



WAYPOINTS RIVES POTTS |

Rives Potts sets out once again aboard Carina in the Thrash to the Onion Patch, (Newport/Bermuda Race) hopefully putting another victory under his belt, Or is it his boom? We talked about the male bonding that makes this race so particular, a look back at his America's Cup experience with Dennis Connor, life aboard Tenacious in the 1979 Fastnet race when so many perished in the storm and of course, "so what's it like to be Commodore of the New York Yacht Club" (sometimes he has to pinch himself) and more...

You're getting ready to set off again in the Newport/Bermuda Race. How long is it now that you've been sailing? Seems a lifetime, true?

I've been racing for close to 60 years, I started as a child with small boats in Virginia, where I grew up. My father picked up sailing after the war and I sailed in Penguins, Jet 14's, 505's. But in my life I have been lucky enough to sail on a lot of great boats and great programs and I've had a great time. It certainly helped me in my career and in the quality of my life in general. Then it seemed like in the 1990's things were starting to change. Guys weren't delivering boats, they were being shipped. The racing programs were not the same. And ocean racing wasn't as prevalent as it was in the past. There was another factor, I was always sailing with other people, which was very nice but I realized I couldn't take my sons. So when they became of age, I decided to get a boat myself, Carina.

So what makes for success? Is it the boat or the crew?

It's a combination of the two, but most of it is luck.

How many times have you done the Newport/Bermuda Race?

Twenty-three times. And no, it never gets stale. It's great fun and something you look forward to every couple of years. There certainly are a lot of people who have full on racing programs, whatever that means but most of us like to take our friends and family. It's not just a race. You get to go to Bermuda for about three to five days, race while you're there, catch up with old friends, it really becomes a vacation. Some of the guys have been doing this race together for 20 to 30 years. The real reason you do this, when you get to be my age is we're afraid we will be forgotten if we don't keep doing it! You walk down the dock, you don't know anybody! We are already has-beens! When you sail with good people you get better. The fun thing I think about my group, is most of what I will call the grownups all came from pretty good sailing backgrounds, for a lot of the kids this might be the only racing they will do for the year, they don't have it in their blood like the old guys. We don't see each other for 738 days and then we get together for a week. It's like a reunion every two years. They are 31 and 32, all grown up.



I've been told in the past by racers, that it is really 3 races in one, the race to the Gulf Stream, the unpredictable Gulf Stream and then the race to Bermuda, what's your take?

I really never thought of it in that way, the Gulf Stream is a particular element in this race that's almost unlike any other race, although it has become a lot more predictable now. We use to go out there and drop a thermometer down the toilet to see what the temperature was; the water leaving Newport is mid 60's and in the Gulf Stream it can be over 80 degrees. There are other ways to tell, the water color changes, the bird life; the Gulf Stream is moving north then Northeast then East and the wind is blowing from the North, you can have some bigger waves and whitecaps, but the fastest current is always where the temperature radius is the largest. If you know which way the current is going, it could be very helpful to get there! Nowadays we have all the infrared cameras in outer space, the internet, many sources for information and we tap into everything that is allowed. In the old days it use to be after the first or second day you wouldn't see any boats; everyone would be scattered looking for wind and favorable currents, nowadays everyone has the same information, the pack is more tightly grouped together.

Have you been aware of a diminished sea life?

I haven't noticed it, sometimes we see a lot, and sometimes we don't see any. In this race we always see porpoises, a whale or two, Portuguese man of war and lots of flying fish, usually chased by bigger fish, especially in the Gulf Stream. I am always amazed to see the dolphins passing under the boat, no matter how many times I see it, I still get a thrill.

So what is life on board?

