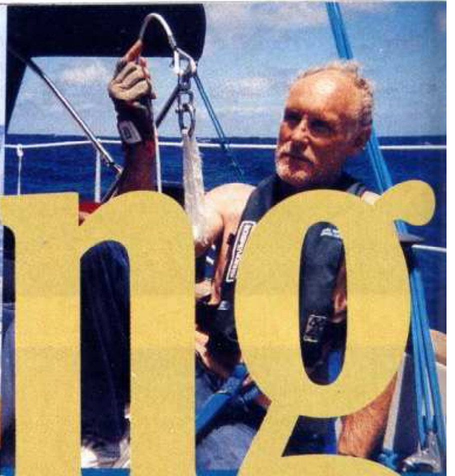
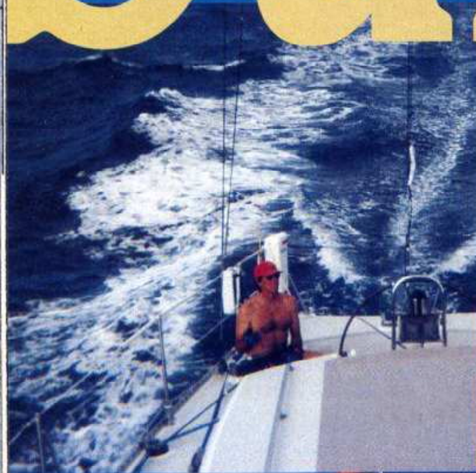
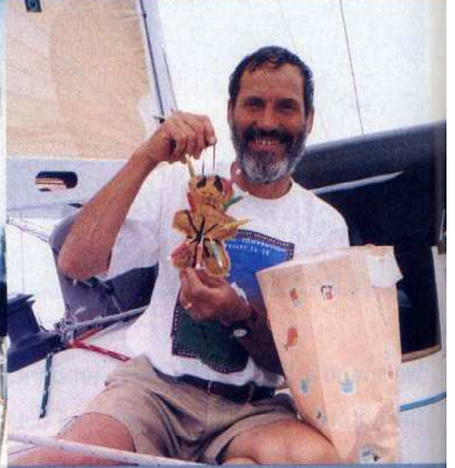
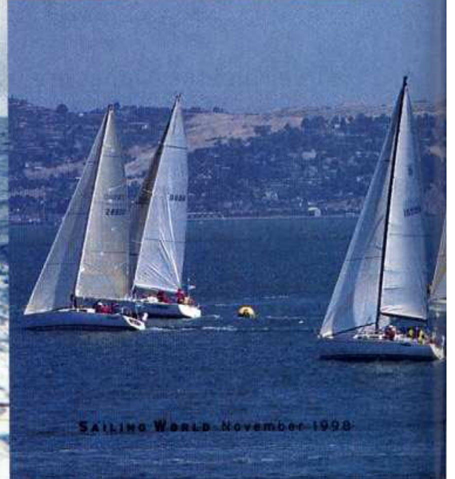
Surfing







(From top, l to r) George Gade points *Rage* toward Oahu. All that remains of the workhorse 1.5-oz. chute aboard *Roxanne*. *Roxanne*'s owner, Tom Petty, takes his Wylie 60 downwind. Steve Rander's *Rage* rolls into town among the tradewind waves. Aboard *Roxanne* one of only a few celestial shots in a generally overcast race. A doublehanded father-daughter sleigh ride: Randy and Ruth Paulling aboard *Alicante*. *Pyewacket* in voodoo-doll form aboard *Rage* halfway through the race. Ruth Paulling steering *Alicante* in heavy air early in the race. Division D gets underway in the Bay.



BY DAVE POWLISON

The fleet is a wild mix, from amped-up sleds to comfortable cruisers, all headed downwind to island delights in the West Marine Pacific Cup.

Toward Paradise

Helmsman Jim Cullison is starting to fret. We're blast-reaching under a double-reefed main and No. 4 jib, and at 15 knots our boatspeed is down. "Let's heat it up," he says. As he eases the tiller to leeward, John Cavenaugh, Gib Colistro and I trim. The digital readout jumps to 17 knots, and a white rooster tail appears astern. Moments later, the windspeed pops from 20 to 24 knots—partly an increase in velocity, partly an increase in apparent wind as we head up. You can feel the acceleration—first 19 knots, then 20—in another shot of wind, a sudden burst to 24.4 knots. The rooster tail is now some 20 feet beyond the open transom, roaring out of our wake with the density of water from a cluster of fire hoses, and I briefly wonder where the water skis are stored.

