

“Don’t worry, they’ll get out of the way,
I learned that driving the *Saratoga*”

(Captain Ron)

Photo by Bob Grieser

The School of Hard Knocks

by Capt. Mark Einstein

As is true with most of life’s great lessons, the ones we will never forget are the ones we’d like most to completely erase from our memories. These are the defining moments in the lives of sailors, whose mere reflection would compel one to laugh out loud, start to cry, or just plain cringe with embarrassment.

I first started sailing after high school when my good friend Mike bought a 19-foot Cape Dory Typhoon to keep at the New Jersey shore. Mike’s only experience was from having read about the freedom and excitement of the sailing life in books like Robin Lee Graham’s *Dove*, the classic tale of a 16-year-old solo circumnavigator. He did his best to translate his fascination to me, and through many trials and errors, we learned to sail together.

There are many stories of us running aground, losing our engine, calling for help, and Mike fighting seasickness out on the high seas off Atlantic City. Looking back, we were about as prudent novice sailors as teenage drivers squealing wheels out of the many Jersey shore nightclubs during the 1970s. Weekend after weekend, we found ourselves stocking our Styrofoam galley with Cheese Whiz, beer, and bread, venturing seaward from the shallow back bays of Sommer’s Point, then barfing our way back to port under sail without an engine.

My first sailboat was a 19-foot Lightning racing sloop—a derelict, wrecked and abandoned in a virtual urban war zone in Camden, NJ. I don’t remember what inspired me to go boat shopping in such a place, but I do remember Rodney, the

boatyard owner, pointing out the few selections in my price range. He had a 30-foot wooden replica of a Chinese Junk that only needed a mast, sails, a “few planks,” and a new keel. A better choice, perhaps, was a 27-foot fiberglass Coronado, made by the predecessors of Catalina. She might have been the lucky boat had she not been lying upside down on a crushed cabin top with a centerboard hopelessly jammed into the trunk. A reasonable alternative was the Lightning. The modest price of 175 dollars was well within my price range, and it included free delivery to my father’s house. Rodney guaranteed me that the only holes were in the topside and that the bottom was sound and seaworthy. With such assurances, I felt no need to bother with a survey, so I bought my first sailboat and named her *Patriot*.

Patriot was delivered the next day and was set down onto wooden blocks in my father's driveway. She was not a pretty sight. There were plenty of holes on the topside. In fact, there was one for every piece of deck hardware that belonged in its place. She arrived with no mast, no boom, no sails, no centerboard, no floorboards, and very little hope of ever sailing again.

came onboard to lend his support for what became, perhaps, the most remarkable nautical restoration project in the history of suburban South Jersey. Piece by piece and hole by hole, *Patriot* began to take shape, and in less than a year, we began looking for a marina. Knowing precious little about the recreational boating facilities available on the Delaware River, we

If experience is the best teacher, then the *Patriot* was the Ivy League education of sailing and seamanship to me. An intense curriculum of maritime misadventures defined my four-year apprenticeship as master and commander of this lively little ship. Upon my commencement, I could have composed a doctoral dissertation on the topic of what *not* to do on a sailboat.

“...as if in a choreographed, slow-motion movie, and before I could even realize what was happening, the entire boat fell onto her side, rolling everything we had, including Mike and me, into the drink.”

Nonetheless, it was at that precise moment, as I positioned myself proudly in the cockpit, where the helm should have been, gazing forward across the muddy, punctured deck and over the bow at a full audience of horrified neighbors, that Captain Mark was born.

I felt a strange and sudden passion unlike anything I had ever felt before. My father shook his head in disbelief but soon

located a run-down marina situated on the Christina River, just outside of Wilmington. The launching went well as *Patriot* splashed down from the rented trailer into the murky waters of the Christina River. Morris, the aging owner of the marina, stood anxiously by, waiting to see how fast the boat would sink. But, to everyone's surprise, she stayed afloat. It was time to start sailing!