It is a fairly short race, 80 to 100 hours. It is particularly interesting when you have the younger people on board, the preteens and a little older. It is a new adventure for them. Many of us have done it before so we know the routine but for them, the first time, they don't know what to expect. The first night it's a bit chilly so the guys are cold, they don't have their sea legs so they usually get sick; I've gotten sick. We have a group of youngsters together who don't know each other; there is a whole lot of difference between 13 and 16 then 64 and 67, the kids are a little bit standoffish, they don't talk to each other too much. But they start bonding through the discomfort, it's like going into the military and having your head shaved, everybody is the same. Then they get on the rail and they start chatting, by the time they get down there they have become friends and will be best friends for life. It's fun watching my boys who, when they were young, looked up to the older guys. With my boys the only two times they have not made it in the race in the last 20, 25 years were when they were in the military in the Middle East. When they came back they sailed on the boat with some youngsters, these young kids gathered round asking my sons about what happens in war. It's a great experience to watch these children grow up and see how the older kids take care of the younger ones. Carina is a small 48, it's tight, with ten or 12 on board. We've not really had terrible seas, although I am not sure what bad weather is if you have a well prepared boat and well prepared crew; we always say reef early to be cautious before it happens. You know as a guy, there is nothing in life that is fun unless there is a little danger in it, a risk!

Tell us about Carina?

Carina is a 48ft aluminum sloop, designed by McCurdy and Rhodes and built in 1969 in Erie, Pennsylvania, in the Paasch boatyard. People say she's a rule beater, but she's won under every rule! She's heavy, narrow, and I'm partial of course, a sweet boat and easy to sail. We have a term in sailing, "getting in the groove". The newer, high performance boats have flat bottoms and very thin keels and rudders; it's like flying a jet airplane. It takes a whole lot of attention to keep that thing in the groove, the smaller the foil, the more critical, they stall out very easily, you have to be on top of it all the time and have this level of performance while you are out in the ocean! It's all about the percentage of polar, how the boat should perform to keep it right on high performance; you really have to pay attention. If you put the crew from Carina onboard, even though we are really good sailors, we couldn't do nearly as well. Carina has this big, fat groove, we can just fall asleep, it is like the tortoise and the hare, we can sail between 85 and 95% not 100% and the boat does well and is a comfortable boat. We're not rock stars but we enjoy ourselves, watch after this we'll finish last place.



What IS the winning streak with Carina?

Carina has won it several times, in 1970 and 1980 when Dick Nye owned her, but in two different classes, we won it in 2010 and 2012. We won our classes several times, the first time we won it overall; obviously to win the race requires some skill but it is really a lot, a lot of luck. You can be 100 yards apart in the Gulf Stream and have 4 knots with you versus 1 knot with the other boat and you still can't tell if you are winning. When you get to Bermuda you have a pretty good idea if you've done well but won't really know for a day. If you are a larger boat and the smaller boats are not in yet, and you owe a smaller boat 10 hours, you don't know how it will play out; but that is part of the anticipation. It also gives you something to talk about at the bar.

This year my two sons, Walker and Allen will be in the race. They also took Carina around the world. We did the Transatlantic Race in 2011 and then the Fastnet. After that my nephew Rives and my two sons sailed the boat to the Hobart race and after that they had to get it back for the Newport/Bermuda race. The only two instructions I gave them, you have to get to Sydney the week before Boxing Day and you have to get to Newport the week before the Bermuda race and they did. It was a good adventure and gave them some stories to tell. I thought after their military experience this was something they needed to do.

But it is also we men have Bucket Lists and I think sailing around the world is something every sailor has in the back of their mind, I still have not done it. I've always worked, but it's still out there on my Bucket List, and this time it will be my sons who did it first.

Your early years were taken up by the America's Cup experience; tell me what was it like to race with quirky Dennis Conner?

It was the best. I probably know Dennis as well as anybody; I lived with him for years. I get a little sentimental about it; he is quirky and doesn't always present himself the best. He was not a yacht club type; he was a chubby kid, no athletic ability, his father was a fisherman. He lived near the yacht club but was not a member. Dennis thought sailing was something he could do so he went to the San Diego Yacht Club and asked if he could wash boats, just to hang around. Alan Raffey, a guy who owned a home DIY business took a liking to Dennis, he wanted to help him out. He asked him to go sailing and then ultimately Dennis ended up running Raffey's drapery business and did well. Dennis is one of those guys that when he gets into something, he is in 100%. Dennis is a very smart guy, they don't give him the credit, he has a photographic memory. I'd say he and Ted Turner, I sailed many times with both of them, are a lot alike in that they are smart people who will be successful in anything they do and they go after things. Dennis studies everything about the boat, knows every nut and bolt. Socially he is awkward but admired, especially among sailors, he is still the only guy who won all five races in a single Star Worlds Championship regatta. He is a very good sailor and a good team builder. Dennis brings everybody up to the level he wants to achieve and he doesn't bother you about it.

