

Anatomy of a Challenge Chicago Super Mac and Back Ken Verhaeren

It all started at the 2008 Annual General Membership meeting (AGM) in Detroit. Like a farmer going out to his fields, the seed was planted. Someone asked, "Are you doing the Super Mac?" "Well yes! I'll work hard and struggle past the Island and then after completing it take a leisurely cruise home." That's when it happened! Someone else said, "They are thinking of doing the 1st Super Mac and Back Challenge!" The seed was jammed deep into the soil of my mind. Would I be interested in attempting that? Of course, it just makes sense; you have to get back anyway. Luckily my lovely wife wasn't there to slap some sense into me at the time of the planting. She might have stopped the whole process with a little reason right then. A seed must be kept moist and dark to germinate. My thoughts about how I'd prepare for it kept it moist. My silence about it (you've got to wait for the right time) with Judy kept it dark. As I thought about what I would need to meet this challenge I dropped hints about my plan. As time went by and the seed continued to grow I confirmed to everyone my commitment to the Super Mac and Back. Preparation was now the center of my focus. Upgrade the electrical, get charts for Lake Huron, rent a satellite phone and talk to people who have completed a Super Mac. Since I am truly a cruiser rather than a racer and because just completing a Mac is difficult enough, I told Judy that I figured the challenge will take 12 to 16 days.

As often the case, preparations did not go as I had planned. The alternator & smart regulator weren't as smart as I had hoped. Now the tach was not right, the oil pressure was high and the water temp to the limit. Of course all of these things were fine when last season ended. Family issues with my uncle kept tensions high all the way up to the Saturday we started. It is often said that starting is the hardest part of the challenge. As things were getting sorted out, I was looking forward to a relaxing sail as we moved up the lake with a nice wind. Thinking I had all bases covered, I worried about what I had missed. As I talked to the other Super Mac and Back skippers they all said that they tucked away a little extra diesel. I hadn't! Kismet, a NONSUCH 30, has a large tank, 30 gallons and I was sailing so I didn't think about that. Did anyone say "charging time"? Now I was worried again. How much would I use charging the engine? How many hours of charging would I need? Getting to Port Huron was no worry but what if I needed to charge more because of a slow trip. Could I make it all the way back? This continued to worry me throughout the trip.

At the skippers meeting, I learned that only four of the original six sailors planning to attempt the Chicago Super Mac and Back were actually doing so. We exchanged communication information and discussed how far apart we anticipated we would be entering Lake Huron. Arch Van Meter, on Antaries an Islander 36, and I figured we would be relatively close to one another as we passed the island and headed down the lake. OK, I was just hoping to be close. As I prepared, I tried to look at the challenge as a four part effort. Part 1 would be getting up to the island as fast and effortlessly as possible. In my mind the key was to be mentally sharp entering Lake Huron. At that point only a quarter of the challenge would be completed and I wanted all the reserves possible for the last three quarters. Part two would be going down Lake Huron. I felt a little uneasy about part two. I've never sailed Huron with the exception of from the bridge to the island. I'd hear all the stories of the ship traffic and know how a big lake can suddenly get small. During my prep, I had talked to a number of

people about how they approached the Port Huron to Mac challenge, spent too many hours guessing my possible track and tried to figure out weather patterns. Again I hoped for a quick and easy passage. A number of people mentioned how Super Mac sailors often get into a good sailing pattern as they continued past the island. That is what I hoped for. Part three would be the good part. Now I would be on the way back. I'd have an idea of what the lake was like and have spent time looking at current weather. Sure there would be surprises, but I would have at least a feel for the lake. The other thing in my mind came from memories of long car trips when I was small. The trip heading out always seemed so much longer than the trip home. So that was it. The trip home would be better. Part four! What can I say? After the 2007 challenge I sailed back to Chicago in less than 48 hours with great winds. Sure when I charged my batteries I had the engine in gear and the start from the island was power sailing for ten miles. But still 48 hours!! Like a horse going back to the stable. Of course I did not expect those kinds of winds going home BUT it would be the last quarter of the challenge and one way or another I'd make it in.

