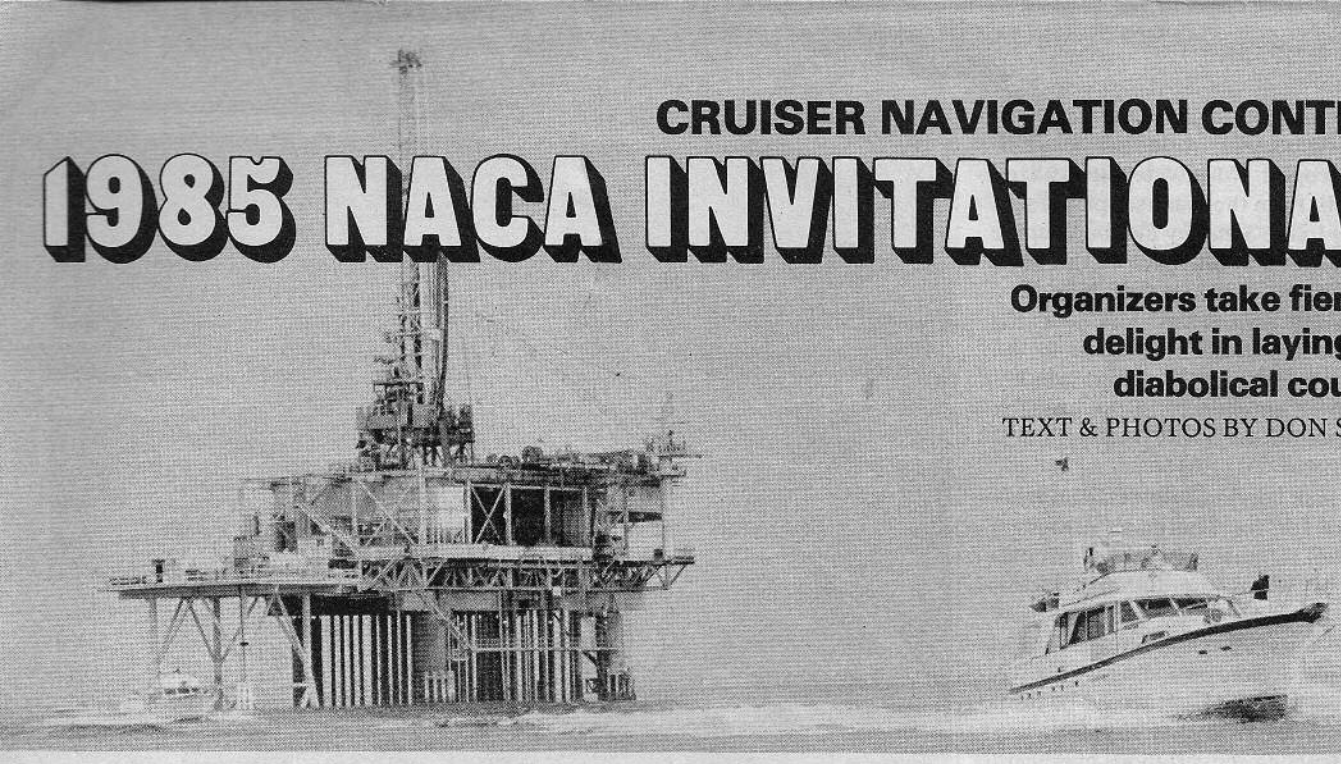
CRUISER NAVIGATION CONTEST

1985 NACA INVITATIONAL

Organizers take fiendish delight in laying out diabolical courses

TEXT & PHOTOS BY DON SHARP



In bygone days, horny-palmed skippers in sou'westers conned tall ships into strange ports by reading local winds in the dance of wavelets and currents in the gyrations of flotsam. Modern skippers, of course, depend on instruments and buoys.

Nevertheless, the ancient skills did not die out entirely when the square-riggers went to rot. Rather, they have been preserved in cruiser navigation competition, otherwise known as predicted log racing, a marine sport played since the first powerboats got their bottoms wet.

Predicted log racers study a course plotted on a chart and predict their running time between marks and, thus, over the whole course. Then they try to run the course in accordance with their predictions.

If a storm 200 miles out to sea provokes an unusually heavy swell, or if up-country rains produce peculiar currents at the mouth of a river, well, those complications don't change the skipper's original predictions. The skill required shows in the fact that over a 50-mile course skippers typically finish within a minute or two of their predictions. Indeed, predicted log races have been won by tenths of a second.

Nobody seems too sure whether it was H.L. Mencken or Ring Lardner who said that watching a sailboat race is like watching grass grow. Either way, a spectator may find that watching a predicted log race is like watching it grow faster. The lack of wave-hopping excitement, though, belies the intense concentration of a skipper whose only navigational aids are a throttle, a tachometer, and a compass, and who must constantly adjust for windage, leeway, and following seas, yet still round a distant mark within seconds of a prediction made in the comfort of a yacht club chart room.