Dennis works so hard, we were the first ones in the America's Cup that did training year round without a day off. In 1979, 80 with Enterprise and Freedom we sailed till Thanksgiving, took the boats apart in Cove Haven, put them on trucks the same night and headed to San Diego. I was taking Enterprise across with my wife following in the car, we pulled into a truck stop in El Paso and painted the deck because we wanted it to be just right, San Diego Yacht Club is a big deal to Dennis. We sailed every day, we didn't have shore crews, we did all the work; we'd get up, exercise, work on the boat, when the breeze came up at 11 we'd sail. These were 12 meters, we sailed with 11 race crew, but we were only 6 in San Diego, now they do it with 16 people. None of us were paid, we lived in people's houses, my wife would make sandwiches, (it was the good old days) every day we would take people out sailing because we needed more people, we probably took 1000 people out sailing. Dennis was always betting, "a quarter we get to that mark in 2 minutes 33 seconds" We pulled away from the dock everyday without any power boat, I would steer, you get good being around Dennis; there is not one minute of the day when he is not thinking about racing.

A lot of people look at athletes and they don't equate them with being smart; but Ben Ainslie, Kenny Read, Paul Cayard, these guys are smart, it's like playing chess all the time. The ability to build a team is a huge aspect. That's why I think a lot of successful business people sail, because it takes the same talents and skills required in building a company or a sport team.

I once discussed with Kenny Read during the Volvo Race whether it was a good idea to switch out team members or stay with the same team, he discovered that after awhile the team would be so in sync, the movements onboard would be without speech, how was it with Dennis?

The ability to build a good team is a huge aspect, huge. We once took a photojournalist out on a race in the summer of 1980 and he said to me afterwards, is it always like this? No one said a word the whole race. Dennis never had to say "we are tacking, we are turning" you just felt it, you knew it instinctively, what sails, etc, when you do it so much, that is Dennis strength, prepare, prepare, prepare. You know these things when you do it so much, that is Dennis strength, prepare, prepare, prepare.



That America's Cup loss in 1983 had to be devastating to Dennis, what do you remember?

Oh yes it was but he came back and got it back. Everyone knew it wasn't Dennis fault, everyone knew the Australian boat was so much better. It was faster on the computer analysis of the two boats; the computer had Australia II going around the course 5 minutes faster. We found out all this stuff afterwards, that is a huge, huge amount. It was amazing that Dennis won three of the races, even the Australians said they didn't know how he did it, Australia II had two boat breakdowns which didn't help them.

While on the subject, how do you feel about the AC of today?

Well, it's different. The times have changed. I think one of the big arguments is professional versus non-professional, I don't think that is anything wrong. That 1980 Cup program when we went full time was the last time when teams were not paid. When you get up to a certain level and you want to win, you have to get the best sailors and you have to sail all the time. So how can they put their children through schools or support their families if they are not getting paid? I don't have a problem with the professional part at all. Personally I would like to see the nationality rule, but you know back in the AC days with J boats, most of Vanderbilt's crew were from a town in Norway and professional seamen. The period with 12 meters, from 1958 to 1980 was all amateur, it's just the way it was, everybody liked it, the good old days, now it is a totally different animal

It is all about speed?

I have to say that I like the 12 meters. I've done 5 America's Cup, in the 12 meters and then the 80 footers. But it is just a natural progression; with the technology today things keep improving. We use to look forward to sailing on our Sabre and Opi, if you were to offer that to a young person sailing today, it would be like offering a Model T car to your son for his 16th birthday. I am not sure the multi-hulls provide the match racing skills that we saw with the 12's and the monohulls. The new boats are so fast and they can start and stop so quickly and they can get out of phase so quickly and the races only last 15 minutes. I remember the race in Valencia when we first started with the multihulls, whoever got to the starboard lay line first, basically won the race. He had two tacks to get to the first mark, the other boat had three and you lose 300 yards every time you tack. The guys who sail these races are really good athletes, we were in pretty good shape, but these guys are really good.