As all participants know, final prep and anticipation combine to make getting rest prior to the race difficult. My number 1 rule is to get rest early and often once the challenge starts. I was out on the start line earlier than normal and once the gun went off; I looked to get north as fast as possible. I also looked for Serenity, the other Nonsuch 30 in the challenge, to see who got off to the best start. Bill and I always have our own little race within the challenge. My start gave me a little edge that would change back and forth throughout our charge up to Mackinac. As Kismet settled into her track north and the boats spread out, I began my rest plan. Rest is not just sleeping; it includes listening to music or reading. Just sailing is relaxing for me, so unless I raise the tension by trying to get every bit of speed for every minute of the sail I am relaxing. My general plan is to sleep after dinner, stay awake during the dark hours and sleep again after an early snack. The hours between 0200 and 0400 are the most difficult. That's when I try to heat up some soup and play upbeat music. So the first day begins and I ease into the feel of the wind and waves.

I had plenty of food and around 1800 I looked to make my first meal, Trader Joe's Penne Pepperonata with spicy sausage and a glass of wine. Yes I do have a glass of wine with dinner. Dinner is a good time on Kismet. After preparing the meal I sit in the cockpit and leisurely sip my wine as I slowly eat and enjoy the late afternoon. But that's it for the wine, only one glass. The rest of my liquids come from ice tea, water and coffee. Soup at night and occasionally hot chocolate for a hot pick me up in the dark hours. Now back to dinner. As I used my propane lighter to start the stove, nothing happened. Ok I'll get the other one except I couldn't find it. Another thing left home. Waterproof matches also could not be found. So here I am with all this great food waiting to be cooked and no way to light the galley stove or the grill. Think! There has got to be a way or this would be a long trip. Then it hits me, I have a propane hot water heater with a pilot light and a pack of tooth picks. I lit the stove by taking a tooth pick and sticking it through the screen over the pilot light. I would then light a candle until after I was done cooking. Pancakes for breakfast, soup at night and a variety of Trader Joe meals in the evening. Problem solved.

I was able to head northeast and at the end of 24 hours I had made about 100 miles toward Gray's reef. The day and night had been uneventful, with the exception of Serenity getting ahead of me. Okay, the USCG Helicopter passing overhead as it looked for one of the sailboats created some excitement. Radio checks are very important but everyone using a tracking system would make locating someone much easier. That along with other reasons

is why I choose to rent one for Kismet. Sometimes we had more wind and sometimes less. Overall this was my best distance after 24 hours including my first start in 2005. I felt pretty good at this point. Day 2 was a little bit different. I continued NE but not very fast. We were moving and as I discovered from earlier trips movement in the right direction is always good. The first 12 hours accomplished about the same distance as day one had and I'm still feeling pretty good. The next six hours developed into a more frustrating period. I only advanced the mark about ten miles. Did I say "as long as you're moving in the right direction"? Typically, at this time, we moved but mostly we drifted. The hardest time for me are these periods of little to no wind; constantly trying to eke out every bit of wind, hoping not to start drifting in circles with no steerage. Why does this always seem to happen at night near the shipping lanes?

I've followed my sleeping plan but hours of sparse winds add to the tension and exhaustion. I generally use 15 to 20 minutes sleep cycles. Day 1 and 2 usually do not involve sequencing those cycles beyond 30 minutes. With Day Three I started longer sequences and more often. Between 0200 and 0800 I moved closer to the Michigan coast, further East than I wanted but made 20 miles and was now starting day three 50 miles north of any of my previous challenges. More importantly I'm back ahead of Bill Vesey on Serenity. With daylight I'm moving to the NW looking to tack NE when I can clear Pt. Betsy. Kismet is moving better now and by afternoon we're off Sleeping Bear...by morning we are still off Sleeping Bear. It was a VERY long evening and night. Inshore I saw another of our boats just sitting there with me. He was much closer to shore and as the afternoon moved toward evening I saw slow movement up the shoreline. Could it be that I would get some of the winds? Of course not. I watched him sail away as I sat and stewed. It was a terrible night and I finally just got some good sleep. Suddenly a good trip up the lake was getting very slow. Oh, Bill passed me in the night.