Although our speed drops back into the low 20s and high teens, there's still enough for us to occasionally overshoot one wave and launch onto the next, landing with a resounding thump that echoes throughout the interior like a 747 touching down. But most of the time it's a smooth, powerful ride down the face of each wave. The bow drops quietly into the trough and takes off, animal-like in desire, as if hidden hind legs are thrusting forward, the snout hunting the lowest part of the trough. Small squirts of water—whiskers we call them—shoot up on either side of the bow, as spray begins to appear at oblique angles from the boat's forward sections. The sounds of the boat charging through the water increase exponentially as it appears to search out the low spots to maintain speed. Belowdecks, there's a constant sound of rushing water as the boat surfs down wave after wave, and the leeward windows appear to be part of an industrial-size washing machine on rinse cycle.

I'm aboard Steve Rander's *Rage*, a Tom Wylie-designed 70-foot ULDB, and we're two days out of San Francisco, bound for Kaneohe YC on Oahu, 2,070 nautical miles away, sailing in the West Marine Pacific Cup. Also aboard are Mike Pitarresi, Jay Phillips, George Gade and, of course, Rander, whose Portland, Oregon-based Schooner Creek Boat Works built *Rage* in a record 10 weeks in the spring of 1994. A wooden boat that's needle-like in appearance—only 13 feet, 6 inches wide—it's a true downwind sled. Two years ago it hit 25 knots, and this year everyone on the crew became card-carrying members of the 20-knot club at least once during their stints at the helm. Oddly enough, when Rander undertook this project, he had only seen photos of ULDBs. "If I had actually seen one up close," he said, "I probably would have been too scared to build one."

Nonetheless, here I am aboard Rander's rocketship, headed for Hawaii. Behind us are days of preparation, farewells to spouses and friends, final phone calls home, hurried attention to last-minute details and a hazy, undefined, unspoken uncertainty. But any concerns we might have had as we left the dock in San Francisco Bay dissipated like the smoke from the starting gun fired from the deck of the St. Francis YC, as we crossed the starting line and focused on the task at hand. Also behind is a day of cold beating that took us under the Golden Gate Bridge and beyond—weather that demanded not only foul weather gear, but also at least one layer of fleece underneath, if not more, plus gloves and stocking caps, especially at night.

Ahead of us is ocean, lots of it. Out here, the water depth isn't measured in hundreds of feet, but thousands. According to Jim Quanci, who has been instrumental in keeping the Pacific Cup going, the halfway point of this race is farther from land than any other place on the planet. No wonder our 70-footer seems to shrink more and more the farther we sail. Also ahead is our arrival in Hawaii, where we'll be greeted by the locals at the Kaneohe YC, leis in one hand, mai-tais in the other—an almost surreal calmness juxtaposed with the wild ride we will have just finished. Small crowds of friends and relatives will bear trays of sushi and other delicacies, and we'll sneak moments to make phone calls home to report that we've arrived safely.

There are other races to Hawaii, such as the Transpac and the Victoria to Maui. However, taking participation as an indicator of success, the Pacific Cup is the clear winner. In the most recent Transpac and Vic-Maui, participation was 38 and 18 boats, respectively, while the 1998 Pacific Cup (billed by sponsor West Marine as the "fun" race to Hawaii) had a whopping 75 boats, the biggest fleet in its 10-year history.

This race to Hawaii is a grass-roots—not to be confused with grass-skirts—event. As veteran West Coast sailor Tom Leweck observes, "When an owner invites you to race in the TransPac, you ask if you and your wife will be flying home first class and when the hotel reservations begin. If you get a call about the Pacific Cup, you can assume your wife will be on the crew and you'll be bringing half the meals."

For many, it's as much an adventure as a race, which has been the case since the biennial event began in 1980. So it's not

From Top Left: David Powlison, Skip Allen, John Rae, Skip Allen, Randolph Paulling, David Powlison, Randolph Paulling, Su Brodsky

(l to r) Jim Cullison, braced against the waves, two-hands *Rage*'s tiller. The next-to-last group, Division E, sets off. Plenty of grinding all the way to Hawaii; John Cavenaugh takes a quick breather on *Rage*. *Magnitude* marches out to sea at the start. Despite monotonous streaks of broken spars and Power Bars, Nikki Glass and brother Alex muster smiles. John Donovan extrudes himself through a Moore 24 hatch, "Like doing yoga with foulies on," he said.

The only drawback is that, after days on one tack—in the case of the Pacific Cup, it's starboard tack—you develop a sore spot in your upper shoulders, just to the left of your spine.

unusual to have a lot of first-timers. Among the 1998 entries, 50 skippers fell into that category. To beef up the learning curve, the Pacific Cup organization hosts seminars up and down the West Coast, beginning almost a year before the event, focusing on topics such as safety and navigation. Even the rating system, PHRF, is tweaked slightly to better accommodate boats that are rated very slow for their waterline length, setting the stage for a sort of David and Goliath event. Since the Pacific Cup course is mostly downwind, the smaller and simpler the boat, the better, which means the Davids often have a better shot at a high overall corrected finish than the Goliaths. In the past, overall corrected-time winners have included a Cal 40 and a Westsail 32.

