

ANTIGUA SAILING WEEK

APRIL 27 - MAY 3, 2003



"Young Pretenders" Make the Cut

- Antigua Race Week, 2003
by Ramiz Abuhaydar

We pulled into the Catamaran Club Marina on Wednesday morning at 8.30 AM to find Helen on the dock to guide us into our slip and welcome us back. The crew on Seabiscuit for the 36th edition of ASW was made up of 9 women and yours truly as the token male.

Friday and Saturday were slated to be practice days so that everyone could become familiar with the boat and with their tasks. It soon became apparent that we had a very fast boat and well matched crew. By the time we returned to the dock on Saturday afternoon we were ready.

The day when we would go out there and earn our keep had finally come. With butterflies in our gut we slipped out of our berth and headed to the start. It is essential to go out at least one hour before the start to have time to check the wind, warm up, discuss strategy and then relax while we await our turn. We were the third class to start and watched the early starters to

get a better idea which side of the course appeared to be favored and which boats seemed to be going fast and which were not. At last it was our turn and with one minute to our start, Pat knew where she wanted to be for a good start and where she wanted to go. It all went according to script and we were first around the windward mark, two boat lengths ahead. A short fetch followed to the wing mark before we turned west for a long leg off the wind. The boat was fast and the crew worked hard to get every last knot out of her. The lead kept growing and soon we were ten boat lengths ahead of Lofoten. Lofoten is an almost identical, but newer Beneteau 445 chartered by Jan Sodeberg, a former world champion in the Soling class and a five time winner of Antigua Sailing Week. The finish line was now in sight and we had managed to increase our lead slightly. We could already taste victory as we headed for home. The euphoria of having raced the perfect regatta was starting to get to me and in a momentary lapse of judgment I forgot about an item in the sailing instructions instructing us to sail outside all oil terminal moorings. We won the race by over one minute but were protested by Lofoten for not sailing the course. I was the navigator and it was my responsibility to know the rules and the sailing instructions. I had let the girls down. All through the ride back to Falmouth and the endless night I could not help reflecting on what if.....

Monday morning brought a new day. Instead of first we were lying in 16th place with a long and hard road ahead if we wanted to finish in the points. We could afford no more mistakes. Lofoten had underestimated us on day 1 and almost paid dearly for it. He would not make that mistake again and dodged us all through the start sequence. Our start was not as good as the one the day before and we found ourselves in fifth place at the first mark. Slowly and surely we clawed our way back, picking off one competitor at a time and soon only Lofoten remained ahead of us by just over one minute. Unfortunately as we rounded the last mark we were pushed over by a wave and touched the buoy. To exonerate ourselves for our mistake we had to perform a 360 degree turn that allowed 2 of our competitors back ahead of us. We took up the chase and soon screamed past both of them. We were inching closer to our nemesis but ran out of real estate before we could haul him back. We were pleased with our race (except for that one unfortunate incident) and finishing second, and had now climbed back into 6th place in our class.

Race 3 would be a long and tiring one as we worked our way, mostly up-wind from Jolly Harbor, on the west coast of Antigua back to Falmouth. We started with the pack and the fleet reached the first mark pretty bunched up, with a lot of yelling and screaming as we looked for a way through. Miraculously there were no contacts at the buoy and we were in clear air once again. Lofoten was having a miserable time. He had been boxed in at the start and had been jammed up at the first mark and was now lying some 6 boat lengths behind us. The race was only just beginning and we knew that Lofoten would be coming after us. He had the advantage to

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windward as our girls just did not have the bulk to tack as quickly as our Olympian adversary. Somehow we held our own for over 15 miles. As we turned the southern corner of the island we were side by side, trading tacks and making sure Lofoten did not get away. As we approached Cade Reef we had Sodeberg pinned under us. Being a wily champion he tricked us into believing that he was about to tack away from the obstruction. We tacked to give him room. He reversed his move and stayed in another few seconds gaining the windward position. For the next couple of miles we dogged each other. The girls at the winches were getting tired and I jumped in to help with the tailing as we managed to stay in touch with Lofoten. We had a slightly better handicap rating and he owed us about 6 seconds an hour. If the positions and spread remained unchanged we could win on corrected time. With less than half a mile to go our luck ran out when a disabled boat drifted in between us forcing us to bear off to avoid it. That move cost us about three boat lengths on our competition, enough for him to sail on to victory, finishing 23 seconds ahead. Once again we had sailed our hearts out and come up an inch short. Our second place finish that day lifted us in the standings to 5th.

By the time we were back in our berth at the Cat Club we were looking forward to Lay Day, a day of rest and recuperation from the racing.

Lay Day is half way through. It is also an excuse for the sailors to party all night and then drag themselves to the Falmouth Yacht Club for Lay Day activities which involve drinking more beer and culminating in a wet T-shirt contest before the parties resume, which of course involve drinking even more beer. Not surprising, this part of Race Week had no appeal for our crowd. They elected to go sailing instead.

Race 4 - A day away from racing had served to recharge our batteries. We were oh! so close to that magical third place that would qualify us for the championship race on Saturday. All we had to do was focus and race our hearts out in the remaining two races.

If the start was anything to judge by, we were in trouble. Because of a general recall to an earlier class the whole start sequence was disrupted in a way that very few competitors understood. We took off at our originally scheduled start only to be recalled. In the ensuing general confusion our class restarted with us far away from the line, trying to figure out what was happening. It took us a moment to realize that we were being left behind before we set off after the pack, starting a full 2 minutes and fifteen seconds late. Full credit must be given to Pat and the crew who kept their composure as we set off in hot pursuit.