Predicted log racing does not bring out cheering throngs. Rather, it brings out the crow's-feet at the corners of a skipper's eyes. The skippers don't race for acclaim. They don't even race for prizes. They race to share an intense experience with others of a similarly monastic inclination, and they share it in every area of the country.

The prestige event on the predicted log race circuit is the annual Invitational, wherein the North American Cruiser Association (NACA) brings the leading skippers from each region together. Since competitors cannot bring their own boats, they race in boats provided by members of the host yacht club. A skipper who leaves a Uniflite 38 at home may race in a 20-year-old Chris Craft Roamer or in the latest Hatteras. Besides adjusting to the subtleties of strange waters, the skipper must (very quickly) develop a sensitivity to a strange boat, as well.

The regional NACA members, knowing the local waters, take fiendish delight in laying out a course ragged with dog-legs, fouled with subtle currents, and scattered with just enough long fetches to entice an impatient skipper to overspeed. As a particularly diabolical refinement, the course usually includes "blind points."

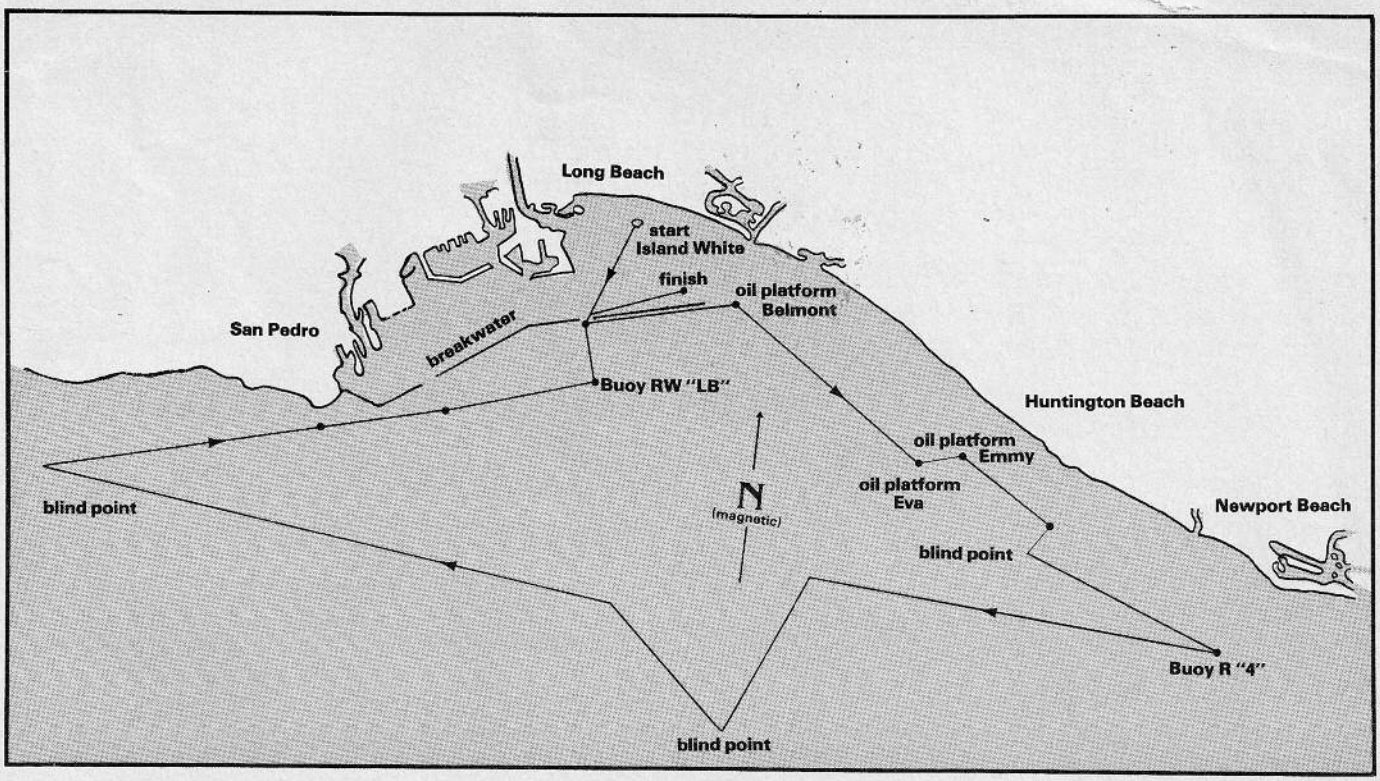
A blind point is precisely that: a position on the chart defined only by longitude and latitude, ungraced with a confirming marker or buoy. To reach the blind point, the skipper must make a drastic change in course after a mark, then must make an equally drastic course change after the blind point in order to make the next mark.

The competitive issue is not whether the skipper gets exactly on the blind point, but how well the skipper maintains course and speed with no visual reference. To fall short of or go beyond the blind point obviously requires adjustments in speed to assure making the next mark within the predicted time.