Would you like to see it go back to a monohull?

For an America's Cup I would like to see that, I think there is certainly room with what they are doing, maybe it could be another event, I'm just old fashion. I think a lot of us who spent a good part of our life on the AC have this vision of it being noble, something above everything else; it's not. It is in some ways, still the sport of rich people. Many people feel it should be one design; it's never been one design. Its been as much a contest between sailors as it is by design, they have what they call the box rule, given a certain parameter, you can create a design, if you want to do one design why don't you get a couple of Tempests or Etchells.

Dennis won the Cup back with a 12 meter in Perth in 1987. He had wanted to win it back for the NYYC, but the club chose John Kolius as its skipper instead. Dennis then challenged through the San Diego Yacht Club, and won the 1987 AC for the SDYC. In 1988 Michael Fey, from The Mercury Bay Boating Club in New Zealand, challenged the SDYC for the Cup. The Deed of Gift was written as a relatively loose document in some ways, but very tight in others. Basically, the challenger decides the boat it wants to challenge with, but within certain parameters. The boats have to be 45 feet, minimum, on the waterline which fits a 12meter, but no longer than 95 ft, so that is a big range. Since 1958, the accepted norm was to sail in 12 meters, (about 60-65 ft LOA), but MBBC issued his challenge with a 145ft "K" boat (which had the maximum allowed 95' WL) and set the date for the match to be 12 months out, which didn't give Dennis time to design or build a boat like the New Zealand challenge. So Dennis said, "now what" and decided there is nothing written that says that the boat can't have two hulls. So he did a crash design and build a program which produced a catamaran, with which he soundly defeated the much larger MBBC yacht. That controversial defense caused the America's Cup trustee clubs to get together and establish what was to be called the San Diego Protocol. Purpose: to put some sense back into the event. They agreed that basically moving forward, the boats would be 80ft and more modern instead of a 12 meter which is a very heavy, relatively sluggish boat; that lasted for 15 years and we had some great sailing. Then Bertarelli and Ellison came along, and after a lot of legal wrangling, sailed the next cup in large multihulls in Valencia. More often than not, the contestant who gets a jump on the newly allowed design, has a big advantage going into the race. That event in Valencia significantly changed the America's Cup, perhaps forever. With the advent of increased TV coverage, and the attendant sponsorship possibilities, the America's Cup would no longer be a sporting event that was simply a "friendly match race between yacht clubs of different nations". The Cup was transformed into a year round, multi year effort, with large budgets and sponsorship money driving the event. There are many diverse opinions concerning the type of boats, the professional nature of the event, the question of nationalism, and others. It hasn't played itself out yet. I think other events may come into play that may bring back the nostalgia for the AC. But as long as the Deed of Gift is written the way it is, whoever has the Cup makes the rules, along with the Challenger of Record. If they want to go back to monohulls, they can. Maybe if the English win, they may do that. New Zealand said they would do it. We shall see how it plays out. One thing for sure, the America's Cup stakes are high.....financial, National pride, design prowess, huge egos.....and the game will always evoke a lot of discussion. It is truly one of the most unique and exciting sporting events on the planet.



Who do you think will win?

Oh I don't know, I think Oracle has to have a leg up on everyone, they have a great team, all the design people captured, they have signed them all up, they have a lot of experience, they have Boeing helping, you can see the difference between the first 7 races and the last 8, they obviously got a lot better. Ben Ainslie is doing a great job, I mean 5 Olympic medals, can't get better than that, he could be the one to beat, one of my sons is working for the Swedish team.

So the AC connection stays in the family, you did 5 America's Cup races, 1980,83,87,92 and 1995?

I think they all have a chance, but Oracle has already been there and done that and has lots of resources, Ben is as good as it gets, but you know the French are really good at multihulls. The Kiwis are good. I think I'd like to go, if I can get a room. Larry Ellison is obviously the one who writes the checks, but Russell Coutts is the key to that operation. He has never lost an AC race, he's a very, very good businessman, good sailor, another one of those smart guy, I don't care if you threw him out in the jungle and say "build a city", he would do it. You have to have an intense passion to win, these programs get pretty long and you have setbacks, like when Kenny lost his mast in the Volvo race, a lot of people would have given up.