An early dawn wind got me started again and by 0800 and the start of day four I was in the middle of the Manitou Passage. Now the goal was to get through Gray's Reef and down the Straits. As I got closer to Gray's Reef Passage the wind picked up. As I was going through the passage I had to plan how I would make the turn, a jibe with my wishbone boom in heavy wind can be very dangerous. As I make the turn east I saw quite a few masthead lights and knew Serenity was in front but very close. It was time to push and get as much out of the wind as possible. Listening to the other boats, there was a lot of confusion as to who was who. Finally getting in sight of the bridge I think some were trying to keep a low profile. For most, the challenge was over and the race to the finish line was on. Arch and I had discussed our plans to continue on throughout day four and five and knew our challenge was just starting. As we drew closer to the bridge some bad wind news comes from the east side. Seems that there was little wind between the island and the bridge. I was leading the pack under the bridge. Flying down the straits I had managed to pass Serenity again. Soon 7 or 8 of us were barreling toward the island after moving under the bridge.

Suddenly I just stopped and everyone seemed to go by me. Fortunately for me, they quickly slowed to a crawl and I seemed to have some wind. Now we were working for 1 knot and angling for any breath of wind. Serenity was now thirty feet in front of me along with Antaries and Margaritaville. Everyone was working for wind when the slightest of a breeze came from the southwest. Since Bill was just to my northeast side, I tried to slide Kismet between the breeze and Serenity. This would of course steal his wind and I could possibly still beat him to the line. In what seemed like forever I slowly inched closer to Serenity and then as Bill lost his

wind I moved ahead. Soon I was there following Margaritaville across the line with Serenity 13 seconds behind. This was the closest duel of the two Nonsuch 30's in the fleet since we started in 2005. Because there were so many boats crossing the line so close together there still was a little confusion on who was who. I continued on and called again for my crossing time. I also confirmed that I was continuing on the Super Mac & Back. Part 1 complete. Longer than I hoped but I felt very good and Antaries was only four minutes ahead of me. Arch and I had talked about continuing on with the Super Mac and Back. We had heard of the rudder problem with Sheldon Drummer's boat and the Erick Kerlow had decided not to continue on. It would be the two of us.

Part Two.... As Arch, on Antaries, lead the way beyond Mackinac Island and along the northern side of Bois Blanc Island we discussed the route we were going to take. Although not speeding we were making a wake as we moved toward Spectacle Reef Light. We had decided that since we would be the only two continuing on toward Port Huron, we'd try to stay as close together as possible without either of us slowing down. In that way we'd have someone to talk to at radio check time. We both had satellite phones but were on different systems. I had set up a regular call time with Judy so that she could not only be following on the tracker but also talking with me at least once a night. Between the two of them I was always able to contact someone. The radio checks between Arch and I became particularly important as the days went on and conditions changed.

Pancakes for breakfast. That was my standard breakfast meal. It gave me a lift in the morning. I also had cereal, yogurt and fruit for morning meals. Judy always tells me that I take enough food for an army. She was right... as always. As time went on speed picked up and by 1200 we were 37 miles down the lake. Going by Spectacle Reef Light was a treat. Anyone can stop by a harbor light but to see Spectacle up close you have to make a real effort. That afternoon Arch and I had the first real stop on Lake Huron. It would not be our last! About a quarter of a mile apart, we were now drifting. Over the next 6 hours we made 12 miles. At one point we drifted so close we could exchange lunches if we wanted. The next six hours brought 19 miles and was followed by 34 miles between 0000 and 0600. During that period we stopped, drifted, circled and were hit by the first of a number of storms we would experience on the lake. When the storm hit, Arch was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile southeast of me and we both took off. Great winds, not too much lighting or rain. Kismet was flying but only for less than an hour. Arch seemed to have the wind longer and when we checked positions in the morning Antaries was 10 miles ahead of me. The last time I saw Antaries was at the start of the storm. From that point on it was only through the VHF, Cell phone or Satellite phone that we made contact. We went from drifting to flying to apart. Still we were close enough to continue radio contact. At that time I was approximately 20 miles due east of Thunder Bay Light.