All that sounds fairly easy—but wait: the skipper has no clock, thus cannot monitor time from mark to mark. Time becomes a function of speed, defined by a tachometer that knows nothing of sea conditions. If a breeze kicks up a three-foot head sea, the skipper must add rpm, but cannot use a clock to establish how much. The official observer keeps the clock in a pocket and the skipper doesn't get to see it till the race is over.

The skipper does get information about time, in seconds, when maneuvering the blind points. The skipper rounds a checkpoint, cries, "Mark," and the observer punches a stopwatch. On the way to the blind point, the observer reports the elapsed seconds since the mark. Once the blind point is reached, the observer reports the seconds on the way to the next mark. Otherwise, the skipper can only deduce time from the tachometer.

In regional competition, the rules may allow watches, or even calculators and rangefinders, and where the rules don't allow them, skippers of loose scruples may resort to elaborate subterfuges—a



*"**Aw, shucks,**" says Tom Trapp, one of the most respected and most self-effacing skippers on the circuit, following his win with a 1.4 percent error.*

timepiece concealed behind a polarized lens on the instrument panel and visible only from a precise position at the helm station, or a depth sounder curiously modified to produce intermittent time signals. Yet, when *la creme* gather for an Invitational, they eschew such tricks and the supporting technology: they come to race *with* each other and *against* the sea, not against digital readout instruments.

If the racing skippers aren't burdened enough by local traffic, capricious seas, and blind points, the host NACA committee prepares additional "greetings" that are read only after the race is underway. For example, a greeting may dictate a change in the course—put a certain mark to port rather than to starboard (a simple instruction that replicates maneuvering among traffic, but which adds to the total elapsed time and requires the skipper to estimate how much to increase rpm and for how long to make it up). Other greetings may require the skipper to make a mark in more or less time than the original prediction.

This past August 8-11, the Long Beach (California) Yacht Club played host to the 13th NACA North American Invitational that brought 13 of the best skippers from around the country: John Gray, all the way from Massachusetts, who had to think twice to recall that he had been running predicted log races for almost 30 years; Tom Trapp, from Vancouver, who had distinguished himself and his 48-foot, ex-navy workboat in the 1500-mile race up Alaska's Inside Passage; Doris Akol, a formidable competitor from San Francisco who brought her husband and son along as crew; and 10 others of similar competence and experience.

When Ecclesiastes noted that "The race is not to the swift," he was thinking of predicted log racing. Scores are based on percentages of error, not speed. Suppose one skipper predicts 5 minutes 20 seconds to a mark and another predicts 4 minutes 40 seconds and both reach the mark in exactly five minutes, then both have the same error. However, that error doesn't affect the next leg: it's a separate prediction. The least average error over all legs determines the winner.

At Long Beach, the course looked simple enough—a dogleg here and a blind point there, but a coastline that suggested innocuous currents and no coastal mountains to generate offshore gusts. A piece of cake, right?

Not at all. As pointed out by Paul Leland of the Southern California Cruiser Association, the bight from San Pedro to Huntington Beach is fraught with peculiar eddies only now being revealed by satellite photography. In addition, one oil platform had an ancillary structure nearby that required extra distance to clear and, thus, rpm adjustments on the next leg. While the weather cooperated, the local traffic did not (always), and skippers found themselves rolling in the wakes of big sportfishermen even as they dodged center consoles trolling around the oil platforms.

With the race over, the calculations made, and the skippers mellowed by a good dinner, NACA Commodore Tom Collins presented the results--an excruciatingly suspenseful one leg at a time. Paul Leland had his currents under control, but failed in a subtraction following an on-course greeting and ruined his

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overall standing with an ignominious 52 percent error on one leg. George Shaw, Jr., made a copying error in submitting his prerace log and rang up a 19.5 percent error on another leg. Other skippers just scratched their heads and wondered where their errors came from.

The totals revealed the winner: courtly Tom Trapp, with an overall (12-leg, 50-mile) error of only 1.439 percent.

"This was not an easy race," he said. "I'm very pleased."

And second? John Gray, veteran of many first-place wins, with an error of 1.501 percent. Gray's error on the final leg was 5.7 percent to Trapp's .2 percent—more than enough to make the difference.

"Back home," Gray said, "you can look at a lobster pot and judge the current. Out here, you just have to guess. I guessed wrong on the last leg."

Gray's final error was the more biting because his averages put him in second place at the end of the sixth leg, halfway through the race. Doris Akol, running second at the halfway mark, finished in the middle with an error of 3.162 percent.

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INVITATIONAL *Continued*

"I've run as low as .84 percent up the Bay Area," she said, "but that doesn't mean you can get casual about the currents down here."

At home, she runs the family Pacemaker, a 43-footer built in 1967. Did being assigned a 53-foot Hatteras at Long Beach make any difference?

"No," she said, "the boat is easy to learn. The hard part is the water."

Exactly—and that's just what the old-time schoonermen said.