I can't let a conversation go by without talking to you about the 1979 Fastnet Race, Sir James Hardy said after being in that race, nothing scares me anymore. Force 10 gale, 50 ft waves, 15 fatalities, 303 boats entered but only 85 finished, what the hell?

It's funny Grace, I was in the race, and it was not the worse. My father was thinking of buying a Columbia 29, and the dealer said why don't you try it out so my father, my best friend and myself, we were 11 went on a 100 mile race in the Chesapeake Bay. We got hit by a storm that lasted 4, 5 hours, boats flipped, people were killed, lightning hit our mast, I was scared out of my wits but my father was a real rock he was a former Marine, and we finished the race. After that race, I think my level of tolerance went way up. That Fastnet race was rough, we were on Tenacious with Ted Turner, we won the race but we didn't have it nearly as bad as the smaller boats, we had gotten around Fastnet Rock before the worse, we were heading home, downwind, while the other boats, many of them the smaller boats were still beating up to the rock. We had a bunch of great guys on board, Ted Turner, Gary Jobson, but back then we only knew we were good in our own little groups, there was no publicity.

But weren't all of those sailors in the race experienced?

One of the reasons they changed the rules after that was of the 303 boats in the race, many of them were casual racers, something to check off the Bucket List and did not take the race seriously. They were out there in lightweight jackets, not trained in what to do if the rudder is lost, some of the boats didn't even have a VHF radio, and as a result of that tragedy they started the Safety at Sea seminars. We learned a lot in that race, we really had not had a bad race like that in my lifetime, we sailed through the worse of it, but we were headed towards the barn and that makes a big difference.

So it is not a stretch to say you are competitive?

I'll tell you how competitive I was back then... we finished the race, we felt we'd done well, by then you can kind of figure it out. We pulled into Plymouth, had dinner, we were drinking and really getting skunked. Me and Peter Bowker, a well known navigator, both of us half drunk, stumbled down to the press tent after dinner where the results were posted. But all you were reading about were all these people getting killed, helicopters were going off, it was a very scary time, no one had ever experienced this many people getting killed in a race. I remember we were looking at the result and it had us, Tenacious, finishing second. I got sober pretty quickly, what the hell? I was so pissed. I went back, grabbed my bag, hitchhiked, got on a train to London, got on a plane and flew home. I wasn't even on shore for 20 hours, "God damn" I was feeling. What happened was a smaller boat turned around during the race and came back across the finish line, and the race committee had written them down as finished, it was just a mistake. Meanwhile, Barbara Lloyd, the yachting writer, called my wife Nancy when the news broke about the storm and people killed, asking my wife if she had any comments on the Fastnet, "Tenacious washed up ashore and they only person alive is Ted, he washed up ashore, what do you have to say?" Meanwhile, I had not called my wife; she didn't even know I was alive until I showed up at the door 4 days earlier than expected. Of course, she was upset, why didn't you call? Of course I was thinking, "Why would I call?"



And look at you now, Commodore of the New York Yacht Club, so what's it like being commodore of such a prestigious institution?

It's a great honor, I feel very privileged. I think you have to give back something. I've been a member of the NYYC for 30 something years I guess and never did much besides contribute to the club and sail with other people. I became a trustee 10 to 15 years ago and started getting more involved. It is great for the sport of sailing and I'd like to say it is the premier yacht club in the world, or at least in the top few, there is a lot of tradition and I love tradition. I certainly have met a lot of people from other places, somehow when you are commodore of the NYYC people look at you differently than they did the day before! It's a great honor, there is a lot to it, and once again decisions have to be made, building a team once again. I have a lot more women involved than ever before as committee chairs, I'm kind of proud of that. I am sort of gender blind, if I see a good person who I think can do a good job, I go after them, men or women. It's a challenge because you have the tradition, and that is what the club is built upon, but you also have to remain relevant. Take for example the issue of cell phones, people are living with these things; so we changed the rules now you can use your cell phone at the club. A few weeks ago we changed the rule regarding neckties; you don't need a tie now except on particular occasions. You want to always keep your eye on the rear view mirror but you have to also look at the road ahead, especially if you want to get the young people involved. For example, in New York City, and this is something I didn't know because I am not a city person, by the way most of the NYYC commodores are financial people in NYC, so I kind of broke the mold, but I was told that in New York, businessmen wear sports jackets and casual attire, they do not wear a suit and tie to work, I didn't know that. We were hearing that men were not going to the club in NY because they didn't have a tie and didn't want to have to wear one. You still do need a tie after a certain time of day and in certain rooms, but now you can wear just a jacket. Right or wrong... but we do have to keep up with the times.

