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Follow Ryan Finn's campaign to win the world's ultimate singlehanded sailing challenge...

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SURFINN THE TRANSPAC:

Or a tired person treating their sails very badly in the middle of nowhere.

by Troy A. Gilbert

So what do you do when you're 26 years old and have recently beaten cancer? How about take your cabin-less 27-foot sailboat and sail it 2,120 miles from San Francisco to Hawaii, and as an afterthought do it alone while racing thirty other sailboats.

That's exactly what Ryan Finn is going to be doing in the 14th Biennial Single-handed Transpacific Yacht Race or Transpac on June 26th.



Ryan, a native of Slidell who now resides in New Orleans, began sailing with his parents in the Gulf of Mexico for family vacations, but was never really interested in racing these boats and certainly not racing them alone, until he began following the 'Around Alone'

regatta (a single-handed sailboat race circumnavigating

About Me

My Photo



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the planet). This curiosity was “the first appendage of sailboat racing that really appealed to me and made me want to learn more about it. But I was in high school then so it wasn’t something I thought I could do.”

In 1998, Ryan was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma and had a lot of downtime during the various treatments he received over the course of that year. The idea of the challenge of spending days and nights on open water with only himself and his boat to rely on grew during this time and he began schooling himself during the treatments to help focus on getting better. After his successful treatments were complete his dream came to fruition. He sailed a 21-foot sailboat alone from Savannah, GA to New Orleans stopping only once during the trip because “I realized that I was really happy offshore and didn’t want to be distracted from that.” But this was only a beginning.

For the past two years Ryan has been actively training himself mentally and physically for the grueling Transpac. Imagine driving a convertible from Southern Yacht Club on the Lakefront to Boise, Idaho or from Miami to Atlanta three times while only going around ten miles per hour, constantly having to tinker with the engine to gain optimal speed and only being able to take quick 10 to 15 minute catnaps. And that’s a rough outline.

His training for the Transpac equates to spending a lot of time on his J/90 sailboat, *Surfynn*. Over the past few years he’s crossed the Gulf of Mexico twice, sailed a leg from Georgia to the Florida Keys and has competed in several Lake and Gulf races, going against boats equal to or larger than his, but who were complemented with full crew. Sailing solo, he won the 2003 Mandeville to New Orleans race, which was a crewed event.

His longest experience alone on the boat was “five days or so, but that’s only because I ran out of runway.” In 2003 he raced in the fully crewed event of the Transpac on someone else’s sailboat. “I didn’t even meet anybody in the crew until the race start, but we ended up hitting it off really well.” So he is no stranger to the Pacific Ocean. He also has raced on his father’s J/160 sailboat, *Kativa*, which has won the Pensacola to



“Crossing an ocean alone, let alone five, challenges every aspect of being alive and in a way it also helps define it. Racing just adds to the problem.” - R. Finn

Cancun, Mexico race twice and “last summer we won the Charleston to Bermuda race, which was fun because nobody in Charleston has ever heard of Slidell.”

Ryan spends a lot of his time modifying his boat for single-handed sailing and lucky for him he works for a local sail loft, UK Sails, so his employers are very supportive and flexible. UK Sails has worked with him to modify the J/90's sailplan, some of which is still top secret. All told, he will have twelve sails on board including backups. Redundant equipment will also be plentiful: extra halyards and blocks, emergency rudder and tiller, several autopilots, 100 watts of solar panels, a little gas generator and the all important emergency water maker. “Of course, I'll also bring some redundant tanning oil and some redundant chocolate.” There will be no engine.

His family and friends have been very supportive. “They think that single-handed sailing is an interesting thing to do, although my mother wishes that I had a safer hobby. My friends used to be like, Dude, you're always working on your boat! Let's go see Slayer! But I've somehow gotten them to help me prepare *Surfinn* recently.”

To qualify for the Transpac, Ryan was required to have single-handed his boat over a 400-mile course. He chose to cross the Gulf in January because “that is when the weather is usually at it's most challenging and I needed to see what changes were necessary for the boat before Transpac. I sailed from Gulfport to Key West and spent the first couple of days sailing in 25-30 knot winds which taught me quite a bit about the boats strengths and weaknesses.” And to be sure, himself.

The dangers out there are very real, some unusual and others bizarre. There have been instances where individuals had to be airlifted out of their boats because of malfunctioning equipment or simply because of massive weather. Another sailor was competing when a shark attacked his rudder. Ryan once ran down an Air Force missile target in the middle of the Gulf. “It was just a huge raft of blue and white balls one hundred miles or so off of Pensacola. I had no idea what it was at the time. And there's always the chance of losing your rudder or even your keel from running into a

whale.”

