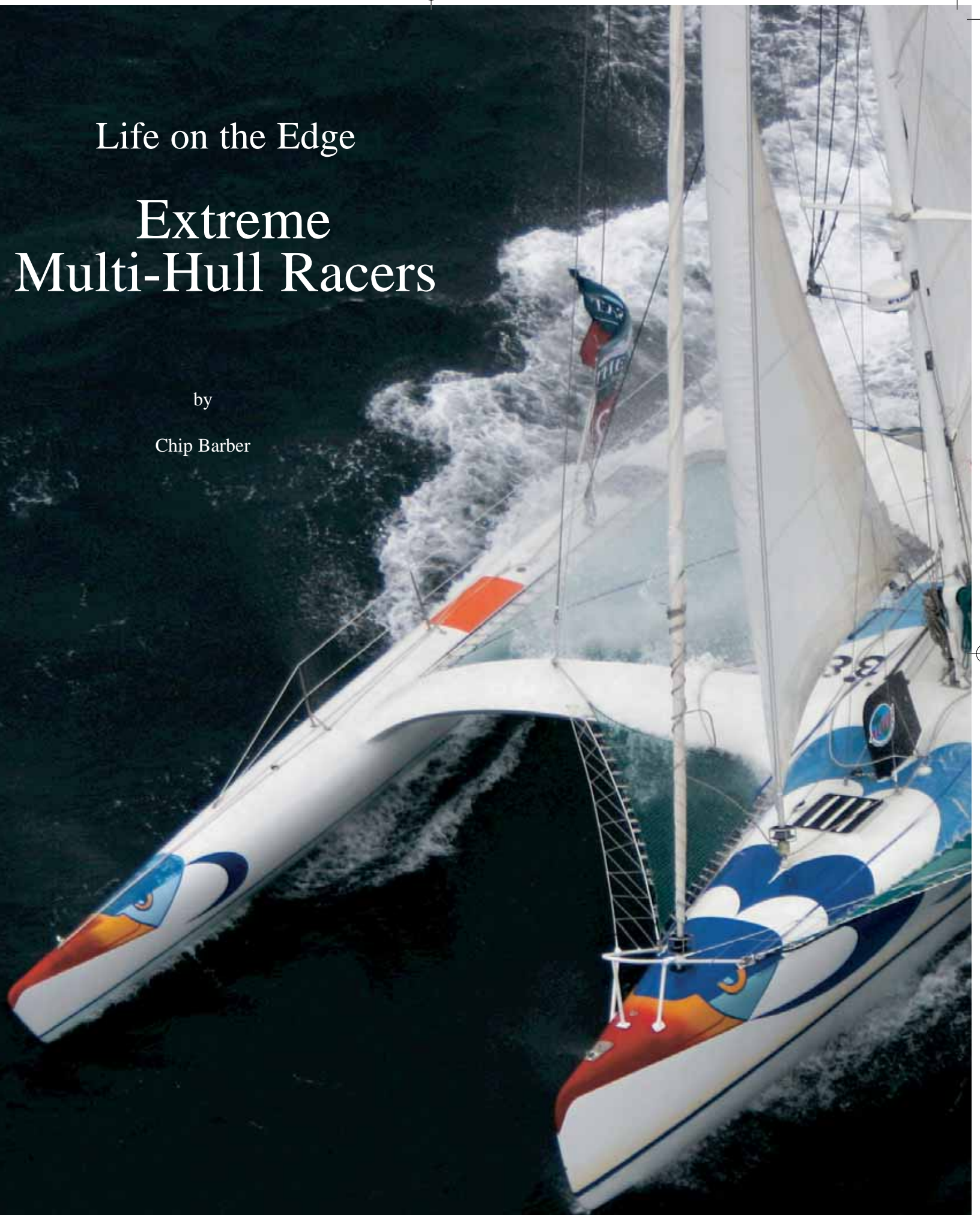


Life on the Edge

Extreme Multi-Hull Racers

by
Chip Barber





Great American II, with skipper Rich Wilson, at the start of the 2004 Transat, a transatlantic race for solo sailors. Photo courtesy of Sitesalive Foundation.

