Heavy Hitters on Heavy Weather

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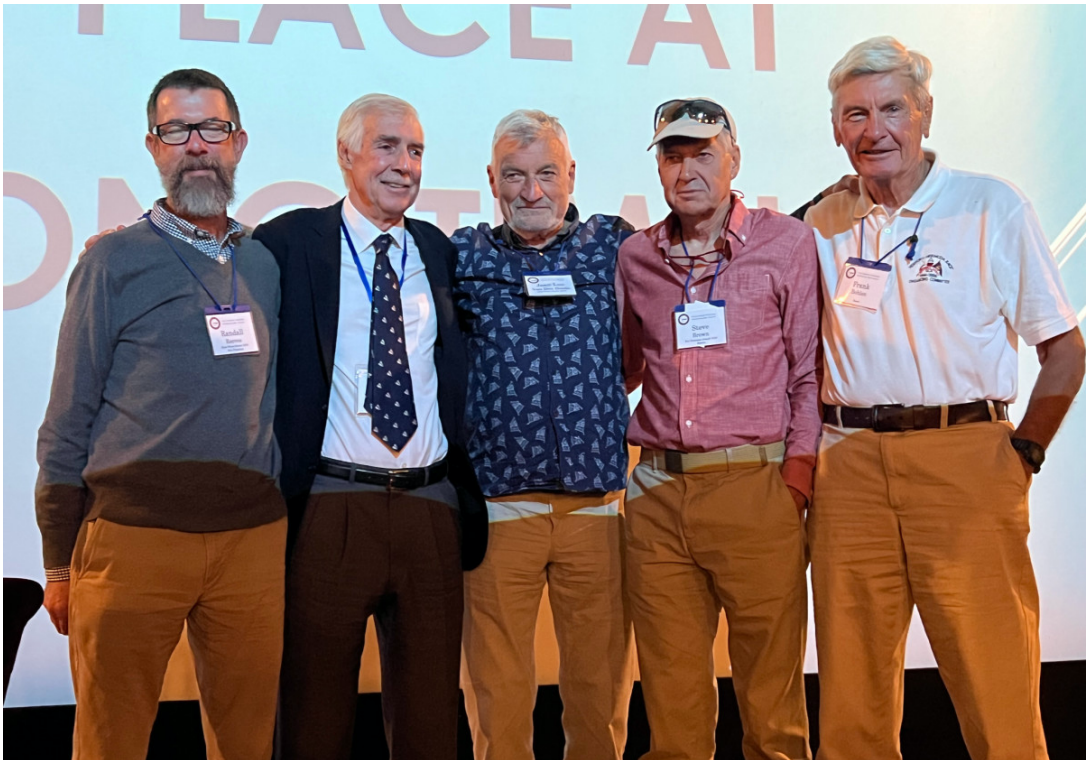

(L to R) Randall Reeves, Rich Wilson, Jean-Luc Van Den Heede, Steve Brown, and Frank Bohlen
Photo by Dan Nerney

“What’s the joke about heavy weather? You know it when you see it.”

Figure 8 singlehander Randall Reeves drew laughs from the Cruising Club of America (CCA) sailors attending the forum “Heavy Weather Sailing: Bluewater Perspectives” as part of the CCA’s centennial celebration in

Newport, Rhode Island, last week. He joined four other heavy hitters who know a thing or three about heavy weather—renowned solo racer Jean-Luc Van Den Heede, National Sailing Hall of Fame nominee Rich Wilson, veteran high-latitude expedition sailor Steve Brown, and panel moderator and esteemed navigator W. Frank Bohlen—all there to describe their experiences and share what they have learned.

And while it may be a bit of gallows humor to joke about winds, seas, and situations that most of us hope never to see in our sailing lives, it's a great illustration of what all agreed are vital attributes any sailor should bring the challenge of heavy weather sailing—a positive attitude, and a kind of joy and satisfaction in working the problem. "If you think you can get through it, you can get through it," said Reeves, who in 2019 completed his Figure 8 voyage, singlehanded 40,000 nautical miles around the Antarctic and North American continents, on his 45-foot aluminum sloop, *Mōli*.