Sometime during the past 36 hours Pat and the girls had decided that I should tail the jib on both tacks and then crank the winch in tight. The change in my job description actually worked. We were tacking faster and I was able to crank the jib in tighter, allowing us to point a couple of degrees higher without any loss of speed.

As we tore after the pack we sailed on the edge, sailing to within touching distance of the cliffs at Shirley Heights to take full advantage of the flatter waters and the favorable lifts. It was a long slog uphill, but soon our competitors were left in our wake as we picked them off one by one. At the last mark we passed Athena, the smallest boat in our class and gave chase to the one boat that has managed to stave us off all week.... That afternoon we took our case to the jury, seeking a two minute redress for the confusion at the start. It was a long shot at best, which was denied. We ended up two minutes behind Lofoten and had been edged out of second place by Athena on corrected time. The good news was that our third place finish that day put us solidly in third place for the week, just six points out of second.

At 6 PM, with several bottles of Veuve Cliquot champagne in hand, we piled into the cab with Kevin, our taxi driver for the regatta and drove up to Shirley Heights to watch the sunset on English Harbor before ending up at Mauro's Famous Pizza for dinner.

One race to go. We start conservatively and rounded the first mark in fourth place. Our run to Bluff allows us to stay with the bunch and pass one of our competitors. We are now running into the rear of the preceding class that started ten minutes ahead of us, which makes for an interesting rounding at the leeward mark. Both Lofoten and Marionette, the other Beneteau 445 in the class, also part of the Swedish 'team' and just ahead of us in the standings, are right next to us as we get set to round the mark at Curtain. We have worked hard to gain the inside track and have an advantage over both boats. Somehow disaster has our number, for as we get ready to tack to cover the two boats, the starboard jib sheet develops an override, making it impossible to release. Pat screams for a knife to cut the sheet and DJ, quick as a cat, flies across the boat with knife in hand and with one stroke sets us free. We immediately tack onto starboard and realize that DJ's quick reaction saved the day and we had lost less than a boat length and we still held an advantage over our rivals. Lofoten and Marionette soon realized that we had them covered and that with our speed we could stay ahead all the way home. Lofoten then did the only reasonable thing possible, he peeled off and went on the opposing, less favored tack. Reluctantly we let him go as we had to think of our placing in the series - maybe even second place and leave our personal feud to the morrow. We remained on top of Marionette all the way to the reef where he surprised us by going inside the reef (the only one of over a hundred boats to do so). At first we thought that he had made a mistake and would soon tack out. Pat then was sure that he had played us and would take advantage of the calm waters in the channel and come out ahead of us. Throughout the commotion I kept on insisting that we stick to our game plan and finish the race. The next time we looked at Marionette we realized that the boat was no longer moving. They had gone aground. His gamble had backfired. After a good 5 minutes hard aground he had to start his engine to come off the reef. We sailed on to the finish, coming in seconds behind Lofoten, and lodged a protest against Marionette, just in case he did not do the honorable thing and retire. Marionette, and team Sweden had too much riding on his finishing second, and when we headed towards the protest room the skipper looked me straight in the eyes and said "it is my word against yours". He was right. The jury heard both sides and without an outside source to corroborate our claim they had to award him the decision when he lied and said that he did not run his engine.

Despite the unfavorable outcome of the protest, we were still pleased with our performance. We had put together a crew that had not raced as a team before, we started the series with a big 16 point deficit and we had managed to finish in the medals. The Bareboat Championship Race, featuring the top three boats in each of the five bareboat classes, would be the time to be personal. Lofoten had tried unsuccessfully to have us disqualified before the series even began, and then protested us in the first race; Marionette who shamelessly lied to hang on to second place. We would be racing to beat them....



From left: Kim Cleary, Gayle Currie, Pat Tyrrell, Pat Nolan, Jill Jinks, Peg Eaton, DJ McCabe, Kelly Bray, Ramiz Abuhaydar. Not pictured, Mel Adam.

We woke up early Saturday, pumped and ready for blood. The wind started the day on the weak side but by race time had built up to 15 knots. Twelve of the qualified fifteen boats showed up for an exciting windward/leeward course. All three members of team Sweden had qualified, Lofoten and Marionette from our class and Taz from another class. It soon became apparent that they would be using team tactics against us. All through the starting sequence we kept our eyes on Lofoten and Marionette and managed a better start. Taz, a small boat, that had a rating advantage on us, sat in our wind all through the first downwind leg to try and deny us clear air, effectively slowing us down, and on the ensuing upwind leg, Lofoten and Marionette split tacks. We knew that we were faster than Marionette, so we let him go and covered Lofoten. We traded tacks for most of the leg, managing to stay a boat length ahead, while Marionette fell further and further behind with each passing mile. The turning point in the duel came when on one tack Lofoten seemed to have gained the edge. He was on starboard tack and we were coming at him on port. Just as I was about to call for a duck, Pat decided to play 'chicken' with him and attempt lee bow him - a kind of slam-dunk procedure by which a boat on port, tacks just under, and hopefully a few feet ahead of the bow of the starboard tack boat, a nervy and dangerous move, which if perfectly timed and executed can force the other boat to tack away. Our luck held and our execution was brilliant and Lofoten was forced to tack onto the less favored tack. We never saw Lofoten again. The fight seemed to have gone out of him and he finished four and a half minutes behind us, with Marionette another 2 minutes behind Lofoten. We finished first in our class and third in fleet, less than 28 seconds out of first.....

Whew. What a week!