In August of 2001, a sleek 100-foot long catamaran slipped out of her dock on New York's Hudson River and headed to sea. Her crew had set for themselves the singular goal of breaking the world speed record for a sailboat from New York to England. They were fully prepared, having just finished third in a grueling race around the world. But to them, this record was the Holy Grail. Locked into a strong weather pattern, they set off from Ambrose Light. After the first half of the first day, they were well ahead of the record pace. Then an hour or two later, with the boat surging along at 30 knots under a full main and gennaker and half the crew trying to sleep below, disaster struck. The port hull hit a semi-submerged object that immediately tore off 35 feet of the bow and the dagger board. This caused an uncontrolled gybe at full speed.

Fortunately no one was injured.

This "adventure" could have been tragic, but to skipper Cam Lewis, navigator Larry Rosenfeld and their crew it was just "another day at the office." Within days, they were working to get their huge cat, *Team Adventure*, fixed and back on course for setting new world records. They tell me that this effort will take millions of dollars to complete, hopefully during 2007.

To put the 30-knot speed of Lewis and Rosenfeld in perspective, we note that most of the ships that ply the world's oceans do so at about 20 knots. Many go slower. Among the fastest ships are modern cruise liners such as the new *Queen Elizabeth II*. The *QEII* travels at 30 knots, but in order to achieve this speed, she depends on more than 157,000 horsepower!

Team Adventure is part of a very small and elite group of adventurous sailboat crews who regularly push their yachts to speeds that make all but the fastest warships look absolutely slow. And they do this with just the power of the wind.

These "extreme" sailors sail high-tech multi-hull racers of 125 feet and longer in search of world record times over established courses. Backed by millions of dollars of corporate sponsorship, and in some cases the owner's personal fortune, their boats are the spaceships of the oceans. They are built of the same high-tech, super-strong, and lightweight composite materials used in aeronautics and astronautics. The vocation of these modern adventurers is to break circumnavigation or transoceanic speed records... and they regularly do so.

Perhaps the most famous and

Team Adventure flying a hull at the start of The Race in Barcelona in 2000. *Team Adventure* finished third in this race. Photo by Jacques Vapillon, courtesy of *Team Adventure*.



fiercely fought world record course is the 2,925-nautical-mile route from New York to the Lizard, a point of land at the southwest approaches to England, near Falmouth. This is the course that foiled *Team Adventure* in 2001. I raced this course across the North Atlantic in the spring of 1997 when it was so cold we had to show real concern for icebergs. As navigator, it was a great challenge. We didn't come close to the record that year in our 100-foot single-hull sloop, but I look forward to having the opportunity to try again.

The original record over this transatlantic course was set in 1905 by the famous skipper Charlie Barr sailing the three-masted schooner *Atlantic*. His record of 12 days and 4 hours at 10 knots stood for 75 years. Today the record is held by the Frenchman Bruno Peyron, who last year averaged a blistering pace of 28 knots in his 125-foot catamaran *Orange II*



The huge size of these boats is demonstrated as the crew of *Team Adventure* poses on the boom at the start of The Race in 2000. Photo courtesy of *Team Adventure*.

Cam Lewis, skipper of *Team Adventure*, looks over his shoulder at an overtaking wave during The Race. Photo courtesy of *Team Adventure*.



(4 days and 8 hours).

Other records sought by these huge catamarans and trimarans are circumnavigations, and routes such as Los Angeles to Honolulu and Los Angeles to Japan. *Team Adventure*'s navigator Rosenfeld holds the record for both, but the true king of world record holders is American Steve Fossett, who not only holds numerous sailing speed records in his huge cat *Cheyenne* (ex- *Play Station*), but also holds more aviation records than anyone else.

Some of the most interesting world record courses are the clipper ship routes of the nineteenth century. The Gold Rush route between San Francisco and New York is one that has yet to be broken. The 50-foot trimaran *Great American II*, with Rich Wilson as skipper, has raced

against "virtual" clipper ships on both the New York-to-Melbourne (Australia) and the Hong Kong-to-New York routes. (*Great American I* was capsized and lost during a storm off Cape Horn while attempting to break the San Francisco-to-Boston record in 1991. Wilson and his crewmen were saved by a passing merchantman.) I have had the pleasure of knowing both of Rich's crews for the latter two records, so I followed these attempts closely. Bill Biewenga of Newport, Rhode Island, helped Rich break the record to Australia by one day in 2002. Rich du Moulin of Larchmont, New York, comes from a famous sailing family and crewed in many America's Cup campaigns when the cup was held in Newport.

