

Do what to the stays'1 halyard?

Members of the Storm Trysail Club learned they weren't quite as salty as they thought on an eye-opening voyage on the clipper ship *Stad Amsterdam*





Does anyone know how to ballantine a stays'l halyard?" asked Helene, the 23-year-old quartermaster of the Stad Amsterdam. My shipmates and I looked at each other blankly, sheepishly feeling like school kids who haven't studied their lessons. Well, at least she had our attention. To us Ballantine meant beer. And after all, as members of the prestigious Storm Trysail Club, who collectively have tens of thousands of nautical miles under our keels in all sorts of vessels, we should have some idea of the workings of a tall ship.

Of the 40 Storm Trysail members aboard there were a couple of circumnavigators, seven America's Cup contenders and we could boast of having completed 34 transatlantics and more than 212 Bermuda races. Oh, and our median age was something like 59 years old. On the other hand, the crew of the clipper ship Stad Amsterdam was mostly Dutch men and women in their 20s, who clearly loved their ship and certainly knew how to sail her. Perhaps they could teach us old sea dogs more than a few new tricks.

It all began when Storm Trysail Club member Rex Herbert, a yacht broker with Sparkman & Stephens, sailed aboard Stad Amsterdam in the

Caribbean as part of his duties in researching optimum charters for his clients. About the same time there was some excitement building in yachting circles about a challenge to the oldest race record in yachting, the 100-year-old transatlantic race record set by the legendary Charlie Barr aboard the 185-foot schooner Atlantic. Twenty vessels, including a classic division of varnished wooden beauties, a class of luxury megayachts and several high-tech record-setting maxis, were signed up for the Rolex Transatlantic Challenge, organized by the New York Yacht Club. Herbert mentioned the possibility of the Storm Trysail Club chartering Stad Amsterdam for the race to the Capt. Peter Brantjes. A shipmaster keen on pushing his ship as hard as the clipper ship captains of the past, he was immediately thrilled with the idea. In addition, it would allow him to position the ship in Europe for the summer charter season.

We soon had a full crew, with 40 Storm Trysail members plus the ship's professional crew of 30, including two cooks and four bartenders. I should mention that we had sponsorship by Mount Gay and Heineken. Of all the vessels I've sailed in, this is the only one that has had Heineken on draft on the weather deck.

By Ron Schaper





The only way to set sail on a clipper ship is to climb 153 feet up the rigging and do it by hand. Daniel Forster/Rolex photo

Before the race, we reported aboard ship in New York for sail training. One look at a full rigged ship reveals a spider web of lines running from the three masts to control some 26 sails. As expected, each of the 300 lines has a name, specific purpose and a belaying pin. To sail the ship, we had to learn the names of the lines, know where every one is belayed and how to correctly haul, ease, coil down and secure each one of them.

There are very few hauling jobs that can be accomplished by less than three or four people. Typically, one or two people will twist the line to be down hauled around an adjacent line or use a stopper line to hold the line fast while another person unwraps the line from the belaying pin on the fife or pinrail. Then to a count of “one, two ... one, two” we all pull together until the line is properly trimmed. Then the line is held again by wraps around another line until it is safely belayed.

As with most jobs aboard ship, there is only one correct way to do things. For example, the simple act of belaying line on a belaying pin: The first wrap comes from under the pin rail then clockwise around the top of the pin, cross to go left to right around the bottom end of the pin. Three wraps are made around before finishing with a half hitch over the top of the pin with the line running out to the right. The line is then coiled down, a bight is taken over the pin looped through the coil and secured with a half-hitch over the pin. If all the coils hanging from a pin rail are not even, the quartermaster is known to dump all of them on the deck to be recoiled. It has also been said that our quartermaster never met a line that didn't need hauling on. Should anyone need to cast off or trim a line in the dark, a consistent known number of wraps on a belaying pin allows one to handle the line safely. If too few wraps were put on, a heavy load could come on that line before expected.

