

Memoirs of an Unlikely Champion

By Gib Charles

To grossly paraphrase Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz: "Oh s**t! We're not on Long Pond anymore, Ken!"

That's how I felt staring at the "ocean" someone had misnamed "Lake" Michigan when Ken Miller and I arrived at the North Shore Yacht Club for the "North American Championship" regatta. The wind was 15-20 knots, the swells were 3-4 feet and dark clouds were coming from the west ... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Hi. My name is Gib Charles and, I confess, I sail a Mutineer. I live in Fort Collins, Colorado. A friend gave me my first Mutineer, it came with his house in 1995. I liked the basics of the boat: it's size; comfort; the fact that it had a main, jib and spinnaker; that it could be launched in very shallow water (a necessity on my pond) and that young kids felt comfortable IN it. My kid's were 3 and 8 and didn't want to go out in my M-Scow because they felt insecure sitting ON the boat. I gave away the Scow and started working on the '74 Mutt. Two years later I saw an '83 Mutineer for sale with all of the upgrades I had read about (spinnaker launcher, wire furling jib, Harken hardware, inboard jib tracks, new style rudder head, etc.). I bought it, swapped the parts I wanted to keep from the old boat, and sold Mud Puppy for close to what I had paid for the newer one.

Last year I began racing my new Mutt in regional regattas. I loved the combination of mental, physical and technical intensity and teamwork. I even won a one day Portsmouth regatta in 20 knot winds – I was hooked!

I soon set my sights on Highland Park. I ordered new sails from North Sails through Greg Fisher; faired my hull, centerboard and rudder; read Rig Your Dinghy Right and did everything my time and budget would allow.

This spring I began looking for crew willing to travel 1000 miles and spend a week with me. I was lucky that Ken Miller, 74, who lives on the lake I sailed, was both available and willing! Ken has sailed for 55 years and has owned 20 different boats and he has no fear. We sailed a warm-up regatta two weeks before Highland Park in a mixed Portsmouth fleet that included two Buccaneers who were also going to BNAC. On day 1 the winds went from 0 mph for the first two hours while we drifted under postponement to a 52 mph blast followed by 25-30 mph sustained. Between races Ken and I went over to windward in a lull, then went turtle. But we also won the Portsmouth fleet that day beating the two Bucc sailors who would probably prefer to not be named (D.S. took 2nd in the A Fleet and G.T. took 3rd in the B Fleet at BNAC). A mixed confidence builder.

Fast forward to NSYC, Saturday of race week. I don't have to weigh my Mutt, but I'm curious how over weight she is. 506 pounds! She should be a Bucc at that weight! 96 Pounds too heavy for a Mutt. A blow to my confidence.

Ken and I decide to go out on the lake to see what big wind with big swells feel like. Our home lake, Long Pond, is 1 mile long and 1/4 mile wide and we launch from a very shallow sand/silt

beach. I decided to launch from the NSYC dock for a rare treat and botched it, hitting the metal pier and crunching the nose of my carefully tuned racing machine. My confidence drops two more notches. When we get out in the 15-20 knot winds and 3 foot swells I have memories of capsizing 2 weeks ago. We sail ugly, clumsy, but we don't go over. Would we be racing in higher winds? What am I doing here? As we settle in for the night, my confidence is hanging by a thread.

Sunday is the practice race. There are so many elements for both Ken and me that we have A LOT to practice and learn: offset windward mark, leeward gate, a finish line that would be set after we are racing, the compass, new sails, 180 degrees of water horizon, swells, etc! The Buccs say it's a bad omen to win the practice race, but I dismiss it. If I have a chance I'm going to take it. It may be my only chance to win a race! The winds are light, my nemesis in races past (does 96 pounds make a difference?). Ken and I work well together. We're constantly thinking, talking and adjusting. We move much better in the light winds with the new North sails than I had in the past. We figure out the compass, sort of, catch some good wind shifts and win it by a good margin. Finally a confidence boost. I can relax a bit and enjoy myself.

