

Transpac 2007

By Al Lehman, Sr.

Over the winter of 2005-06 Al Jr. said he was looking for a trailerable boat to do the Transpac race from Los Angeles to Honolulu. We discussed several boats including a Hobie 33, J boats and others. Al Jr. found a Fast 40 in Nanaimo, B.C. that he liked and purchased it in the spring of 2006. Then he asked me to do the Transpac 2007 in the double-handed class. I thought, "I'm getting too old for this stuff," but Al Jr. convinced me that the boat is easily sailed by two and that he would do most of the foredeck work. I agreed to do the race. In preparation my job was to study the safety requirements, the Notice of Race, and determine what needed to be done to get the boat ready for the race.

I remember seeing the Fast 40 at the Long Beach Boat Show in the early 1980s. It is 40 feet long, 8 feet wide, and about 4' 10" tall inside. The keel is retractable with a draft of 8' when down and about 4' when in the raised position. There are four pipe berths, two being quarter berths, and a vee berth. A marine head is about the only amenity. A Sea Swing stove using bottled propane was our cooking equipment. The mast is about 40' tall and must be raised with a crane. The boat only weighs around 4000 pounds and is outboard powered. Everything fits nicely on the trailer and is easily pulled by a ¾ ton truck.

The ISAF Offshore Special Regulations for Category 1 races, which Transpac falls into, run about 40 pages of detailed requirements for the boat and equipment. Details include the height of the toe rails, spacing between lifelines, what to carry in the emergency grab bag when leaving the boat for the liferaft, and other equipment to be on the boat. Since this boat had been entered in two previous Transpacs most of our study had to do with the gear and safety equipment. Because this boat had a new owner and there were some changes in the equipment carried on board it had to be remeasured, a process that takes about four hours. It also had to be inspected by a Transpac inspector prior to the race to check that the boat has all the required equipment and certificates for the boat and sails.



Narrow Escape ready to be towed to California.

A requirement of the Transpac race is that the navigator shall take and reduce a minimum of four sights using a sextant. I have done celestial navigation before but it has been about 20 years and I was a bit rusty. I was the navigator so I got out my books and started studying, bought the current Nautical Almanac, and cleaned up my sextant. As many of you know Al Jr. is very particular about the amount of stuff and weight carried on board when he is racing. I took my bag of books, sextant and plotting tools to Al Jr. one day to show him what I had. He took one look at my 30 pounds of books and said, "maybe you can just tear out the pages you'll need."

We went very light on this race. We installed a solar panel instead of a generator for our electrical needs. We cut our electrical requirements to the minimum including using LED running and interior lights. Al Jr. took off at least 200 pounds of fittings and other gear not needed for the race.



In San Diego for outfitting, measurement, inspection & practice

We trailed the boat to San Diego where we did the final preparations for the Transpac Race. We spent 42 days at the San Diego Yacht Club, and then motored to Rainbow Harbor in Long Beach where we stayed for ten days prior to the start of the race.

The Transpacific Yacht Race, or Transpac, is one of the premier long distance sailing races. The great circle distance is 2225 miles, but the handicaps are based on 2300 miles. The only mark of the course is to leave Catalina Island to port.

The first race was held in 1906 and was scheduled to begin in San Francisco but the great earthquake of 1906 in San Francisco caused the start to be moved to Los Angeles. At noon on June 11, 1906 three yachts started the first Transpac off LA's San Pedro breakwater. The yacht *Lurine* crossed the finish line 12 days, nine hours, and 59 minutes later setting a record that held until 1926.

The race was held in even numbered years until 1936 except for ten years during WW I and was shifted to odd numbered years in 1939 so as not to compete with the Newport to Bermuda race. Transpac was not held from 1942 through 1946 due to WW II. The race has traditionally started near July 4. This year was the 44th race.



Interior of Narrow Escape showing galley area and midship pipe berths

This year there were 74 boats registered, although at least one withdrew before the start. These boats were divided into seven divisions plus two Aloha divisions for cruising boats. In addition there was a special class for double-handed racers. This was the class we were especially interested in. The starts were divided into three different days, July 9, 12 and 15, with the slowest boats starting first, the fastest boats last. We were in the July 12 start.

When the first start got underway it was apparent that the Pacific high was going to create a problem. It had covered the course and had a large area of low winds. The forecast was for things to be better by our start on July 12, but tropical storm Cosme came along and helped destroy the normal trade winds that make this an enjoyable downwind race.

It was a hard beat to Catalina Island and after passing the west end we loosened the sheets and headed south on a beam reach for about two days. During this time we were lifted until we were on course for our selected spot to cross under the Pacific high. However, once there we had little wind so we headed south again for another two days where we picked up 12-14 knot winds that pushed us in the right direction to Hawaii. We needed 20-knot winds for our boat to really perform but we were able to stay in the middle of the fleet. Later in the race we headed south again for about half a day looking for the higher trade winds that normally blow in this area.



Narrow Escape maneuvering for the start

We finally picked up the trade winds and ocean swells about 100 miles from the finish. At this point the boat would make 14-15 knots for long distances at a time as we surfed down the front of the swells, steering back and forth across the face of the swell to keep the boat on a plane. This was exciting sailing and lots of fun. We finished the race 338 hours, 37 minutes, 49 seconds after starting—just over 14 days.