The main limitation is a minimum boat length of 24 feet. Beyond that, the sky's the limit—full crew or doublehanded; big, heavy cruising boat or small, lightweight surfing machine, or anything in between. With the use of PHRF anything goes, although you'll certainly take a rating hit for it. Roy Disney's ULDB *Pyewacket*, a Santa Cruz 70, is a case in point. According to boat manager Gregg Hedrick, their goal was to put another notch in their growing list of Pacific Coast records. To bolster their chances, *Pyewacket* (along with several other ULDBs) took a pre-race dose of Viagra, extending their spinnaker poles from around 25 to 35 feet. That meant bigger asymmetrical spinnakers (4,000 square feet on *Pyewacket*) and the ability to articulate the pole farther aft to sail deeper offwind angles. *Pyewacket* also sported rows of pad-eyes along both sides of the deck, from which large, black, plastic envelopes were draped over the windward side. Filled with water, they provided 2,400 pounds of ballast—about the equivalent of two NFL lines. Once far enough offwind the plugs were pulled, and the NFL guys were jettisoned.

Pyewacket set a course record, finishing in just under six and a half days, but their rating slid to minus 123, making it impossible for them to finish well on corrected time, especially when up against the likes of the Newport 30, *Water Pik*, the 1998 overall winner, which rates 203. In round numbers, that's 2,070 miles at 326 seconds a mile. For *Pyewacket* to have come out on top, it would've had to finish almost eight days faster than *Water Pik*. Since *Water Pik* finished this year's race in roughly 13 days, *Pyewacket* would have had to sail the course in about five days, averaging almost 18 knots straight down the rhumb line!

But it's a long way to Hawaii, and almost anything can happen. As Rander said before the start, "The chips fall in a lot of different ways in this race. It's just a matter of who deals best with them." Aboard *Ripple*, a Riptide 35, all of the electronics except a cockpit-mounted GPS went out before the start. For the four sailing the boat, Jonathan McKee, Trevor and Tina Baylis, and Morgan Larson, the next week became a game to see if they could sail using only what the GPS could tell them. Said McKee, "We thought we sustained a solid 20 knots for a few minutes, but we really don't know because we were too scared to let go of anything and reach down to push the buttons on the GPS."

According to Larson, the lack of electronics was no impediment, supporting the grass-roots concept that you don't have to go high-tech and expensive to sail this race. "A GPS is really all you need," he says. "You don't have anybody on your case about sailing targets or anything like that. We're all dinghy sailors, and we just sailed it like a dinghy."

Even *Pyewacket* had to deal with chips falling the wrong way. Six days into the race, the steering cables went. As the boat charged along at 15 knots under its biggest asymmetrical spinnaker, crewmember Zan Drejes worked below to replace the cables. According to an e-mail message from *Pyewacket*, a chiropractor onboard subsequently checked Drejes and determined that he needed his head examined. Rumor was that he had sustained a "cranial flying-fish concussion in combination with oversized cojones."

Aboard *Rage*, chips fell in the form of shredded Kevlar and polyester. Two days into the race, while we were close reaching, a jib sheet frayed against the leeward shrouds and broke, and before we could lower the flogging sail, a seam let go. That was an easy repair job compared to the shredding of the masthead asymmetric. The first time, this involved completely restitching one leech (about 150 feet); the second time, both leeches. At one point, only two crewmembers were left on deck to sail the boat, while the rest of us were lined up below, assembly-line fashion, sewing as fast as the heat would allow.

One of the biggest survival stories can be told by the sister/brother team of Nikki and Alex Glass, who doublehanded their Express 27, *Killer*. A large welcoming committee awaited them at the Kaneohe YC as they limped in to the dock, much like Don Quixote returned from a tilt with windmills. The top of their fractionally rigged mast, broken off in the heat of battle, was strapped to the base of the mast, more like a permanent flag of victory than defeat. On the foredeck lay a spinnaker pole, jury-rigged with duct tape, pieces of wood and sections of their spare pole. Deciding sleep was more important than food, especially in light of their equipment failures, they had subsisted on Power Bars for the past 12 days. Pole repairs (four in all) occurred throughout the race, but the mast snapped just 70 miles from Oahu.

"I'm glad I got here in one piece," said Nikki, who skippered the boat. "I'm glad I got my brother here in one piece. My sister would have killed me if I didn't."

"It's one of the hardest things I've ever done," said her brother, Alex, and not just because of the challenges they endured. Be-

David Powlison, Su Brodsky, David Powlison

At one point, the moon was directly in front of us and so bright that Cullison, on the helm, asked for a baseball hat to avoid losing his night vision.

fore this race, Alex had only sailed at camp, 15 years ago. So when they decided to team up for the Pacific Cup, he underwent an eight-month crash course in sailing.