One of the biggest dangers for Ryan though is the lack of sleep. On his first solo crossing of the Gulf he found himself being overly quiet so as not to “disturb my father who I imagined was sleeping down below.” Since then he’s gotten much better at monitoring his sleep. “It’s tempting to tweak sails and course headings for hours on end, but if the boat is sailing close to optimum speed and you find yourself awake with little to do but fine tune, it’s probably a better idea to catch some sleep. You may find yourself in a situation where you need to be awake for a long period of time. So get the rest when you can.” And as far as hallucinations from lack of sleep and stress, there’s “just the usual voices and shadows.”

For some of the dangers, Ryan has already found a workaround. On his qualifier for the Transpac it took him 24 hours to figure out how to pee. “It’s not like I forgot how to do it, it was just so rough and cold that I couldn’t find an opportune time to take off my foulies and survival suit without taking a bath. After finally figuring out which awkward position to take, I made my dream of peeing a reality.”

The single-handed record for the Transpac is 10 days and 22 hours. Ryan definitely would like to win, but no matter what he’s going to have a lot of time on his hands. Surprisingly though there won’t be much to distract him. The only reading materials onboard will be regarding weather routing and the only electronic distractions will be his GPS. There will be plenty of music though. “I’m loading my iPod with lots of Sonic Youth, lots of Residents, Bad Brains, some old disco, some good soundtracks, ‘The Shining’ and ‘The Keep’ in particular, a bit of Bach and Laurie Anderson, maybe a book on tape (something funny), Fishbone and some old speed metal to keep me awake. Chanting also helps pass the long hours at the helm. And lots of chocolate.”

“AlpineAire Foods has been kind enough to supply all of my food, enough for 30 days. It’s freeze-dried cuisine that only requires me to add boiling water to a pouch. It’s actually better than what I eat at home, and with the addition of salt and olive oil, it’s probably more

nutritious too. When I'm tired, I add lots of Tobasco to everything just to keep my eyes open."

Ryan's competition will be fierce. Most of his competitors have done the race at least once and because of certain aspects of his boat, he may have some difficulty sailing against other boats upwind. His goal is to try and skirt the Pacific high for the extra winds, even if this means sailing extra miles. "Lake Pontchartrain is a great place to train because you get such a wide variety of conditions, most of which are challenging. It's much better to apply to the Gulf than the Pacific though. The lake is just like a tiny Gulf of Mexico."

"The biggest differences between the Gulf and the Pacific are the trade winds, the wave period and the water temperature. The Pacific waves are like long runways that permit more stable and consistent 'surfing' while the Gulf has these steep exhilarating waves that allow you to 'surf' really fast for a short period with an abrupt stop at the bottom. It's also a lot colder in the Pacific than here, and *Surfinn* is quite wet."

Some of his competition was 'on guard' showing signs of even a little animosity towards him when they found out that Ryan and his J/90 coupled with some sponsors was going to be competing. "I think they were under the impression that I was some fully sponsored hotshot going out there to crush them. They now understand that my sponsors are all of limited means and that I too must stay up all night working on my sails and equipment. I often sleep at the sail loft because I'm up very late working on my stuff. The truth is that I can't pay for this race so I needed some level of sponsorship."

As far as communications go, Ryan is required to check in with the Race Committee daily by satellite phone and his position can be monitored throughout the race on the web at www.sfbaysss.org.

Some of his preparations came from areas that have nothing to do with water and wind. "Fighting cancer is very physical, very emotional and very mental. As my situation unraveled from the initial tests and on through

the treatments, I never really let myself get tangled up in the process and tried to keep an eye on the big picture, which was to get better. This all translated very well to solo sailing and I don't know if I'd have such an approach without my cancer experience.”

Ryan is also using this experience as a means of fundraising for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. “I'm always looking for contributions. Of the money I raise, 25% or less goes to getting me on the starting line, the rest goes to cancer research, education and patient services. As a cancer survivor I decided to take this opportunity to raise money for the society. I want to give something back to the people who made this race possible for me.”

In trying to describe the overall experience, Ryan explains that “after watching the movie ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, I had the feeling that it was the best film ever set in the ocean. It's dryer in the desert, not necessarily hotter, and sailors wear equally silly looking apparel.”

“Crossing an ocean alone challenges every aspect of being alive and in a way that also helps define it. Racing just adds to the problem. It's a very fulfilling process. I only wish this race finished in Japan”

If you would care to make a contribution for Ryan Finn's efforts and the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society simply make out a check to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and mail it c/o UK Sails 400 S. Roadway, New Orleans, LA 70124. All contributions are tax deductible.

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