There were lots of memorable moments during the race. Our plan for the start was to hang back a bit and let the aggressive Santa Cruz 50/52 fleet start and try to be right behind them. Our plan worked except several SC 50/52s were pushed up into the committee boat and did a 360 right in front of us, one actually barging in causing us to fall off. We could have protested him but didn't want to go through the bother. We had a good start about 20 seconds after the gun.

It was 22 miles to the west end of Catalina Island and a hard beat all the way. This is not a good point of sail for *Narrow Escape* and we were nearly the last boat to pass the island. We had to do one short tack to clear rocks at the west end. The fleet was spread all over the horizon and we were on the left side of the fleet with only one boat further to the left. At sunset we could only see three other boats on the horizon.

The next three days we were on a close reach making good boat speed, heeled over about 35-40 degrees. The boat was not too wet but living on a tilt is not too comfortable.

Meals were mostly peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. During this stretch we used all our non-spinnaker sails. Winds were mostly 12 to 15 knots.



We started hand steering during the day but had to hand steer the whole trip after the autopilot quit working. The boat was easy to handle but very lively

On the morning of the third day our autopilot quit working. There was nothing we could do to revive it. It was especially useful at night when it is very difficult to steer the boat by the compass alone. From here on we would have to hand steer the boat 24 hours a day. We decided that at night we would only do one hour watches, one hour on, one hour off. During the day we would steer as long as we were able so that the off watch could get some rest and sleep. This was very fatiguing but we had no other choice.

We were finally able to put up our reaching spinnaker. During the night on my watch the wind came up to 20 knots and the boat was traveling 14 knots most of my one hour watch. It was overcast so the sky was black, the sea blacker still. The only light came from the instruments. My whole world was within my reach; everything else was out of sight. This was very exciting with spray flying and the boat bouncing along. I kept hoping that there was nothing in front of the boat as I could only see as far as the bulkhead.

Changing spinnakers at night with the wind blowing 20 knots gets to be exciting. Both of us used headlamps to be able to see things. We did not keep a log of sail changes but I estimate we changed sails at least 35 times, maybe 40 times.

We had three or four knockdowns, some at night. Some were caused by gusts from different directions, which got us out of control before we could react. None were too serious and we normally were underway again in a matter of minutes.



Sitting up higher made it easier to keep surfing down the face of waves

One time while surfing down the face of a wave the boat caught up with the wave in front and buried the bow causing a wall of water to come over the cabin. A few gallons ended up in the cabin.

The first few nights out we both wore our full foulies with two to three layers of fleece under them. The boat had dew on it at night and we caught some spray. As the temperature warmed we took off the fleece, and eventually just used the foulie jacket as we neared Hawaii to keep the rain off.

Initially our main meals consisted mostly of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We started with two loaves of bread. These are easy to fix and eat when the boat is bouncing around and heeled over. We mostly only ate one meal a day, snacking the rest of the time. About half way through the trip it became apparent that the race was going to be longer than we anticipated so we did an inventory of the food left and the days we thought it would have to last. It would be close but we did not see any reason to reach Hawaii with lots of food left. After watching for two days the progress of the first boats to start we had added additional food and water to our stores so we ended up having plenty of food and water. We probably did not go through half of our water.



We had to take four celestial sights during the race

One of the requirements of the race is to take and reduce four celestial sights and plot lines of position. Nowhere did the instructions say anything about how accurate these sights had to be. I did these sights early in the trip to get them out of the way. We were sailing in latitudes close to that of the sun and it is difficult to get lines of position that are not basically north-south lines. Since there was no accuracy requirement or a requirement for a celestial fix I just did the work as easily as possible. In 1982 when we sailed to Hawaii, we only had celestial navigation, so at that time I worked out fixes using the sun and moon.

One of the race requirements was that at night if you were out of the cabin you had to wear your safety harness and be tethered to the boat. We did this at all times. If you stay with the boat you don't have to have a man-overboard drill.

