

# Last Sail of the Season

By Jack Northrup

When is sailing too much fun? Where's the line where fun ends and anxiety begins? I crossed that line soon after I bought my sailboat, the *Surprise*, a 1977 Pearson 323. Unfortunately, I dragged my family across that line with me.



The adventure began on October 6, when I said to my 26-year-old son, Brice, that that day was the day. We had made a pact to go out on Lake Champlain at the end of the season to find some rough

weather and "to have some fun." The sailing season was almost over. Few boats were left on the lake. Ronnie, my wife and third crew member, had signed on for the first half of the trip. (She always demands to be put ashore when the fun ends.)

**The author owns a Pearson 323 that he sails in Lake Champlain, sometimes way too late in the season.**

Lake Champlain is western New England's version of the Atlantic: 120 miles long, straddling New York on the west and Vermont on the east. Our destination was Valcour Island, one of the many historic islands in the northern part of the lake.

Normally, it would take two to three hours to sail there, a reach from the east to the west side of the island. The Sunday forecast had been a wind advisory and small craft warning, winds from the south at 25 with gusts to 35 miles per hour on the broad lake. Waves were to be three to five feet.

I had purchased the *Surprise* three months earlier and in the ensuing time, taught myself all I could about sailing, with mixed results. The boat had not sunk, my marriage was in trouble (Ronnie hadn't talked to me for two weeks) and my three sons were distancing themselves from me at varying rates.

To begin, we headed out five miles over the bays that connect to the lake. The wind was not blowing very hard, and the waves were not too bad. We made it to the island in an hour and a half, rounded it, dropped anchor, dropped sail, and ate our lunch.



**Brice, son and crew, may have had more "fun" than what he bargained for when he decided to sign up on board the *Surprise*.**

After lunch, we sailed north and dropped Ronnie on the New York mainland. She had had her share of the fun. We passed the northern tip of Valcour Island and immediately were pounded by the southerly winds, which

had really picked up. So had the waves. It was blowing very hard. I have an anemometer on top of the mast and I won't report what it said, because saying so would discredit this story.

The waves, whatever size, were by far the biggest I had seen since I owned the boat. They were as long and far as the eye could see—thousands of them. The ride became bumpy and wet, and yet the *Surprise* handled beautifully. We were having a good time.

Then the jib split and started screaming and flapping in the wind. The boat took a sharp turn to the left and we headed downwind. I started the engine and turned east back to our original course. Brice grabbed the wheel. I headed on deck to drop the mainsail and pull the jib down. I left the jib down—a hanging mess, attached to the forestay, crumpled up. When I returned to the cockpit Brice was grinning. Someone was having a great time!

Suddenly, the engine stopped. We turned again, straight downwind, going five knots. With the waves behind us, we would be in Canada in two hours.

Brice managed to raise the reefed mainsail and we slowly moved to the Vermont side, behind the Grand Isle-Plattsburgh Ferry breakwater. We cut off the ferry that had just arrived, with over 50 cars and trucks on board. The captain wasn't happy—at least that is how I interpreted the fist shaking he was doing. I rounded the breakwater and we dropped anchor. The waves had stopped, but

we were pointed right into the wind. It began to rain.

The unrelenting wind pushed us, and the anchor dragged. We were heading backward into granite cliffs. This is when I decided to start yelling. Brice was at the wheel and five feet from the ledge wall. I told him to move out of the cockpit and got ready to jump into the water. In desperation, I moved up toward the bow, raised the reefed mainsail, pulled up the anchor and, miraculously, the wind pushed us offshore and we were clear of immediate danger. We were back in the lake with the wind and waves. Twilight was setting in.

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I believe the term is hove-to, which in our case meant that the *Surprise* was pointing southwest, losing ground. Things settled down. We dodged a bullet. On Channel 16, I heard the ferry captain talking to the Coast Guard. The captain, whose acquaintance I had made 30 minutes earlier, was telling the Coast Guard that "The guy that looked like he was trying to sink his boat seems to be back in the water and everything is fine."

Despite my reluctance to publicly identify myself, I cut in and acknowledged being the guy in that boat and while I was in no immediate danger *I sure could use a tow.*

Guess what? A local marina's tow boat was out, making a profitable living. *Surprise* is number 2 in line, after the dismantled sailboat, but before the one that washed ashore. We turned and headed downwind. Thirty minutes later the tow was coming toward us—a Boston

Whaler, maybe 20 feet long, with two massive outboards. It came completely out of the water with every wave. We communicated via Channel 16. The Coast Guard was listening. In the tow boat were the operator, his wife, and her uncle. The wife and uncle hold cans of beer



**At one point Valcour Island got a little too close for comfort—especially when the engine decided to take a break.**

and toasted us like it was a family barbecue. On the radio the skipper said "One chance only. I'm going to throw you a rope and if you miss it, I'm not coming back." He turned 180 degrees and came along side as best he could. Brice was up front to catch the rope, which he did.

One hour later we had pulled into Mooney Bay Marina, where a crowd had assembled on the dock. While being towed, my relief at being saved was being replaced by the "What is this going to cost me?" apprehension. In the initial euphoria, it didn't matter. Now it did.

The tow pulled next to *Surprise*, then safely on the dock. Not being a great believer in tow insurance, I waved my credit card. I ask "How much do I owe you?" He said "Oh, you're not going to like this." Weakly smiling, I replied, "Don't worry about it." He answered "\$150." I knew that what he could have charged would have paid for the new jib I would soon buy.



**Having a Boston Whaler return your proud and joy to the dock is not exactly the most glorious ending to a daysail.**

Brice was lying on the dock reveling in being off the boat. I started worrying about the engine. We talked to the marina about leaving the boat for there overnight, and we cleaned up on deck. A kind spectator, a fellow sailor, agreed to drive us to the ferry so that we could return to Vermont, where we would take a cab and meet Ronnie at the family car, near the mooring. We would (I would) deal with the boat the next day.

Brice took off the remnants of the jib and pulled in the attached sheets. They were stuck. They were wrapped around the propeller, which is why the engine died. I would have to dive in the 51 degree water the next day and unwrap the mess. Should I be relieved or curse my luck?

No matter. Brice and I were dropped off at the Plattsburgh ferry. We bought a ticket and stepped on deck. The captain of the ferry welcomed me aboard personally. I wondered whether to worry about

being safely dropped off on the other side. Next time, I think I'll keep my distance from the ferry!