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Finn 5 Oceans

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

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By Canulette

Sail On Sailor

Ryan Finn was 20 when he first experienced the pain in his chest. At first, he dismissed it. But the pain worsened.

"When I would bend down to pick something up, when I stood up I'd feel a sharp pain in my chest," Finn said. "It would last only for a fraction of a second, which was good, because if it was any more, it would have been too much."

Finn contacted his father, Mike, a cardiologist, about his condition. They decided Ryan would have a checkup when he returned home to New Orleans after he completed the spring quarter at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

When he did, Finn's worst fears were confirmed. A tumor had grown in his chest, little more than an inch from his heart. Biopsies proved the tumor was cancerous.

He was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Finn withdrew from college and began chemotherapy at Ochsner Hospital. He later had radiation treatments at Stanford University in California. It was an arduous time for Finn as his body attempted to fight the cancer.

Finn said the right mind-set, the belief that the disease could be conquered, was essential if he was going to recover.

"It wasn't about focusing on the problem," he said. "It was about focusing on the solution."

Perhaps it is similar thinking that has led Finn to his latest test. Finn, now 26 and free of cancer, is preparing for the Single-handed Transpac -- a 2,200-mile sailing race from San Francisco to Hawaii

About Me

My Photo



Name:

Ryan Finn

Location:

New Orleans,
Louisiana, United
States

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"Crossing an ocean alone, let alone five, challenges every aspect of

that begins Saturday. Finn, aboard his family's 30-foot J/90 "Surfinn" will battle the weather, sleep deprivation, passing freighters and fatigue as he makes his solo journey across the Pacific Ocean.

Finn entered the race for two reasons, he said. First, he wants to raise money and awareness for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society to "give something back." But this isn't just a ceremonial crossing. He wants to win.

"This is very much a personal challenge," he said.

David Constance, co-owner of UK Sails in New Orleans, where Finn works, said that although modifications have been made to the J/90, it's designed to be a short-distance racing boat, not an ocean-crossing vessel. That could lead to a rough passage during the 11 days it likely will take to complete the race.

"He shouldn't have any psychological challenges," Constance said. "The fatigue's another story. He cannot sleep. You have to keep a lookout for ships. He'll set a timer and wake up every 15 minutes, keep a lookout, then doze again. Four or five days is rough, but an 11-day passage can be brutal. He'll be tossed around like a cork, beat up. And down below, it's like being in a washing machine."

Though his boat will be, on average, 15 feet smaller than the 26 other vessels entered, Finn is undeterred. He's made solo passages across the Gulf of Mexico and said he's prepared for whatever conditions he might face. He also likes his chances in Surfinn -- a downwind boat in what is considered a downwind race.

Still, he says the race won't be easy.

"I'm looking at a hard race," he said. "I'm just going to have to sail really well, not push too hard, but not throttle back either."

Getting ready

Though he grew up on boats, Finn didn't always like sailing, he said. His father recalls that neither Ryan nor his siblings enjoyed being on the water.

"When their mom and I would take them sailing, they hated it," Mike Finn said. "They'd go below and read books."

Ryan said that's because he didn't like the idea of sailing on cruisers, which aren't built for speed. But when the family purchased a 21-foot racer in 1995, Ryan was intrigued.

"Things moved faster," he said. "The boat had more of a feel to it."

As his interest grew, he said, there weren't many days when Ryan didn't long to sail. Then the cancer came and disrupted his life. The downtime of being in and out of hospitals made him realize how much he missed the sport. It was during that period he had the idea of completing a solo passage of the Gulf of Mexico.

being alive and in a way it also helps define it. Racing just adds to the problem." - R. Finn

"It was an escape," he said. "I wasn't doing a lot of drawing. I had been doing it for so long, a lot of the little discoveries sort of disappeared for me. But the open water offered something else."

He re-enrolled in college in March 1999 and soon after began preparing a 21-footer to travel 1,200 miles from New Orleans to Savannah. Coupled with a three-day layover in the Florida Keys, the trip lasted 8 ½ days. The experience led him to consider a bigger challenge, he said, one like the Transpac is expected to be.

To qualify for the race, Finn had to complete a solo run on Surfinn for 400 miles of open water. He met that requirement in January when he raced from Gulfport, Miss., to Key West. And to mirror the rough conditions he might encounter in the Pacific, Finn left shore during a particularly rough cold front that had just hit the Gulf South.

The 3 ½-day trip was indeed trying. Cold rain drenched him for more than two days, and the boat took on a considerable amount of water. The upside, Finn said, was that he had an opportunity to see how Surfinn, which Mike Finn owns, would react during adverse conditions.

It also was a reminder, Ryan Finn said, that he was prepared for the challenges of the Transpac.

Setting sail

Constance and Finn left New Orleans last week for the San Francisco Yacht Club in Tiburon, Calif., with Surfinn on a trailer behind them. They stopped at several children's hospitals along the way, where young cancer patients signed a spinnaker Finn said he hopes to use when he leaves shore.

When the Transpac begins, racers will quickly turn south, following the California coast before picking up the reliable trade winds that will ferry them toward Hawaii.

There will be no creature comforts on Surfinn -- no refrigeration, no bathroom. Foul-weather gear, shirts to block ultraviolet rays and a survival suit will be on board, but the space below deck will be used to store freeze-dried food and a variety of spinnakers, storm sails and jibs Finn will need for different weather conditions.

"I'll sleep on the hull, and that's the way I want it," he said.

When he arrived in San Francisco, Finn had the option of staying with a friend in Berkeley, about an hour away. But Finn opted to sleep in his car so he could be closer to the boat and have additional time to prepare the craft.

Though Finn shows few signs of anxiety, his father said he can't help but be nervous. He said he had a dream recently that he and his son were on the boat, and Surfinn's hull deck was just above water level

and had holes in it.

"I'm arguing with him to epoxy the holes," Mike Finn said.

Though sure to be anxious, the entire family will be in California to offer support when the Transpac begins. Mike Finn said they have full confidence in Ryan.

"I have a lot of faith in him," he said. "He's done an excellent job."

posted by Finn Team @ 9:23 PM

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