"I am very happy each time I find a solution," said Van Den Heede, a six-time solo circumnavigator and 2019 CCA Bluewater Medal winner, of the adaptability needed when the unexpected happens or a forecast presents a navigational challenge. "If you like adventure, you like to solve problems. If you have no problems, you are watching TV, so, no problem."

Photo by Dan Nerney

Wilson, who set multiple records aboard the 60-foot trimaran *Great American* and survived, with Steve Pettengill, the boat's catastrophic capsize off Cape Horn in 1990, said that while fear can make you think about what could happen, "what's worse is something happening that you can't fix."

The conversation began with Bohlen, an oceanographer, Gulf Stream analyst, and emeritus professor of marine science at the University of Connecticut, providing a succinct primer on wind, wave, and sea state science. "You are part of this," he urged the sailors in the audience.

"You're working with models. They all have a finite resolution." One data point, he noted, may come from roughly 12 square miles of ocean. "You and I care about a 50- to 60-foot patch of the ocean. You've got to be part of the game. You've got to get out on deck, look at the wind, the seas, look at the radar, the barometer. You are very much part of the equation. You can't blame it all on the forecasters."

The discussion ran the gamut from specific experiences with different types of drogues and other methods of slowing the boat down—from running downwind under bare poles to heaving-to—to the imperatives of preparation, research, and practice. Brown, who won the Royal Cruising Club's Tilman Medal for epic passages including around the Americas via the Northwest Passage and Antarctica aboard his Bestevaer

60, *Novara,* emphasized that proven techniques such as heaving-to are only as useful as your practice with your boat.

"All boats handle differently," he said. "It's absolutely essential to test it." He described running into a brutal storm while sailing from South Georgia to the Falkland Islands—finally turning around and running "for 42 hours in hurricane-force winds." He and his crew deployed a Jordan Series Drogue. "We shut the door, went below, slept, and played cards for 42 hours. The boat yawed no more than 10 degrees."

Preparation and practice, he reiterated, were key.

So is anticipation. Reeves described playing "what-if games—what if the cap shroud lets go right now, what if the rudder gets jammed—what will I do? I try to run through these scenarios in my head so that I can be prepared for when the stuff hits the fan." When a storm was imminent, he said, he focused on self-care—getting sleep, eating good food, cleaning up himself and his boat—all to be as rested as possible for the challenge to come.

Van Den Heede echoed this strategy, noting that the worst part of heavy weather is not at the beginning of a storm, but rather toward the end when the sea state becomes more confused as the wind shifts in a storm's wake. "Rest at the beginning of a gale," he said. "Sleep. Eat. You must keep cool, have a positive attitude, don't be scared, because at the end of the gale, you may have to hand-steer."

Brown, who noted that he is neither a racer nor a singlehander, described similar mental and physical preparation "making sure everything inside is well prepared…eliminate the fear factor, give the crew confidence in the boat and in you as a skipper." He also reiterated that his core heavy weather strategy starts with "never being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Being out in extreme conditions can be a massive adrenaline rush," Brown said, "but over time it gets exhausting. It wears down the crew, it wears down the boat."

And while much of a sailor's focus may be on what's happening on and above the sea, paying attention to the seafloor beneath is equally critical. Van Den Heede described racing a Swede 55 in France in a three-day gale and capsizing in seas that had piled up on a shallow shelf, blowing the mast out of the boat. "I made a big mistake," he said. "I didn't check the chart that we were passing in depths of 8 meters…check the charts. Don't pass where the bottom is coming up."

Reeves recalled a particularly difficult night in the Indian Ocean when he was pinned on the shallow banks of the Crozet Islands when a low arrived. "That evening when the sun went down, or rather when the slate-grey sky went black, I remember sitting in the cockpit thinking, I don't know how we're going to get through this," he said. "It was just huge, steep seas, and everything was breaking. And I was pretty right actually; overnight, we were knocked down a couple of times."

In the end, he said, it's important to maintain perspective. "Remember," he said, "this was all your idea, being out here. You *wanted* this."