For those of you who are not familiar with the Nonsuch design, they are cat rigged boats with a wishbone boom similar to what you see on sail boards. They are wonderful boats when the wind is aft but pointing can be a real challenge. It would seem that most of Lake Huron would involve my meeting that challenge and it was not fun. At 0600 I set a course directly toward Goderick but with the winds I tacked back and forth only making 12 miles by 1000. Much time was spent admiring the rolling waves pushed at me by some unseen laker. Huron seemed very rocky roly to me. Probably because I had little to no speed most of the time. Over the next 8 hours I moved 24 miles to the ESE. And so it continued, 12 miles here, 18 miles there and 13 miles thrown in to give me something different and it was not going to get

any better. I was still working my sleep plan trying to store as much energy as possible but the sail was very difficult. Most of the time we seemed to drift and then get a little wind and work to make up miles to only have it evaporate in the heat. At night all reference points were lost as variable winds and waves bounced the boom from one side to the other. I passed Mackinac about 0500 on the 25th and was sitting 19 miles NE of Pt. Clark Light at 0600 on the 27th. About 170 miles in 48 hours. Around 3.5 mph if I was able to take a direct steady course. Unfortunately I was not able to take the direct route. Still I'm only about 40 miles NNW from Goderick, 48 hours on the lake and though tired from all the tacking, drifting and sailing, I'm getting close to the first mark of the lake. There were hours of heat, circles, frustration and some good sailing. Yet I'm feeling pretty good at this point.

Over the next 18 hours I made only 23 miles and was not feeling so good. Either no wind or it was in my face. Tacking back in forth just to gain a mile. On shore I could see wind turbines for what seemed like forever and they were all pointing in the wrong direction. Then the storm came and it got real interesting. At 0000 I have about 16 miles to get to the turning point off of Goderick. The wind is picking up but I still have to tack, no direct route for me. As time passes the wind gets stronger and we have lots of rain. Arch and I have continued to relay positions and conditions to each other. It was not good out on the lake. About 0100 Arch calls and tells me that he has talked to the Canadian Coast Guard and set up a check in time for both of us. This is a good idea because conditions have deteriorated with waves increasing with the wind and the rain just pouring down. The idea was just to let them know position and how we were doing.

My 1st rule of sailing is not to hit anything hard. I now have a hard shoreline about 2 – 3 miles off my port side. I'm also sailing to a point just off of Goderick. In these conditions I would normally be moving away from an unfamiliar harbor. However, Kismet was handling it well and I was not having a problems. I also had moved some of my finger food up to the wheel. I normally keep something to drink and eat close at hand when the weather gets questionable. If stuck at the controls for a long time I still can restore my energies with food. I had a great combination of things in my homemade gorp.

I had programmed the mark into my plotter much earlier in the trip and now had it zeroed in. Conditions made it difficult to see but since we did not expect a buoy and we're turning a GPS point I didn't have to see it. As I was nearing my call in time with the CCG, I was also nearing the mark. That was just what I needed, a call in just as I was turning. As it worked out I completed the call just prior to the mark. Almost done with part two. Only around 59 miles to the Port Huron mark. I made two additional calls into the CCG and laughed every time they asked me about wave height. Finally I said to them "You know that sailors can't tell you how high waves are. That they always overestimate by 3 times the real height." We both had a good laugh and I told him that would be my last check in. Conditions were better by then. Arch and I are having difficulty radioing each other and were now using both cell and satellite calls. He's getting way out in front. Winds are in the 20 kt area but again keeping me from a direct route. Because of a slight shift I can go S but not directly toward Port Huron. Beating as close to the wind as possible I am giving up speed for direction. This is a decision point that I probably choose poorly. Having an indication that the wind was going to veer west, I continued to head 238 degrees SW. I needed to be heading at 215 degrees but if the wind did move I'd be in good shape. If I went south and the wind veered west I'd be in real trouble getting to Port Huron. Now the winds were blowing at 20+ and my fear was that when I finally got to Pt. Huron and turned it would be gone. Oh for that wind on

a broad reach! It turned out to be a very long day with no sleep. I was quickly using up all those reserves. 18 hours after turning Goderick I avoided a laker coming out of the river as I turned the Port Huron mark.