The club is trying to introduce a younger membership?

Sure. With all the good clubs the average age is 61 ½ years of age, for some reason the needle moves very slowly off that number. The issue is the mortality rate; people are living a lot longer. We have 3200 members but under 40 years of age, we have only 400, which is about 14%. We are getting more and more younger members all the time many are top sailors, so it's really good but the older ones are still going strong so the ratio stays the same.

Someone said to me the other day, not that it makes any difference but I am the first commodore who comes from the South. The club is a very parochial, tight group and it is like that with most yacht clubs. There is a certain demographic that the club was founded on, and it has remained that way for some time. But the NYYC is becoming more international all the time; we have 300 members who live overseas. We have reciprocity with the Costa Smeralda, there are only 4 clubs in the world, that have reciprocity, Costa Smeralda, Royal Yacht Squadron, Royal Thames, and St Francis, that's it. There are a lot of yacht clubs that if you belong to the club, they think you have reciprocity everywhere but we don't do that, we would be overrun, everyone wants to go to the NYYC. I think getting Harborcourt made a huge difference, we have some great members, great staff, being the commodore of such an organization sometimes I have to pinch myself, but they all so nice. Every time I eat at the club, I make a point to go down to the kitchen, you know, in all my finery, and thank the chef, it is just my upbringing. I like to do that to show respect, I live in a blue collar world except when I go to the NYYC.

You have been with Brewer Marine for 35 years now, what are some of the changes you've witnessed?

Right now money is not the biggest commodity that governs whether people are into boating or not, it's time. It is not just the busy businessman; it is also the busy family. It used to be when I grew up we'd get out of school the end of May, go back in September and all summer long we would do kids stuff, we would go sailing, boating, fishing, nowadays it is soccer games, lacrosse camps, because everyone wants their kids to be great, what's it called, helicopter parents? To be good they have to do all these things, and it has cut into family boating a lot. I know when I grew up my family would go sailing every weekend in club races on the Chesapeake. Boating is still very strong in a lot of places but I see it even in our marinas, we have 26 marinas, in the ones that are very close to urban areas we have a lot more younger people. But if you are in a place where people have to drive an hour and a half it is more of a challenge. In Westport, Connecticut, at my office and the biggest yard, we have the locals and we see people from New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. We notice the older people are still boating because they can take off for the weekend, but the younger people who have to be back on Saturday for soccer practice, not so much, they have to belong to a marina that is close by otherwise there is not enough time. Certainly the recession in 2008 didn't help and I am not sure there is a cutoff regarding whether it is over, and it has affected a lot of people. We did have a recession in 1992, but other than that, things were smooth, we were on an upward trajectory for many years, not anymore and also boats cost more now than they used to.

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Sail America members perceive a diminished interest in sailing, any ideas on how we can reverse that?

If they grew up sailing, you have a much better chance that they will continue, but there are so many other competing interests, I think that is the problem. It's not wrong, you have 60 hours a week to do things, in the past, summer was a lot of water sports, nowadays sports are year round, not just one season and competing with summer sports like sailing. Some manufacturers like Beneteau have done a great job, no question; they are building boats that are comfortable and easy to use. But there are so many gadgets on boats now. When you think of the changes in our lifetime that have made sailing easier, a couple can go out sailing on a 50ft boat; 30 to 40 years ago in order for that couple to go sailing they had to have 5 or 6 crew. Now there is rolling furling, autopilot, roller furling booms, electric winches; navigation is so simple you have to be really an idiot, excuse me, not to get it right. Manufacturers are doing their job. Also I think racing is not everything. People equate sailing with racing, not cruising and I think a lot more people prefer to cruise than race.