

Enter the Harbor of Defeat?

by Kelly McGlynn

The gun goes off and immediately I see half the 420 fleet of boats capsize and flip over. The sailors in the water struggle to keep a grasp on their boats, the race forgotten in their hopes to right them. This I watch from behind the line, awaiting the start of my fleet. Brackish water splashes up randomly with every wave and gust, simply a change in scenery from the constant pouring of rainwater on my head. I have sailed in these winds before, but never this boat. I know I am too short and too light for this bigger boat, and as I look at the race committee waiting for a flag I am hoping, yet not hoping, to see the red and white signal of abandonment which would send us home admitting defeat to the weather. I know my regatta standings will be better off if this race is not sailed. I know my legs will feel better tonight if I do not sail this race. I know all this and yet, as I stare waiting the sign, I want also to go for it. I want to take the challenge. I want to know that I can do it. And so when I see a different flag go up, the one that tells me the race will happen, I take a breath, and set my watch. 5 minutes until the start. I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if I should do it. It's like being injured and still wanting to play a sport – you know it's going to be hard and there's a chance it could be dangerous, but you have an irrational desire to compete. This might be unrealistic or impossible. I could sail into the harbor and relax safely, or I could race and risk defeat or injury.

As the time in the start sequence drags out, I watch the fleet ahead of me. There are few 420's still sailing, most are flipped, most sailors are in the water. And I know that ahead of me is a race course, like the hundreds I have seen before. I'm sitting on a boat that is new to me, but with the principals that are familiar. I know what lies ahead and yet it is a mystery because I have never taken on such a challenge.

My hair is blown back, my sunglasses on despite the lack of sun; it would hurt my eyes to look into the wind and rain without them. I can't hear the sound signals from the committee boat that is only yards away from me – I have to base my timing off the watch on my wrist and the flags I can barely spare the time to look for. Ahead of me lies a racecourse, a chaotic, crazy, graveyard of a racecourse. And far to the left, barely recognizable beyond the waves and dark

wet sky, is the opening to the harbor. I see a flow of boats there who are trying to escape the insanity that I am now being soaked in. I think I just heard a horn. 1 minute until the start of the race.

The ludicrousness of this is overwhelming. These gusts have to be up to 27 knots. Not an inch of my body is dry. My long rash guard and neoprene hiking pants do not succeed in keeping me fully warm but I know that the moment the race starts I'll wish I was cold compared to the burning in my legs. I know that I have to make a choice to start the race or sail in. But I also know that if I decide to sail, I'll have 50 more minutes to continually repeat the choice. Every action I make is its own decision; because every moment I am either sailing the race, or giving up and sailing in. The reasons I would go to the harbor have been running through my mind, and their convincingness is closely matched with the rewards of sailing that I also seek. My decision is between two extremes; the calm safe and relaxed or the exciting dangerous and the general awesomeness of the sport of sailing. Should I go into the harbor to escape this outrageous weather that constantly threatens my ability to sail well, or should I push through, risk my energy and possibly safety in order to sail in the most extreme conditions I have ever sailed in?

I look far up at the mark. And I look far beyond at the harbor. As the time ticks by on my watch, I know it's not the strategy I'm working out that matters, or the observations I'm making on the course. It's the thoughts, the preparations, and the decision I am trying to make that are going to get me through the race.

At the gun, I trim and watch behind me as the worse half of the fleet flip over. It's incredible. I am fully outside my boat, my legs stretched out straight beneath the hiking strap, my body as flat as I can get it. I hold the mainsheet using the techniques I've known and practiced for years as I grew up sailing, and yet the boat is still overpowering me. I'm not surprised; I know I'm too small for the boat. I know I am not built for heavy air in this boat. But there is something beyond build that determines what one can do in sailing. The mind can overpower any physical disadvantages, and although it is going to be a struggle, I know this race is possible for me to complete. Anything is possible. I don't try to force myself into the top of

the fleet. I don't try to win. I try to make it through the race. By the middle of the first upwind, I neither know nor care what place I'm in or who's winning.

But I do know one thing. There is a growing stream of boats struggling into the harbor. Safety, security, comfort is open to me with just one decision, and only the sacrifice of one race. There are an overwhelming number of boats flipped over and drifting while their skippers try to right them against the strong current and through the torrential downpour that we try to call rain but know it needs a much stronger word to describe it. The usually readable racecourse is a pool of boats, struggling sailboats, 'safety boats' trying to help them, and then there are the few boats who are flying through the breeze. I know if I were to just make it to that top mark, I can fly downwind until the next mark. If I can only hold it for that much longer.

There is something about utter confusion and chaos that is extremely inviting and exciting. And when I turn that mark into the reach, my boat suddenly hits a plane and I'm flying forward through the water, going faster than I ever have while skippering a boat. This is the indescribable reward of sailing; so completely opposite from the reward of the harbor, and much more satisfying from the standpoint of having earned and worked to get to this point. The whole struggle upwind was worth this rush of adrenaline, a mix between the speed of my boat and the exhilaration of having completed that part of the trial. But I know there are two more up winds. And despite the exhilaration and awesomeness of this speed, I know stopping and turning are going to be near fatal moves. Again I look beyond the racecourse and see the harbor sitting there, slowly filling with sailors who had given up. Those sailors feeling the relaxation and comfort that I long for, yet missing the excitement, challenge, and exhilaration that I'm experiencing. I barely know anymore if they have cancelled the race or not, because so many boats are sailing in I can hardly tell if it's because they gave up or because the race is over. Those are the sailors I don't want to count myself part of; but the race is hard, my legs are tired and there's still a long way to go. The possibility of simplicity and ease calls to me, while the difficulty, struggle, and awesomeness of sailing envelops me.

As I am flung from my boat after the attempt to turn it, I float in the waves holding the side of my boat suddenly realizing how tired my arms are. I could sit here and wait until a

motor boat comes who will pull me out and tow me to the harbor. My muscles are worn out and my body is tired and there is much more of the race left to sail. I don't care anymore; I am going to finish this race.