With shifty winds the last few hours I was exhausted and looked forward to sequencing quite a few 15 min catnaps. I was running parallel to the shipping lanes but stayed out of them. Soon I was in a very deep sleep and when that first alarm went off the only thing I knew was that I was on Kismet heading somewhere. I also knew that everything was OK. All systems were good, nothing was approaching me and that I needed more sleep. After the next 15 minutes I actually knew who I was and where I was going. For the next 10 hours I continued to sequence my catnaps until I had an early breakfast of pancakes, fruit cup and coffee. Until breakfast I hadn't even thought about Part Three starting. Soon I turned Goderick for the second time 12 hours after leaving Port Huron and 6 hours faster than my trip down from Goderick. I hoped to make it well under 10 hours, as I had feared, the wind died down prior to turning the mark.

Well rested, I really felt like things were starting to turn my way. I was now heading NW at a good speed and thinking I might be gaining some miles back from Antaries. It would be good to get back into radio contact. Cell phones were not working very well and I even had some problem with Satellite contact. BUT I WAS MOVING CLOSE TO THE RIGHT DIRECTION WITH SOME SPEED. From 0000 6/29 till 0000 6/30 I covered 120 miles all in the right direction. No it wasn't nearly as fast as Kismet can move, but it averaged about 5 mph; certainly a lot faster than I had been going. I also had caught up on my rest and was feeling pretty good again. Then the wind sent me slightly east of north. Now the fight was really on. Thinking I had to get north anyway I headed for Canada with building winds coming right from where I wanted to go. Waves also were getting larger with the tops blown off. No rest again. As I was working my way north I would tack to the west to keep from being driven to far east, neither close hauled course being very comfortable or fast. If I'd take a larger angle I could pick up some speed but at a loss of distance. As I was getting further north I saw the Duck Island group and thought I could hide in the lee of the island for some rest and food. I called Judy and let her know that I was going to stop for a little while and for her not to worry. She informed me that she had often seen me stopped on the tracker! She related that during the trip friends would call and ask way I was not moving and she have to explain about how and why sailboats move. I hid out behind Outer Duck Island for about four hours while I rested and had dinner.

Soon I was off again with the wind screaming in my ears. During this 24 hour period, with a 4 hour stop, I made 74 miles and felt that I fought for every one of them. I also had not heard from Arch in quite awhile. I was figuring he was nearing Mackinac Island by now. At 0000 July 1st, I was about 25 miles NW of Presque Isle Lt. with around 70 miles to Mackinac. This was another fight into 20+ winds tacking back and forth. Most of the time was spent within 10 miles of Cockburn and Drummond Islands getting more and more exhausted as I went on. At times I felt that I couldn't make any headway. Finally I was back insight of Spectacle Reef Lt. After too few, OK a lot, of prayers to the wind gods I was able to chart a course directly toward the island. I had to watch carefully but could hold the course. Bois Blanc took forever to pass by and soon It was dark. The wind was blowing through the bridge at 25+ kts. Not expecting to be heard, I called out to anyone listening on channel 72 that I was passing the Mackinac Island line. It just made me feel good to say it.

Soon I was fighting the wind again. It only seemed angrier because I was attempting to reach the bridge. The lights along shore made it difficult to see. Either it was all black or so bright with lights that I could not distinguish what I was seeing. Exhausted, concerned about the wind blowing straight through the bridge, fearful of Lakers coming up on me and disoriented because of the brightness of some areas and the darkness of others I feared I was about to make some bad decisions. I did! I decided to drop my sail and slow down Kismet. The wind was strong enough to easily move me around. I had hoped this would help me orient myself and give me time to decide if I was going to continue or find a place to anchor. Because I was so tired I was not using my radar or chart plotter very well. Both could have helped in understanding my position in relationship to what I was seeing. I had told Judy prior to the trip that if I was ever too tired I'd try to anchor to get rest. At Duck Island it was for a little food and some rest and because it was there it was sort of neat to anchor on the lee of the island. This time it was because I knew bad decisions were waiting to happen. Avoiding, just barely, a laker in the passage between Round Island and Mackinac Island, I pulled into Mackinac Island harbor and threw out the hook.