Rich du Moulin had not raced a multi-hull before setting out from Hong

Kong in 2003. He noted that *Great American II* is smaller and therefore not as fast as the huge cats like *Orange* and *Team Adventure*, but he says that the boat is still exceedingly quick—capable of 20 to 25 knots when pushed. But he warns that these boats, unlike mono-hulls, cannot be safely pushed to their full potential in most conditions. At full speed, structural damage could result from the boat pounding through the waves; therefore their crews must be continually alert to the forecasted conditions and slow down before damage or capsize occurs. Every good multi-hull sailor I have spoken to about this aspect of his or her sport talks about "balance." Sailing at the edge of the envelope in cats and tris more often than not leads to failure in a race where one has to first finish to be successful. Rich du Moulin explained that

Great American II reaching in perfect conditions. Photo by Billy Black. Courtesy of Sitesalve Foundation.





Steve Fossett's giant *Cheyenne* at Norfolk Yacht and Country Club in 2003. *Cheyenne* was prepped for her record-breaking circumnavigation in Norfolk, Virginia. Photo courtesy of Norfolk Yacht and Country Club.

he learned to anticipate changes in wind and weather far more accurately than in racing mono-hulls. For *Great American II*, the first reef was tied in at 13 knots true wind speed, no matter what the wind angle. The second and third reefs were taken at just 16 and 19 knots of wind respectively. Most of us single-hull racers have never sailed under this paradigm.

Wilson and du Moulin raced *Great American II* against the "virtual" clipper *Sea Witch* from Hong Kong, across the Indian Ocean, west around Cape of Good Hope, and finishing in New York in

May, 2003. They were less than two days ahead of the 192-foot-long *Sea Witch*, the actual clipper ship that set the record over this 15,000 mile course in 1849.

I find it commendable that both *Team Adventure* and *Great American II* are sailed in support of educational programs. Both American teams have dedicated a great part of their programs to bring geography, the physical sciences, and math into the classroom in an exciting and meaningful manner. (See <http://www.teamadventure.org/> and <http://www.sitalive.com/>)

As in the automobile industry,

sailboat construction directly benefits from the trickle-down of new technology from racing to production vehicles. There is no better example of this than in the work of Peter Johnstone, who builds the Gunboat line of cruising catamarans. Peter was a well-known mono-hull racer until a few years ago. From the Johnstone family of J-Boat fame, he was instrumental in developing the 49er class of dinghy into an Olympic class. His boats have won the Transpac race and numerous other high visibility races. Johnstone told me that he became a convert to multis while on a family



Peter Johnstone's Gunboat 48, *Cream*, a "cruising" catamaran at speed near Newport, Rhode Island. Photo by Clint Clemons, courtesy of Peter Johnstone.

vacation on his own boat in the Caribbean. While reaching between islands in heavy seas, everyone aboard, including his wife and children and even Peter, became seasick. The boat was heeled over to a dangerous level, which contributed to the *mal de mer*, he says. During this miserable passage he noted with curiosity a production catamaran pacing his boat across the lumpy seas. The difference, according to Peter, was that the crew aboard the cat were all enjoying a picnic (with wine) while seated in the completely smooth and level cockpit! From that time on, Peter has been sold on the comfort and speed of cats, as well as the safety that results from both.

Johnstone's Gunboats are built in South Africa and are among the most technologically advanced cruising sailboats. Even though liberal use of carbon composites and rigging reduce weight so as to improve performance, no luxury has been spared in these 62- and 48-foot boats. And while the Gunboats comfortably and safely cruise at half the speed of the world's



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largest racing multis, one must remember that this is still twice the speed of the world's fastest racing mono-hulls!

Yes, the stories of mid-ocean dismastings and sinkings are legend among the elite sailors who constantly push the envelope in search of elusive world sailing speed records. But these men and women are true professionals. For them safety is paramount in everything they do. But without pushing (bending?) the envelope once in a while, no records would ever be broken.

As a famous ocean racer I navigated for a few years ago is fond of saying, "If you are not living on the edge, you are taking up too much room!"

Note: No story of multi-hulls in *Virginia Sportsman* would be complete without recognizing Felix Herrin and his Catman Cats manufacturing facility in Urbanna. Felix is renowned for building quality custom power and sailing catamarans for truly knowledgeable and discriminating boaters.

Chip Barber is a yachting professional who provides expert project management and support for discriminating yachtsmen worldwide from his offices in Charlottesville. Recent projects include managing both vintage yacht restorations and new construction using high-tech composites. He is an accomplished ocean racing navigator.



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