

My First Mackinac

By Meritt Palm

Merritt Palm raced her first Mackinac aboard "Asylum" owned by Dr. Richard Lootens. Merritt is a junior at Grosse Pointe South High School, Grosse Pointe, MI

My face was implanted in the hotel pillow. The wake-up call blared through my dream like a fire engine. I woke Ann, who was sleeping in the bed next to me.

"So...you psyched for the big race?" she asked.

"I guess," I said, wishing Mom were here.

Ann didn't seem to get up right away, so I hopped in the shower. Then I unpacked my clothes for the day. Actually, I might have to wear these clothes for the next three days. Who knows when I'd have time to change them? After putting on my yellow crew shirt and blue shorts, I repacked my duffle for the seventh time. Anticipating the time of darkness and the inability to see, I tried to memorize where everything was. We went to breakfast and then to the boat.

"Asylum" looked sleek in the morning sun. As we loaded the necessary equipment and food on the boat, it seemed to get smaller. Then we had a crew meeting. Dr. Lootens, the owner, passed out safety equipment and told us how and what to do in case of an emergency. This triggered a wave of anxiousness which made me wish I were related to someone on the boat. Dad was on another boat and Mom would be waiting at the Island. Panic left me when I remembered I was in good hands. After pictures, kisses and hugs, "Asylum" and her crew of nine motored out of the Sarnia harbor and into the St. Clair River. There we were greeted with smiles and waves from crowds of people on shore.

Finally, after battling the current in the river, we reached Lake Huron.

It was a sunny and warm day with a slight breeze, which was perfect for a downwind start. While waiting for our fifteen minute gun, we motored around the starting area, sized up our competition and discussed tactics for the first part of the race. Most of the boats in our class were well equipped. We were fortunate that our skipper had just purchased a new mylar genoa a few weeks before. This sail would greatly increase our boat speed. While positioning for our start, I saw my dad on another boat. He blew me a kiss which caused a huge lump to catch in my throat. It soon disappeared when I was given the job of calling time. 5., 4., 3., 2., 1..Gun! We were off on 300 miles of non-stop racing – our destination Mackinac Island.

The deep blue water bubbled by the boat. I watched it for a while, then decided that since it wasn't my watch, I'd sleep for my four hours off. When I came on watch, the wind had died and we were moving ever so slowly. Dr. Lootens steered because we were still going downwind. I

sat to leeward with the rest of the people on watch, hoping my weight placement would improve the speed. The boats had spread apart from us. Only one boat from our class was close by, and she was behind. Then came the dreaded **bugs**, the little kind that fly up your nose and into your mouth, but don't bite. As they came in showers, I prayed the plague would end soon. Now, as well as being sweaty from the heat, I was also spotted with bugs. As dusk approached they departed, leaving behind their dead as a continuing reminder of the annoying side of nature.

Soon darkness fell and all that could be seen with the aid of the moon were the ghostly silhouettes of nearby boats and the red glow of the compass light. Drifting off to sleep, I heard the buzzing of Ron's Walkman as he plotted a course for the Cove Island Buoy.

I awoke to the urgent sound of our fog horn. Seeing the fog cascade over the cabin top onto the floor, I jumped out of my berth. To shield myself from the dampness, I put on my boots and foul weather gear and went on deck, joining Ann at the bow. I could barely see my two feet in front of me. Ann informed me that we were nearing the Cove Island Buoy, but we couldn't see it to round it. While she blew the horn every few seconds, I looked forward, left, then right, but couldn't see anything but light gray. The navigator furiously took reading after reading on the Loran to find our approximate position: Boats came into view, then vanished in thin air. A bell sounded in the stillness. It was the buoy! Excited shouts came from invisible boats. We rounded the mark and sailed up wind: it was now my turn to steer.

I paid close attention to the telltales, the puffs of air on the water, and the compass heading; doing my utmost to increase the speed of the boat upwind. After a few hours of steering, the novelty wore off and I began to wonder.

"What are my friends on "Rubicon" doing now? What about my friends back home?"

But I realized this race was something that not everyone gets a chance to do and I began to appreciate it more.

As night slowly approached, the air began to chill. Ann, being my opposite, loaned me her warm coat while I steered into the night. An hour or so later, she took over the helm and the coat and I joyfully grabbed a bite to eat and caught some "Z's."

When I awoke to Ann's shaking, the Island had come into view. Spirits were high as we were bearing in the direction of the finish line.

After a while, I became somewhat dispirited because the Island didn't seem to be getting any closer. I looked at the chart and realized we had farther to go than I had originally thought. The sun tried to push its way out of the clouds and finally succeeded by mid-afternoon. As dinner time approached, the finish line drew closer. Along with everyone else, I sniffed the air trying to catch the scent of horses and fudge that is Mackinac Island. We listened closely to the radio to catch the excited chatter of the skippers calling into the Race Committee as they finished. It was then that we heard the names of a few boats in our class. The first, second, and third place slots were taken, but my spirits were not deflated. Finally, around 6 p.m., we finished. The gun went off and I was elated. Although we were fifth, I was so thrilled to have finished my first Mac race. However, I regretted that it was over.

I had found confidence and pride within myself. I had succeeded in completing an event which few, especially women, have the opportunity to start. I had thought that by the end of this race, I would be tired and cranky. On the contrary, I felt as though I could run a marathon. As we glided into the harbor, I felt a lump of joy and self-satisfaction form in my throat.