Was it worth it? "I've never experienced anything like this before," said Nikki. "When a puff comes and all of the sudden the boat just accelerates, and instead of surfing down the waves you're just hitting the tops of them, like mogul skiing — it's the best."

To ensure that the fleet all gets to Oahu at about the same time, the Pacific Cup uses a staggered start, sending the slower, usually smaller boats off on Monday and progressively faster divisions over the next three days. Since *Rage* was in the fastest division, our start was Thursday and our wait was the longest. Late on Tuesday it occurred to us then that boats we were racing against had already been out there for almost a day and a half—watches had been stood, meals cooked, sunrises and sunsets observed, and so as not to deceive anyone into thinking this was too glamorous an undertaking, one boat's e-mail indicated there had also been "a lot of barfing." Indeed, the first day or two of the race, the only part that is closehauled, can be both cold and rough. By the time we passed under the Golden Gate, the seas outside were 8 to 10 feet and winds topped 25 knots.

The next big wait is for the tradewinds, the sure sign that you're sailing in the Pacific. About two-thirds of the way to Oahu, the water suddenly turns cobalt blue and big rollers are formed by consistent 20-knot winds spun off a huge Pacific high-pressure system in the section of ocean just to the northeast. The wind is well aft of the beam, but aboard *Rage*, under a masthead spinnaker, the apparent wind is always forward. Even the velocity is dramatically different. In 22 knots of wind and 18 knots of boatspeed, we're often seeing only 10 to 12 knots of apparent wind, giving the illusion that it's not quite as breezy as it really is—until you look at how fast you're moving through the water.

The Pacific Cup is always started so the boats will be racing under a full moon by the time they reach the trades. Although 1998 was cloudier than usual, we still were treated to a spectacular display of moonlight, bright enough so that we could see squalls ghosting by like gray-skirted phantoms, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, then disappearing just as quickly. Sometimes they brought a lot of wind, sometimes only light rain. At one point, the moon was directly in front of us and so bright that Cullison, on the helm, asked for a baseball hat to avoid losing his night vision. He said he couldn't see the spinnaker luff because the moon was shining directly in his eyes. At first we didn't take him seriously, but as each of us took our turn at the helm it became clear that he wasn't kidding.

What's it like to steer a 70-foot sled offwind in the trades? One of *Rage*'s unique features is that, unlike other ULDBs steered with wheels (some as much as 8 feet in diameter), it's steered by tiller. Rander doesn't like the weight of wheel, pedestal, and associated gear. "Plus," he says, "it steers well enough that you don't really need anything more than a tiller."

So, aboard *Rage* it's not like steering a big racing boat, but rather a dinghy on steroids. At times the tiller can exert a pull that takes two hands to control—maybe that's why the tiller bracket bears a large pink sticker that says "animal." But other times you can tell the instant you're in the groove, as the helm suddenly becomes very light—just a few fingers on the tiller is all it takes—and the boat starts dancing across the waves. Move the tiller in increments of just an inch or two and watch the bow, some 60 feet in front of you, move 10 to 15 feet left or right. The bow drops into a trough, and just like that, you're surfing. You could let go of the tiller, and the boat would still be tracking down the wave. The only drawback is that, after days on one tack—in the case of the Pacific Cup, it's starboard tack—you develop a sore spot in your upper shoulders, just to the left of your spine (a common malady aboard tiller-steered boats in this race). Baylis knew what I was talking about after the race. Putting his hand on my back, he said, "You mean right here?" For those using tillers, it's apparently the "Pacific Cup shoulder."

Little can match your first sighting of the islands. It's usually only a cloud bank on the horizon. Then the islands themselves appear, first one, then others on each side, magical, almost growing out of the water as they must have thousands of years ago when volcanoes pushed up out of the sea.

We're now less than a day from the northeast side of Oahu. Soon, we'll radio the Kaneohe YC to let them know we're within 100 miles of the finish. It will be seven days, six hours from start to finish, not a course record (*Pyewacket* takes that) but 18 hours better than when *Rage* set the last Pacific Cup course record in 1996. We're on the edge of our final day at sea. We take bets on our finish time.

As darkness gives way to day, the eastern sky starts to glow a golden yellow. "There it is, guys," says Rander, "our last sunrise at sea. From here on in, it gets a lot more complicated. Lots of rules and responsibilities." Hours later, as we cross the finish line off the Kaneohe YC, we're indeed on the edge of trading the simple routines of life at sea—keeping the boat going fast, sleeping and eating—for life ashore. Our enthusiasm at completing the journey is shadowed slightly by the realization that the adventure is over. Until next time. ✦

Dave Powlison is a contributing editor for *Sailing World*.

Su Brodsky, David Powlison, John Donovan