t break, they’ll win,” predicted Ryan Breymaier, who was in town to race on John Sangmeister’s modified ORMA 60

Tritium, a piece of bad assery that once served as a trial horse for the America’s Cup Team Artemis Racing. However, during the delivery from Southern California, the boat suffered breakage, so the team borrowed *Taniwha*, a tuned-up F32 SRXC trimaran that was hastily trailered up from San Diego. Also on the *Tritium* crew was beach-cat champion and R2AK veteran Tripp Burd from the Boston area, who finished fourth with his brother Chris in the windy first edition on a souped-up Arc 22 catamaran, straddling the fine line between crazy and catastrophe.

“We broke down a lot, but the boat was small enough to tuck into small coves for shelter and repairs,” Burd said. This effort rippled to 2016 and *Mad Dog*’s entry. “Tripp called me last year and suggested to do this race on the Marstrom,” said owner Randy Miller. “I declined because I didn’t want to lose my boat or my life. But after they did it

on a much smaller boat, I changed my mind.”

There also were several all-women teams, and two prominent ocean rowers/adventurers, Colin Angus from Victoria, BC, and Mathieu Bonnier from France, who brought custom rowing trimarans with sailing rigs to challenge the singlehanded record set by Roger Mann in 2015. Mann, the R2AK patron saint, raced a stock Hobie Mirage Adventure Island trimaran to Ketchikan, cheating his way out of several calamities that could have landed him in Davey Jones’s locker, like getting swept off the boat at night or pitchpoling onto a remote beach. Yes, this guy walks on water, but he can do live surgery too, in front of a shocked crowd, on his own thumb, which he accidentally cut open with a box knife while unpacking his boat. Alas, this year car trouble halted his advance in Denver, 1,400 miles short of the starting line.

The sentimental favorite in 2016 was *Alula*, a stock F27 trimaran crewed by three sailors who all had lost the use of their legs in accidents. Skipper Spike Kane from Liverpool, England, but now based in Seattle, and his mates Zac Tapeç from Hawaii and Bruno Hansen from South Africa wanted to give the R2AK a whirl, despite minimal time on the boat. Foolhardy? Maybe, but these guys don’t want no pity, alms or smart-aleck advice. They know how to scrap. “It’ll be a nice trip with piña colodas and tiny paper umbrellas,” joked Tapeç, a first-tome racer who played wheelchair rugby for the U.S. Paralympics National Team and now does standup (get it?) comedy. Hansen was an experienced sailor before getting injured in a carjacking 17 years ago. He also survived the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004 while on a catamaran by himself, crawling to the bow and cutting loose the anchor. His role on *Alula* was “floater,” because he is a paraplegic with some mobility.

But he also had a looming scheduling conflict in the form of a talk in New York to help his fundraising effort for bionic exoskeletal legs that promise to let him walk again.

The 40-mile prologue from Port Townsend to Victoria started at 0605 on the morning of June 23 in a fresh and following breeze. It was a tune-up for the full-race participants and a fine daysail for the few who only did the first leg. The Strait of Juan de Fuca quickly culled the weakest from the herd, sending them back to the beach, the bar and the workbench, in that order. *Mad Dog* swiftly dropped over the horizon, flying a hull nearly all the way to the customs office in Canada. Behind them even casual sandbagging could not dispel the notion that lead mines like the 40ft *Madrone* and the Fox 44 *Ocelot*, aka Team Jungle Kitty, two cruiser/racers with large crews, might be in the running for the steak knives.



Team Tritium aboard a borrowed F32 SRXC trimaran, a last-minute addition to the fleet



Green Culshan, a San Juan 21, was fitted out with oars for the race—when the wind didn’t cooperate, elbow grease did



The pedal drive system onboard Team Jungle Kitty

R2AK BY THE NUMBERS:

Dropout quota (2015):
58 percent

Top reason for quitting:
It doesn't matter, it's all posturing anyway.

Smallest boat to compete:
NavOcean (drone), LOA: 2.5ft

Largest boat:
Ocelot (keelboat), LOA: 44ft

Recorded top speed under sail: 24 knots (*Mad Dog*)

Recorded top speed under muscle power:
5.5 knots (*Jungle Kitty*)

Mayday responses: 1

Masts broken: 2

Youngest/oldest participants:
11/73 years

Highest number of national championships won by members of a single team: 11

Biggest fish caught during the race: 8-pound snapper (*Team Por Favor*, 2015)

Beaver pelts received in lieu of entry fee: 3

Beaver pelts cashed: 0

Number of permanent R2AK tattoos etched: 6

Bar tab of 2015 winners:
\$22.54

Bar tab of Team Soggy Beavers (2015): Can't be expressed numerically

Number of beers handed out at the finish line: 133 (plus a half bottle of rum)

Highest number of alleged mid-race conjugal visits: 2



Team *Jungle Kitty*, seen here at the start in Victoria, BC, ended up with a second-place finish (note the tilted-up pedal drives on the stern)



NavOcean's Scott Duncan (left) talks with the author

Side bets were offered too: \$1,000 for the first boat under 20ft to finish, and a Seagull outboard, that legendary bit of British machinery that breathes the odor of Winston Churchill's cigars and Agatha Christie's armpits, for the first boat to take the sag wagon's towline.

The real competition commenced three days later in Victoria with a Le Mans start that sent the crews scurrying downstairs from outside the Empress Hotel to their berthed boats. Watching *Alula* descending the steps on wheelchairs and schussing down the ramp to turn hard left on smoking tires toward their waiting yacht made folks cry with admiration. Under oar or pedal power the fleet gained the harbor entrance where the sails went up and *Mad Dog* simply said: "Sayonara." Ninety-two hours and 13 minutes later, Randy Miller stepped ashore in Ketchikan to ring the bell at the finish line that announced an are-you-kidding-me new course record. Pure madness, of course.

