

Bob Steadman

On a warm summer's morning in July of 1960, I saw a sign on the bulletin board inside the Montauk Post Office announcing the second annual Montauk Catboat Sailing Regatta for kids ages 8 to 12. It would take place in Lake Montauk at 1 p.m. on Saturday and was part of the kids' sailing program run by Bob Steadman, a former World War II Army officer living in town who had a sailing school in Montauk.

This was the first year I was running the newspaper, the first edition had come out in that town, and suddenly I was learning what all newspapermen learn, which is that the newspaper comes out every week—even if mine was just for the summer—and is constantly in need of fresh articles. Covering the sailing races, I could write about the winners and take pictures of all the determined little kids sailing around in Lake Montauk, the sails of their little boats bellowed out gracefully, looking for the finish line.

At nineteen, I was still living with my parents. My dad, four years earlier, had bought the pharmacy in Montauk and



had uprooted the family from where I grew up in Millburn, New Jersey. I missed my old high school classmates, and Millburn was just so far away. I'd call them, sometimes, and invite them out, but few came. That weekend, however, one of my best buddies, Howard Stone, was staying at the house. Howard could be my photographer.

And so, at 12:30 on Saturday, Howard and I, he with my camera and I with my pen and note pad, drove two miles down to Lake Montauk and the flotilla of small boats—six sail boats each about fourteen feet long, called “Penguins,”—that were tied up one next to the other at the dock there. This dock was part of a ten-acre waterfront property that had on it an abandoned building that had been at one time a bootlegger’s gambling casino. Steadman was by the Penguins, and so were about fifteen kids, milling around the boats with their mothers and fathers. The Penguins were really little, all identical. They had a mast and a boom and a sail. Little boats for little kids.

I had met Steadman only once before, briefly, introduced to him by my dad. This had been the prior summer, when I worked in my dad’s drugstore and he had come in one afternoon to buy something. Although in civilian clothes, he was nevertheless a ramrod straight military fellow. He had a full head of blond hair, walked with his jaw stuck out, talked in short machine-gun bursts, and he told my dad that, with the war over, he now worked during the school year at a high school up the island as a gym teacher. In the summer, he lived with his wife in Montauk and taught sailing.

Now, standing by the boats, Steadman took out a bullhorn.

“Okay, everybody, it’s five minutes to race time. Go to your assigned boats. You have your boat numbers. Thank you, everybody.”

The kids hopped to. The six boats were numbered. The kids found their assigned boats and stood on the dock by

them, all eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds, two kids to each boat. They looked at Mr. Steadman, who, pacing around in front of them, spoke on the bullhorn.

“The wind is brisk. No problem, though. Everybody please get in your boats now, careful, get in your designated positions. Okay. Now you will each sail down to the far end of the lake and turn around. You’ll see the dock. That’s the starting line. Sail in a group, cross the line together and, as you do, Timmy here will sound the horn. It’s once around. You’ll see the buoys I put out. They’re all red. Eight of them. Just stay between the buoys and the shoreline, but not too close to the shore. The first one all the way around wins. Okay!”

Steadman was now looking at boat #4. There was nobody in boat #4.

“Where are the Akin twins?” he asked.

There was no answer.

“We’ll wait a few minutes. Gotta have all the boats.”

They waited a few minutes, but there were no Akin twins. Steadman now turned to me and Howard.

“You two. You guys with the camera. Get in that boat. Ever sail a boat?”

“I know how to handle a boat,” I said.

“No matter. Just get in. We’re gonna start this thing.”

And so Howard and I hopped in. The boat shifted this way and that. But there were two plank benches. Howard sat on one and I sat on the other.

“Raise sails,” Steadman shouted.

“I used to have a sailboat,” I whispered to Howard.

“Just tell me what to do,” Howard said.

“Just sit tight.”

I reached past him to the boom and unhooked a rope from a cleat and began to pull the one sail, which had been all crumpled up on the boom, up the mast. Around me, there was the sound of ropes pulling up sails on each of the other five boats. Now there was the flapping sound of the white canvas up there, and in dark blue, little penguins near to the top. We were a jolly sight, I thought.

With the sails up, Steadman moved down the dock, quickly removing the lines from the cleats and throwing them into the boats. Then, one at a time, he shoved everybody off. Soon we were tacking this way and that, trying to turn around.

What great fun. The wind snapped our sail out, billowing it which, in turn, pushed our boat to the front. When we got to the turnaround at the far end of the lake, I let the sail go free, and as it luffed in the wind, we sat and waited.

“When everybody gets here, we’ll lay back,” I said to Howard who could hardly not have noticed we had beaten everybody to the starting line. “Most of these kids don’t know what they are doing. When they all get here, we should move to the back and help the stragglers along.”

“Okay,” he said.

And so it began. Soon we had a fleet of ten little kids operating five little Penguins in front of us, zigging and zagging about, shouting to one another—“Hey, you’re getting too close! I was here first!”—and we were herding them along like sheep. It was a gorgeous day. Our boat heeled over nicely against the wind. It slid gloriously across the surface of the lake going downwind.

I could easily gain on these kids in front if I wanted to, but I held back. And so it was after a while that the first of the boats crossed the starting line, and Timmy, on the shore next to Mr. Steadman, blew a loud blast on his air horn.

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The parents cheered. We were underway.

