

Coastal Characters

There are few, if any, skippers with more Swiftsures and Southern Straits under their keel than Ron MacKenzie.



RON MACKENZIE

A Swiftsure stalwart
BY MARIANNE SCOTT

Scratch the surface of most sailboat racers and you find characters who started sailing on the family boat, signed up for Sea Cadets or caught the bug when a forward-looking parent sent them to sailing school. They started young and racing permeated their lives.

That's not the track that Ron MacKenzie followed. When

he arrived in Victoria from Vancouver to participate in his 43rd Swiftsure International Yacht Race, he told me he hadn't even set foot on a sailboat until he was well into his 20s. "In 1967, a friend, Mike Howard, invited me aboard his 23-foot, wooden centreboard sailboat," Ron recalls. "I'd been on a couple of powerboats but had no experience with sailboats. We cruised in the Gulf Islands but when the boat heeled, I was really scared."

He decided once was enough and sailing wasn't for him. But quickly, second thoughts prevailed and he began gaining experience during the weekly races. Not wanting to be a wimp, he crewed on *Doran*, an Alberg 37, in his first

overnight Southern Straits race in 1970. "I was pretty naive," he says. "I'd gotten into my pyjamas at one point during the night. Talk about a wardrobe malfunction! It got so rough only a quarter of the fleet finished. We didn't either. When a sailboat was rescued after hitting Alden Reef, the race became known as the gear buster."

Ron felt he hadn't really met the challenge during this first big race—and that feeling changed his life. "It made me determined to do it again so I managed to get a ride on the top boat in those days, Bonar Davis' *Hyak*, a Discovery 32. Fortunately for me, there was

an opening. We were first overall—nothing new for Bonar and crew, but exciting for me.”

He soon realized he wanted to race his own boat. So he bought a C&C 35 MKII, and with her and his two later boats, he’s completed 47 consecutive Southern Straits, holding the record for most races entered.

He also entered his C&C in his first Swiftsure in 1974. Since then, he has entered every Swiftsure for a total of 43 contests—few people have entered more. He built a dependable crew, people who raced with him week after week.

Having moved up to a C&C 37, he expanded his local and regional experience by sailing the Vic-Maui offshore race in 1984. Once in Hawaii, he joined the Canadian team in the Pan Am Clipper Cup, a 775-mile race from Oahu round the Hawaiian Island chain.

In the meantime, when not racing, Ron was building his career as a chartered accountant, articling, then building his expertise, eventually specializing in serving dentists in accounting, management and providing know-how when buying and selling practices. He writes and lectures widely on dental practice management and has provided expertise in legal trials.

BUILDING A TEAM To compete in all those races, Ron’s been fortunate to have consistent crew over the years, an essential ingredient for success. His partner, Joan, has joined him in several Swiftsures and Southern Straits. “And my right hand, night and day, is Werner Kurz,” says Ron. “Big winds, big seas; he’s there for me and us. He’s a rock, with great judgement.”

Another team member is David Sutcliffe, who’s also crewed for Ron for decades, mostly as the foredeck guy.

“We’ve had excellent offshore races,” says David. “In sailing, there’s no substitute for experience. You can read books and take courses, but the proof is in the actual sailing. Ron has tremendous experience and he keys in on building a team. His team crews with him for many years, a mark

of good leadership. For me an important thing is that even in the heat of the moment, Ron remembers that racing should be fun. If it isn’t fun, why bother?”

Having enjoyed offshore racing, Ron next signed up for the 1987, 1,000-mile Puerto Vallarta Race, sponsored by

the San Diego Yacht Club, and the following year, he bought a J-37, “the only one on the West Coast,” he says proudly. “She’s called *Future Primitive*. My son, Bill, named her after a skateboard video.” It’s the boat he’s kept and continues to race.