Monday, Race Day 1: The winds stay light and we win all 3. Is it going to be this easy? No way. Enter the villain, complete with a black Pirate flag flying from the leach of his main, Michael Connolly. Michael is a Buccaneer racer who had just started renovating a Chrysler Bucc and knew he wouldn't have it ready for BNAC, so he borrowed a very nice Mutineer from a friend. He and his crew Marty put over 200 man-hours into the boat to make it competitive. They took a third followed by two second place finishes on the first day, which was only the second day either of them had ever been on the water in a Mutineer! They both had their sights set on winning, so they spent many more hours changing and refining the boat. I knew I had a great big bulls eye on my mainsail as far as they and the other Mutts were concerned.

Tuesday, Race Day 2: We only got 1 race in on day 2, a real drifter. Ken and I learned something new with every race, sometimes something important on the first leg to use to our advantage on the same leg later in the same race. In the very light wind it was much more a mental/tactical game than it was a physical one. Even with a heavy boat, the new sails seemed to have enough power to more than compensate and we won race four. Michael took another second and Rey Garza from Texas finished third. Back on shore Michael and Marty make more adjustments to their boat, we all give suggestions to each other, even offering spare parts and tools to each other. The friendly competition was wonderful. By encouraging each other to do better we were raising the bar for all of us.

Wednesday, Race Day 3: We had some wind! We got 2 races in. Winds around 10 - 15 mph with 3 foot swells. The wind I loved, the rough water was a real challenge. On the first beat Ken and I were taking waves over the bow. It's very easy to get weight too far back in the butt of a Mutt, this was the first time I experienced having our weight too far forward, driving the bow down into the troughs. I had Ken slide back and studied how Michael was sailing.

I was fighting the waves with the tiller, trying to sail a straight course according to the jib telltales. It appeared he was letting each wave lift him slightly. When I tried it, my jib would luff on each lift, killing our power to drive forward. I learned to steer down gently on the flat before

the wave to slightly overpower the jib so that it would be trimmed properly when it was lifted by the wave. We were able to sail a higher course, and faster, but we followed Michael and Marty on every leg of both races that day, except the last legs.

On a one mile beat from the leeward gate to the finish line, with a horizon that is just the water line, I found it was nearly impossible to read wind shifts. We split tacks with Michael right after the leeward gate, picked up two major wind shifts with the help of the compass, and stole two more victories. Two excellent races requiring focus, study and drive. The compass gets credit for races five and six. Marty was furious, in a friendly sort of way. He could taste the victory he had worked so hard for, just for us to snatch it away in the end - twice.

I'm thrilled to be learning so much, so Ken and I look forward to the last day as a chance to learn more. Since we were following Michael and Marty for most of day 3, watching them sail higher on the upwind legs repeatedly, we decide to make some changes to the boat. Primarily to set the jib leads further inboard. It proves to be a great improvement, especially in the BIG winds of day 4.

Thursday, Race Day 4: The first race is in 15-20 mph wind. At the start of the second race the committee measures 22 knots (about 25 mph) and it increased during the race. After four days of learning in light to moderate conditions, this was the Real Deal. Ken and I have our confidence back, we're eager to learn more, to keep the boat upright and to feel the speed.

We had two more excellent races, Michael and Marty beating us by mere seconds both times. That was thrilling. Three miles around a racecourse and to finish separated by seconds. The competition was fantastic. The new skills allowed us to sail in 25+ mph winds and 3-4 foot seas under control in a 15 foot dinghy. It was worth the whole week!

If I never race again, MNAC 2002 has made me a much better sailor. I learned as much in that week as I did all last season.

Thanks to Jim Faller, Eric Frisvold, Rey Garza, Michael Connolly and your crews for five great days. I certainly enjoyed your competition and camaraderie, and look forward to 2003.