The ship has large hydraulic capstans, but since we were racing, we were not allowed to use powered winches. One of the most difficult tasks was raising the upper topsail yards. These halyards run through heavy wooden four-part blocks and then to the deck where some 25 crewmembers stretch it out along the weather deck and “one, two” the heavy yards into position. The running rigging consists of chain for the squaresail clews, parceled and served wire rope and, the most numerous, three-strand laid line. This line has the tan look and feel of traditional natural manila line, however, it is actually a synthetic polypropylene with many of the same characteristics as the traditional line—it splices, coils and stretches, but does not rot.

One hundred years ago in the zenith of clipper ship development, just as sail was being eclipsed by steam, Capt. Jarvis developed an ingenious winch system for bracing the yards of a square-rigger. The Jarvis winch assembly with tapered drums allowed the largest three yards, the course, and the lower and upper topsails, to be braced by as few as two men, instead of the usual 12 crewmen. The smaller upper sails still must be trimmed by hand.

Those of you who have spent days at sea, living in your cold, wet foul weather gear on the windward rail of an ocean racer, eating freeze-dried food, would certainly appreciate the fact that we enjoyed having three professionally cooked hot meals plus a night lunch per day; unlimited, hot





freshwater showers and laundry service. No hot bunks on this ship either. We slept in heated and air-conditioned state-rooms, each with its own head and shower. Bunks were made up with fresh linens every other day and towels as needed. Two full bars, one on deck and one in the Long Room, provided copious amounts of draft Heineken and plenty of Mount Gay Rum. Every evening Capt. Peter would apprise us of our position and review weather reports, all projected on a large movie screen. Following this, America's Cup veteran and sailing broadcaster Gary Jobson, would often introduce one of his voyaging movies or there would be some other entertainment. We had e-mail, weather routing, a position tracking transponder and more satellite telephones than I've ever seen on one boat.

Early on in our sail training, there were those of us who elected to be climbers and those who chose to remain on deck. We climbers had special instruction from our quartermaster and crew in the safe and happy techniques required to go aloft. (At this point the deck crew retreated to the weather deck bar.) We were fitted with climbing safety harnesses, each with a large clip for securing to the standing rigging, and we followed our instructors, Helene Moodie and Paul Janssen, up the foremast ratlines. It is as easy as climbing a taut inclined rope ladder. While climbing you do not clip on the safety harness. You only clip on when you are stopped and working.

All goes well up the ratlines until you reach the top. Here the shrouds meet the mast and overhead is the top—a platform inside the futtock shrouds. Instead of the easy climbing up an incline, you must reach up and outboard away from where you are standing, hanging backward to grasp the deadeye rigging supporting the topmast and pull yourself up.

Did I say deadeye? That's what you would be if you missed your grip as you pull yourself out over the top. This is the place that the would-be climbers joined the deck guys at the bar. Once over the top, confidence is gained and it's ever aloft. (Climbing back down over the top is even trickier.)

The ratlines aloft continue up the topmast to the next top, called the crossrees because of the arms that spread and separate the lines running up the mast. From here, the route to the masthead is not a comfy, taut, angled ratline anymore, but a straight-up-the-mast Jacob's ladder. Marlin-served wire rope forms the sides of the ladder; lashed-on 12-inch-wide oak rungs are the steps. As you climb you face forward and with each roll of the ship you and the ladder twist to leeward. You must time the roll of the ship as you climb. I found that climbing the athwartships ratlines was easy on the roll, while on the Jacob's ladder it was easier to take a few steps between the bigger rolls.

The journey to the top of the mainmast was exhilarating and was worth every apprehension and sore muscle. Perching on the skysail yard, some 153 feet above the rolling ocean, provided an amazing perspective of the ship below. Sailing photographer Daniel Forster actually sat upon the masthead to take some of his captivating shots.

The author takes to the rigging, top left, as Stad Amsterdam sails rail down, top left. Everyone got a chance to take the helm, middle right, including the author. Storm Trysail Cub members take an active part in running the ship, a much different experience than on boats they normally sail, middle right. The ship's professional crew give lessons on how it's done, far left. There are no freeze-dried dinners and Gatorade when racing aboard Stad Amsterdam, left, just sit-down dinners and Heineken on tap. Ron Schaper photos



“Can you believe they let us do this?” said my watchmate Jim Rogers as we stood on the lower topsail footrope, clinging to the yard some 70 feet off the deck during training in New York. “Well,” I said, “you signed the waivers, didn’t you?”