For example, never flaunt your spinnaker handling skills in heavy air in front of a large audience.

This is a lesson I learned one chilly, autumn Saturday afternoon when Mike and I went sailing past the Fort Mercer battlefield on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. It was a cold, blustery October 22, the date of the annual picnic and battle re-enactment at one of South



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Jersey's Revolutionary War sites. On-board were some half-eaten sandwiches, a cockpit full of mostly empty cans, Mike, and I. Ashore was a large crowd of curious onlookers strolling toward the beach, waving as we hoisted the bright green, yellow, and red spinnaker up the wooden mast for a broad reach down the river. It must have looked magnificent as the multi-colored nylon balloon snapped open to catch hold of the fresh, northwesterly wind. The sheet line held fast in my hand as *Patriot* leaped across the chop against the current.

Mike and I were thrilled as we skidded, nearly airborne, down the river for almost a half of a mile and then turned up into the wind to drop the flogging sail. Mike insisted we do it again as we made a quick ride back up the river on the current and the close-hauled mainsail. Who could resist such an opportunity to demonstrate the power and beauty of wind and speed as the fascinated crowd filled the beach to catch a glimpse of our courageous exhibition.

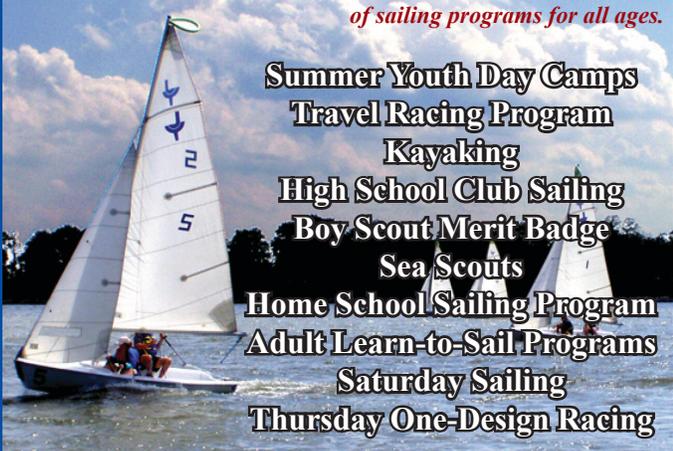
We seemed to execute each maneuver exactly the same way as we accelerated onto a surfing plane downwind. Then suddenly, a tremendous gust hit us from the starboard side. The giant sail swung sharply to port, tearing the sheet line from my fist. At once, as if in a choreographed, slow-motion movie, and before I could even realize what was happening, the entire boat fell onto her side, rolling everything we had, including Mike and me, into the drink. By the time we swam up to the surface, the boat was completely upside down, dismasted, and the motor, rudder, floorboards, and drinks were forever lost. It was a most tragic scene as the shivering captain and crew clung desperately onto the centerboard, surrounded by the dozens of cans riding on the current past the growing multitude of bewildered spectators.

Within minutes, the race was on to see whether the National Park Marine Police, the Philadelphia Navy Yard, or the United States Coast Guard would be the first to reach the scene. As it turned out, they all

showed up at the same time, ensuring that the spectacle would be talked about and remembered for years to come. And if that wasn't enough, the Navy Yard newsletter published a brilliant article chronicling their dramatic rescue... and they mentioned names. Notwithstanding, *Patriot*, although dismasted, sunk, and returned to her original state of disrepair, did live to sail again. I will be forever indebted to her. For, although it was I who made her a sailing ship, it was she who made me a captain.

About the Author: A Baltimore native, Mark Einstein is a history teacher and sailing charter captain. His first and only mate Suzanne and he run Blue Crab Charters on their 36-foot Watkins departing from Waterman's Crab House in Rock Hall. This is an excerpt from his collection called "No Cruise, No Crab Cake." E-mail Capt. Mark at bluecrabcc@aol.com.

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