For a considerable way on that first tack, Howard and I talked about some of our friends from Millburn High School in New Jersey and what had become of them. I had, after graduation, moved away with my mom, dad, and sister to Montauk, 130 miles away, so I had lost track. Howard filled me in. He had gone to Brandeis, and was studying the rabbinate. Mark Lerner had gone to Lafayette. Most everyone had gone to college. We talked about the quality of the girls we'd chased the night before at Montauk's three nightspots—Surf and Sand, the Blue Marlin, and the Montauk Playhouse. And after a while, I told Howard about the boat I had owned the previous year.

"My parents got it for me for my birthday," I told him. "It was an old wooden boat, sixteen feet long, very wide and slow and heavy. It had one sail like this one, one mast and an iron centerboard you could pull up and down. In a brisk wind such as the one we are in now, the boat would get up to its full speed, maybe eight knots, which was really not very fast. But it felt faster because, when you got up to that speed, the iron centerboard would begin to sing—buzz, actually—from the water rushing by. It would be shaking in its slot, banging against it. And it would make the whole boat vibrate. You could feel it in your seat and hands. It was

sort of a warning noise. Go any faster and the boat would fly apart. It was Breaking the Sound Barrier. Meanwhile, a whole lot of other boats would be scooting quietly by.”

We laughed at this.

“Here was the most embarrassing thing I ever did in that boat. Once, I took my younger sister out onto the lake. She was about eleven at the time, but my mom said she was old enough for me to teach her how to sail. So, I’m telling her what to do, and the boom hits me a glancing blow on the head and knocks me right out of the boat and into the lake.”

Howard was howling.

“I’m splashing around, spitting out water and everything, and Nancy is sitting there in the middle of the boat, and she looks down at me with this worried look and says, ‘What am I supposed to do now?’”

“That’s hilarious.”

“But then in the fall, I went off to college. I’d left it tied to its buoy—you’d wade out to get to it—and I figured I’d bring it in over Thanksgiving. But then at school, third week I was there, my mother sent me a photograph. The hurricane had come through, and there is my boat on the narrow beach of the lake with a telephone pole crunched on top of her. End of boat.”

At this point, we had rounded the first buoy heading north, hugging the shoreline. The kids in the Penguins in front of us were trying mightily, but they were continuing to squabble and shout and generally getting all mixed up. We passed a bunch of them—just couldn’t help it. Now we were in third place.

You know, when you're in a boat race, even against a bunch of nine-year-olds, the competitive juices start getting up and you get to thinking.

"Only two in front of us now," Howard was saying. He was thinking the same thing.

Passing the second buoy, we passed the second-place boat, and as we rounded the third buoy, we passed the lead boat. As we did so, we high-fived each other. We were going to win.

Way up ahead, we could hear Steadman shouting orders over the bullhorn, but whatever it was, we couldn't make it out.

And then a strange thing happened. The wind, quite suddenly, died. It just stopped. We coasted to a halt. Behind us, the other boats came to a halt, too. We were all becalmed. Now, in that silence, we could hear Steadman loud and clear over the bullhorn.

"Let them by, you two! Men, pull in your lines, men, get them tight." They did that. It did them no good.

We both looked back. There was 30 yards of open water to boat #2 behind us, but it might as well have been ten miles. We weren't going anywhere. And neither were they. But this was also very tantalizing. We were now just 75 yards from the finish line. Behind us, two of the boats had sort of drifted into each other. The four boys in them were arguing and fighting anew. The booms were banging against one other.

"We'd let them by if we could," I shouted on ahead, but it seemed Steadman was unable to hear me. He continued with "let them by, let them by."

We all stayed like this for what seemed like the next half hour but was probably no more than ten minutes. The sun, which felt warm in the breeze, now felt hot. Off to one

side, Steadman continued barking his orders. The boys were shouting and splashing—one had started to cry.

Finally, Howard Stone spoke.

“How deep is the water?” he asked.

“Probably no more than up to your waist,” I said.

The bowline—the rope that ties to the front of the boat—was on the floor of the boat. Howard picked it up. “Want me to do this?” he asked.

I looked up at the sail. Not a puff.

“Go ahead,” I said.

In one quick motion, fully clothed, Howard leaned back, threw a leg over the gunnel and made a gentle back flip into the water with a splash. Up ahead, Steadman was suddenly silent. Now Howard was up and splashing about. And then he found his footing.

“You’re right,” he said, standing up. This would be easy. Holding the rope, he waded to the front of the boat and began to pull us, mule fashion, toward the finish line. Penguin #4 lurched forward jerkily. We were on the move. Pulling away from the pack. Heading toward victory. And none of these other little kids behind us could do what Howard was doing. They were too short to stand up in the water.

Mr. Steadman, forgetting about the mothers and fathers standing near him, began to lose control.

“What the hell are you doing?” he screamed. “You can’t do that!” He paused. “You! Get the fuck back into that boat. Now. Do you hear me? I said get the fuck back in.”

Howard stopped pulling. The rope went slack. Penguin #4 began to glide to a halt.

“Keep going,” I said, grimly.

He shrugged, and back he went to pulling.

“You assholes!” Steadman shouted. “You assholes are disqualified. Do you hear me? Disqualified. Wait till I get my hands on you assholes. Get over here!”

As he said that, we crossed the finish line. And, right on cue, Little Timmy, age nine, held his hand high in the air, pressed the button, and sounded the air horn.

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