An experienced helmsman is in tune with the tactile feedback through the wheel from the rudder for optimum performance. On a 1,000-ton vessel more than 200 feet long with a 16-foot-deep keel and a keel-hung rudder the steering must be hydraulic. While this type of steering does not provide the feel of a cable system, it does provide the tremendous power for one person to steer this large heavy steel vessel. The wheel requires two complete turns for just one degree of rudder angle.

There are two helms, the forward one just aft of the chart house, the other all the way aft. The aft helm not only has fewer turns per rudder degree but also allows the helmsman to see the entire ship and trim of the sails. This is especially useful when braced up sharp on the wind, where you must steer to

keep the uppermost squaresail luffs properly trimmed. Like sailing to windward in a sloop by reading the jib telltales, watching the skysail and royal trim keeps the ship at the best point of attack, or full and by. (The expression three sheets to the wind comes from a drunken helmsman not having the concentra-

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tion to maintain these upper sails in trim. By letting the skysail, the royal and the upper topgallant sail go aback, or three sheets to the wind, the helmsman must be drunk.)

Some of the most interesting sails that we set are the studdingsails, or stuns’ls. These downwind sails set on wooden stuns’l booms that are deployed from the yards. They also use a bak spear or spinnaker pole-like boom extending from the ship’s rail to provide a fairlead for the sheets.

The New York Y. C. race committee delayed the scheduled May 21 start of the

race by one day to avoid a predicted gale. When we did start 24 hours later, it was with a mere zephyr from the east. Square-riggers do not do well going to windward in light air. After wallowing for a couple of days with little breeze and still some 2,500 miles to go, it was concluded that we could not make

England under sail alone in time for the end of our charter. The captain reluctantly fired up the engine and we retired from the race. For the balance of the passage, we used the engine to get us to areas

of strong, favorable winds so we could enjoy glorious sailing during the crossing.

Atlantic’s original record established the traditional course for setting a transatlantic record time, which has been broken many times, just never in a race. In fact, *Mari-Cha IV*, the 141-foot carbon fiber schooner, holds the 2,925-nautical-mile course time from Ambrose Light in New York harbor to Lizard Point, the most southerly point in Great Britain, of six days, 17 hours, and 52 minutes. (The multihull record set by *PlayStation* is four days, 17 hours.) The



It's all hands to raise the sail, when you can't use the hydraulic capstans when racing, above. The bowman has a great view from the bowsprit, above left, while it's stern rail sitting for the rest of the crew, above right. Daniel Forster/Rolex photos

organizers of the Transatlantic Challenge did get their wish of a new race record, and it was only fitting that *Mari-Cha IV* broke *Atlantic's* time by two and half days with a new race record of 9 days, 15 hours, and 55 minutes. *Stad Amsterdam's* time, with engine assist, was 14 days.

Oh, ballantine? That's a neat way of coiling down a long halyard or buntline so that it doesn't kink or foul when thrown off the belaying pin. Like the coincident three rings of the Ballantine beer label (purity, body, flavor), a ballantine coil is made by clockwise making a four-plank wide outer circle,

then making a smaller coil inside this coil, then one-third the way around another small coil, then one-third another, and so on. The completed coil looks like a 24-inch diameter pile of Ballantine beer rings and it is very effective. When the line is cast off, it runs upward without kinking or jamming.

Sailing a square-rigged ship takes a lot of teamwork and continuous hauling on lines. The feeling of being at the helm of a 257-foot clipper ship, with a squall breezing up to 40 knots and 24,000 square feet of sail set overhead, is a sailor's dream. Whether perched on the end of the magnificent 43-foot bowsprit watching dolphins happily cavorting in the bow wave, or the exhilaration of climbing to the heights of the rig, sailing this ship was a feast for the senses. And the Storm Trysail members who have been privileged to sail some of the most magnificent boats in the world each found that this was a truly unique and magical experience. There is a certain lore, a siren song, that allows sailors to connect with their past and hold in reverence and awe the ships and those who sailed in the square riggers. Find a tall ship and sail her. □