Another test came in 2006 ▶

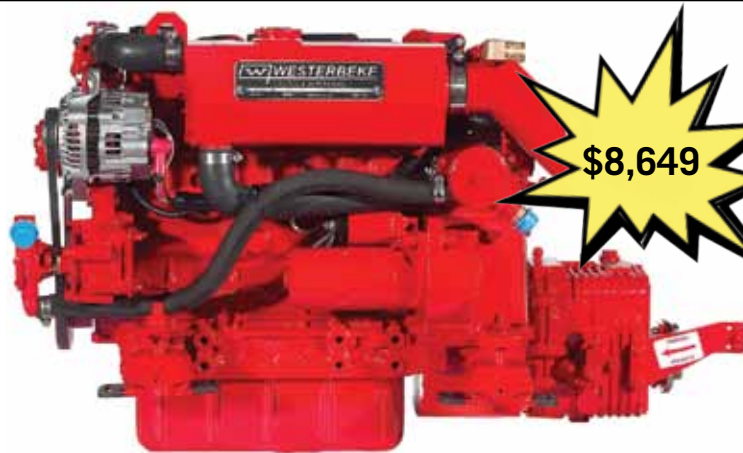


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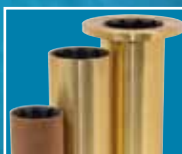


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aboard *Kinetic IV*, a Beneteau 47.7 that David Sutcliffe had raced to Hawaii and then brought to Sydney, Australia in stages. The goal? To join the (in)famous 630-mile Sydney-Hobart Race. Ron flew in for the contest, which, afterwards, the Australians termed a "medium" strength event. Sutcliffe described it as "lots of drama:" one boat sank and several were dismasted. "The winds come in from the Southern Ocean and the shallow Bass Strait funnels those winds," he says. "Tricky currents can run several knots making it among the most challenging race courses in the world."

"We were able to put together a great crew and had an exciting race," adds Ron. "We made it to Tasmania and back without mishaps."

Never daunted, Ron raced in the 2011 Antigua Sailing Week, a series of day races. "I put together crew," he says, "and chartered a Beneteau 40.7. Five years later, we repeated a Caribbean contest by sailing the RORC Caribbean, a tortuous, 11-island, 600-mile race from Antigua to Guadeloupe."

Ron is fit, with a well-trimmed white beard, a shiny head and looks like a guy always in control. He's now passed the three-quarter century mark, but is definitely not ready to swallow the anchor. At the Scott Point Royal Van outstation on Salt Spring Island, he sails Lasers competitively with the "old guys sailing club." "I still go into the office, consulting now, several days a week and I bike 45 minutes each way," he says. "Keeps me in shape." Although always the skipper, he relies on his crew to share the load.


"We didn't have the best results," says Ron, reflecting on the 2017 Swiftsure race. "But we gave it our all. Of my 43 Swiftsures, this is the only one with fog and wind

all night all the way back. We gybed in the dark fog through Race Passage in 25 knots, never seeing Race Rocks or land on the left, with David Lloyd calling the minutes for each gybe. And then, as has happened many times before, we spent almost three hours completing the last one-half mile from the finish line. A Driftsure at the end."

Werner Kurz, Ron's right hand for decades adds, "This was the most fog we've seen in a Swiftsure. It was a race in which old-fashioned seamanship and the desire to keep the crew safe prevailed over the desire to perform well. When the fog was getting really thick at night and we were making 10-plus knots under spinnaker with virtually no visibility, we decided to switch to a jib to reduce speed somewhat but greatly increase the ability to

respond instantly to any object that might emerge out of the fog. And having to cross the outbound shipping lane added further motivation."

WHY DID RON TAKE

to racing and continue on that same path when many septuagenarians have long abandoned the demanding sport? He has many reasons. "Not many people engage in racing," he says, "and that means you're among those who challenge themselves." He sees racing as a healthy sport, a passion. He loves the competition, the camaraderie, even sharing the trials and the stress. "When you finish a race, no matter what your position, you have a sense of accomplishment," he says. "So I'll be back for the 2018 Swiftsure, pleased to help celebrate its 75th anniversary." 



Future Primitive at the startline for yet another Swiftsure.



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