The wind was blowing a ton, so I let out plenty of scope and sighted landmarks for my position. Concerned about dragging anchor, I also set an anchor alarm in a very tight circle. With the wind howling I went below to get some sleep, it was 0100 July 2nd. So close to the last part of the odyssey but not there yet. At six in the morning I was listening to the weather. It still was not good, winds blowing right through the Straits and bridge, however there was daylight and I was rested. After eating I was on deck trying to clear a fouled anchor. I finally motored out of the harbor at 1030 and set sail east of the mark I started my engine the night before.

Another tacking duel with the wind. I had to get under and through a bridge with 23 knots of wind in my face. After two hours I passed under the bridge three times, once fighting the wind getting under, then drifting back under after getting caught as I tacked and finally as I passed under again fighting my way west. I was making feet not miles as I worked toward Gray's Reef Passage. My first goal, St Helen Light just kept moving away. Finally I was past it as I continued from one side of the straits to the other. By this time I knew that Arch had also stopped for some shelter and rest. He was moving on and way out in front. I was guessing he was eighty or more miles ahead of me. At this point I just wanted to get to Gray's passage, to finish. Again when most discourage from fighting the winds, it veered a little and I was able to work more directly toward the passage.

Was it the length of the challenge, was it the constant tacking back in forth that by now seemed like the entire trip, was it the wind that blew hard only wind it was against me or was it just lack of sleep and rest? I was tired and wanted to be done. Finally it was time to turn. Green can #3 at the north east end of the Gray's Reef passage was the navigation aid I was trying to get to all day, time to turn home. Although in part four of the trip since leaving the island, this is where I really felt like I was heading into the last leg of the trip. I would complete the challenge. However, paying attention to the wind was important now as I had to set the boom to the proper side. An accidental gybe with that huge wishbone boom in the current winds could end the challenge right in Grays Reef. If the wind held we would start gaining miles. It is hard to express my feelings as I turned that corner, Kismet took off. Suddenly the Speed Over Ground (SOG) is reading 8+. Exhausted but enjoying the ride I keep it going as long as possible. Now comes another decision time. My energy is depleted and I need sleep, more than fifteen minutes. But Kismet is sailing at top speed and although

not on the edge she could quickly get there. However, I know that this is my best point of sail and I'm making up miles. All the hours I fought to get to Gray's Reef could be averaged out IF I keep this going and the wind stays with me.... More surprising things have happened. Do I keep my full sail up and continue speeding south while I get much needed sleep or reduce sail and continue at a good speed but also get off the edge and gain more control? My choice... I put a reef in. Yes it would slow me down but I wouldn't risk a real problem that could end the Challenge.

I spent most of the night sleeping in those 15 minute catnaps waking to check the radar and boat. We continued to make 6's and 7's. The morning of July 3rd broke much better than the 2nd. Kismet continued to eat up the miles along a crisp and clear coast line. I talked to Arch but still not over the VHF. By 2352 Chicago was 100 K. miles away. Another 24 like the last one and I'd be home on the 4th. It was with great hope that I looked at dawn on July 4th; good winds would drive me home without spending another long night. Unfortunately that was not to be. Instead of wind I got flies. Wind forecasts were not encouraging and they were far better than what I saw. At 0705 Arch and I talked about the situation. He was about 40 miles ahead of me and experiencing the same winds. Actually it was hard to call what we had a wind. I was now in between shipping lanes watching Lakers going both ways. Over a period of nine hours I moved 24 miles closer. It was going to be another long night and I worried that if things didn't improve it could be 2 long nights. At least I was able to watch the fireworks from Indiana to Wisconsin and wonder how Arch was fairing as he arrived at the finish line among all the boaters anchored out to watch the show. A slow night followed and I inched my way across the line the morning of July 5th, 14 day, 2 hours and 17 minutes after the start. Arch got in about 13 hours ahead of me.

So what did I learn? Always plan for a challenge to take longer than you expect. Always keep your energy reserves built up, sleep. At some point you will need to draw down on them so have enough to get you through. Check your match supply prior to leaving. Bring that extra can of fuel so you don't spend the entire trip fearing that you'll run out and not be able to charge the batteries. Most importantly, with determination a person can accomplish far more than they think. BTW, at the end I had seven gallons in my tank!