

Lessons of the Sea

Months alone in a round-the-world race can crush spirit and body, but not for this asthmatic 66-year-old

“We are in the gale,” Rich Wilson wrote on January 1, describing his exhaustion and demoralization as the sea pounded his 60-foot monohull *Great American IV*. “Imagine being inside a house getting tilted by a crane,” he said two months later, “then being repetitively dropped from 15 feet onto a concrete slab.”

America’s greatest blue-water sailor has broken records for 50 years while piloting old boats on shoestring budgets. And yet, he performs in a sport barely recognized in his home country. *The New York Times* wrote he looks more like an accountant who does a singlehanded sailor’s taxes than a singlehanded sailor. And his only Wikipedia page is in French.

When slammed like so much flotsam, Wilson had been alone for 56 days, since November 16, 2016, at the start of the Vendée Globe, a 27,000-mile, around-the-world race, when he and 28 other sailors were sent off by 300,000 spectators lining the jetty in Les Sables d’Olonne, France.

In those eight weeks, Wilson had seen land only once—while rounding Cape Horn—and had spotted no ships for a month. He was the only American and the oldest competitor in a quadrennial race that tests, going up against a race that tests determination in the face of solitude (rules prohibit the solo sailors from outside help or resupply). Racers have a 4.23-percent chance of dying in the quadrennial event.

Daily work entailed more than a thousand hand-cranked revolutions on the winches, leaving Wilson gasping for breath. Even if the one-time high school math teacher had been decades younger, the physical toll and inherent sleep deprivation could have been crippling. But Wilson was 66—and a severe asthmatic with less than 75 percent of normal lung power. Sleep was fleeting, as his four asthma medications contained caffeine and steroids, leaving him too wired for shuteye. For months, he grabbed only enough half-hour naps to total no more than five hours a day.

On January 29, the finish line still 5,000 miles away, Wilson was becalmed, and *Great American IV* spun futilely in circles. Alone on the sea, going nowhere, bereft of companionship, and so stressed that he pounded on the deck in frustration, he wished he could uncork his emotions and cry. But all he could do was hope for wind and think about past voyages.

In 1990, when he set out to break the San Francisco to

Boston sailing record in *Great American I*, he and partner Steve Pettengill clawed past Cape Horn, a 600-mile bottleneck of storms between Chile and Antarctica. Seas climbed to 65 feet, wind shrieked through the rigging, and waves roared overhead until one massive wedge crashed onto them and the boat capsized. Now standing in icy water—on the ceiling of the upside-down boat—yet another monster flipped the vessel upright, but slammed the mast against the deck and shattered it to pieces. Barely afloat, they crammed into a seven-by-two-foot locker and hung on. The next night, blown upwind on a seldom-used trade route, they were rescued by a container ship that fought through 200 miles of storm seas to reach them.

Undaunted, Wilson returned three years later and shaved six days off the record. When asked if his time had been bested since, he replied, “I can’t imagine why anyone would even want to try.”

More long-distance records followed. By 2008, Wilson was turning 58 and coming to grips with his age, so he entered his first Vendée Globe, enticed by the organizers’ call to “answer the needs of sailors to reach their uttermost limits.” And disappointed in how poorly public education stimulated students, he tried a new approach to teaching by designing an online ocean curriculum that reached 250,000 kids during his race. After finishing in a respectable 121 days despite broken ribs, compressed vertebrae, a gashed face, and the need to consult with a psychiatrist, he vowed, “Never again.”

But seven years later, he was back. The hunger to teach from the helm was too strong. This time, he doubled the number of students he reached. And when he received an email photograph from students in India holding up their certificates for completing his course, his emotions broke free. “I cried,” Wilson said, “I just opened up the floodgates at the chart table. That was exactly why I was doing this.”

When Wilson reached Les Sables on February 21, he’d bested his 2008-09 time by a fortnight. His place—13th among 18—was unimportant. In his log, he wrote one last entry: “Finished.”

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