Racing with a tube of waterproof epoxy and some ratchet straps in their tool bag, plus nine handheld GPS units, a hand-bearing compass and a set of paper charts, the crew that also included Ian Andrewes and Colin Dunphy felt prepared after having campaigned the boat in Northwest waters for a while. They had food and water for five days and a bucket with a toilet seat. "I took a lot of grief for that, but it turned out to be a real asset," Miller laughed.

They sailed without pit stops and were in sync with the tides at all the choke points. Driftwood, the scourge of sailing here, was not an issue, Miller insisted, at least during daylight hours. "And at night the logs simply went home." Sleep? Totally overrated. Maybe five or six hours per sailor over the course of the race, tucked into a bivvy sack that was attached to the wing. Unfortunately, frequent tacks forced frequent switching of sides, which makes for a lousy sleep pattern. "That part was a bit scary so I slept with a knife in my hand," the skipper explained. He wanted to be able to cut his way out of the bag if they pitchpoled, capsized or lost him over the side.

The white-knuckle portion came at the end, with *Mad Dog* hurtling through the sub-polar night at 20 knots. No moon, no stars, just the wan light of the GPS screen guiding them toward the finish line; sailing, quite literally, on a wing and a prayer, while being serenaded by the terror bird. "Russian roulette," Miller mumbled. But on Thursday, June 30, at 0715 Alaska Standard Time, it was clear that there were no bullets in the chamber. The red rocket gracefully glided up to the dock in a whisper of a breeze as the mainsail was doused. It was a perfect maneuver to punctuate a kick-butt performance.

Behind them the battle for the steak knives raged between *Madrona*, *Ocelot* and *Big Broderna*, an F31R-trimaran. Score one for the felines who got the best of that group and the silverware. They docked a minute before midnight that same day, 16 hours and

44 minutes behind *Mad Dog*. Having eight crew and a clever twin-screw pedal drive that could be manned by up to four "riders" simultaneously made the difference.

"We recorded 5.5 knots on the way out of Victoria Harbor under leg power alone," noted Anthony Boscolo, who designed the contraption with offset pedals for more efficiency. "We were pretty sure we could beat every other boat upwind except *Mad Dog*, so when the forecast showed three days of upwind [sailing] we felt like we would do alright," added skipper Ben Glass, who also pointed out that routing choices early on could make or break the race. *Big Broderna* salvaged the trimarans' honor, but had to fight to the finish to hold off *Madrona*, whose crew included Carl Buchan, the 1984 Olympic champion in the Flying Dutchman, his son Jamie and other talented mates, like skiff sailor Dalton Bergan. The boat, designed by Carl, was up to snuff, especially during a dicey stretch in Hecate Strait. There, the breeze gusted to the 30s and the speedo peaked in the mid-teens while surfing steep waves as *Madrona* approached Dixon Entrance, where underwater shelves and strong currents stir things up dramatically before the calmer home stretch to Ketchikan.

There were other odd duels: for example, between *Fly*, an F27 trimaran, and *Hot Mess*, an Olson 30. They locked horns early on and duked it out for hundreds of miles. In the back, in the department of grit, an eclectic group of boats banded together for a raid-style cruise: *Shadowfax*, a singlehanded Hobie 16 from 1974 that skipper Dan Isaacson bought off the original owner for \$500; *Searunner*, a singlehanded Seascope 18 with race veteran Thomas Nielsen at the helm, who in-

"She might think this is a glorified fishing derby."

— Ryan Wegwitz

(Team *Nordica*) on how he convinced his wife to let him do R2AK.

formed the world via Facebook of his choice of adult breakfast—Red Bull and whiskey; *Bunny Whaler*, the team of Cooper and Nate Rooks, two bearded brothers who sail a Boston Whaler dinghy that features an axe as a tiller and a "bio boom crutch" made from driftwood branches; Team *Squamish* with three Canadian adventurers who chose a Young 6M for this trip, "a boat that makes up for the lack of color with its smallness inside;" and Team *Nordica* with Ryan Wegwitz and Brian Croll from Vancouver Island, who entered the race to alleviate the pangs of midlife crisis. "It's cheaper than a Corvette and a 20-year old," Wegwitz deadpanned when asked why he does it.

Alula looked like they had to drop out in Campbell River after Bruno decided to leave the boat for his talk in New York. But the proverbial Race-to-Alaska camaraderie sprang into action: Within hours after the news made the rounds, two sailors who already had finished, Mark Eastham, skipper of *It Ain't Brain Surgery* and Morgan Tedrow from *Mail Order Bride*, volunteered to take turns in helping Spike and Zac sail to Ketchikan. If successful, it's a victory for the spirit of this event and more than *Tritium* had to show after pulling out of the race, citing time constraints due to business commitments and the imminent birth of Ruby, skipper Ryan Breymaier's second daughter.

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal, it is the courage to continue that counts," Tritium-boss Sangmeister wrote in a social media post. "The Race to Alaska is a remarkable assembly of pure enthusiasm. If you're so inclined, we encourage you to sign up and have a go. You'll find, as we did, that you will be better from the experience." To say nothing about a chance of drowning, being run down by a freighter, or being eaten by a grizzly bear. 🐻

Dieter Loibner started as a boating journalist back before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He's worked as a reporter and editor for publications that include *Sail*, *Soundings*, *Sailing* and *Classic Boat*, covering every conceivable folly with sailboats, including the Olympic Games, the America's Cup and the Race to Alaska. Books by Loibner include *The Folkboat Story*, *Sustainable Sailing* and the revision of *Sailing Big on a Small Sailboat*. For more information on the next running of the Race to Alaska, visit r2ak.com