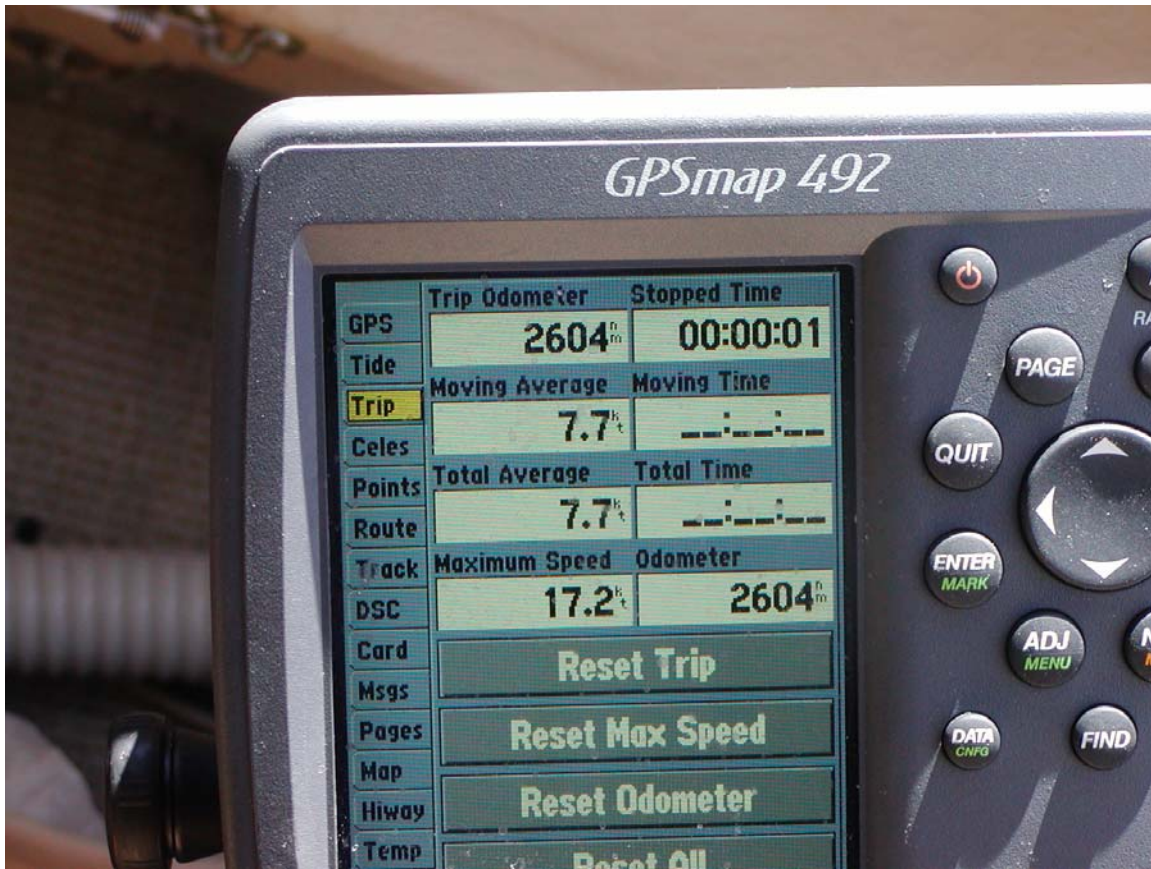
Before the race both Al Jr and I had to attend a one-day Safety at Sea seminar. They talked about life rafts and their use, EPIRBs, how you get rescued and man overboard recoveries. I do not remember them once mentioning wearing a safety harness and tether. For years I wore a safety harness and kept myself tethered to the boat. I rarely wore a life jacket except when in the dinghy. When the inflatable life jackets with a safety harness came out I bought these and now use them. To me the most important thing is to stay with the boat.



The last stretch to the finish line and we're doing about 15 knots

Before the race Al Jr. and I had decided to do two-hour watches at night, but when the autopilot quit we changed to one-hour watches. The first couple of nights on the one-hour watches were the hardest. But after awhile you get so tired that you fall asleep right away and probably get 45 minutes sleep during your one hour off. So if you do this 12 times a day you get 9 hours of sleep, better than I do at home. As a practical matter we each probably got 4 hours of interrupted sleep per night and normally a two-hour nap during the day. It was very tiring and I was exhausted when we reached the dock.

The hardest part of the trip was steering at night by staring at the compass. After awhile, especially when tired, the numbers on the compass start to blur and it is easy to be off course by 30 degrees and not realize it. The second hardest part was to sit in basically one position while on watch. Tired butt set in soon. We had a soft easy chair to sit in but even that became hard by the end of the trip. Al Jr. had suggested that I buy a pair of sailing shorts with padding in back. I think these were worth the money and I wore them the whole trip.



We covered 2604 miles at an average of 7.7 knots. Top speed 17.2 knots

Three-hundred-thirty-eight hours of racing. In a fully-crewed boat this would be a hard race. In a double-handed boat it's almost like doing a marathon. I cannot think of anything I have ever done that was as physically, mentally and emotionally challenging.

For most of us this is as close to going into space we will ever get. You have to be fully prepared to be self sufficient for the duration of the race. While outside help is available in an emergency it would probably involve the loss of the boat to be rescued. At the Safety at Sea seminar they pointed out that if the Coast Guard diverts a ship to rescue you when your EPIRB goes off, they are only interested in rescuing people and your boat would probably be left to sink or drift to shore.

If you have a life raft and have to get into it, and have an EPIRB and it is properly registered, you will probably be rescued within 48 hours even 1000 miles from land.

When Al Jr. asked me to do this race with him I was concerned that I was not physically up to the challenge. I did not think I was up to doing foredeck work on this boat and Al Jr. agreed to do all the sail changing and foredeck work. With me staying in the cockpit trying to keep the boat under control and Al Jr. doing the foredeck work we managed to get everything done with only a few minor mishaps.

This race was a great adventure and challenge and we had a real sense of accomplishment just to have finished. I'm glad I didn't miss it.



Tied up in Ala Wai Harbor, Honolulu