SLOW RACE TO ALASKA

1903-built Morecambe Bay prawnner *Ziska* was restored in 18 months to become the oldest ever vessel to sail the R2AK.
ZISKA'S ALASKA RACE

Racing an engineless boat 750 miles from Washington State to Alaska is a daft endeavour, yet at the start of the 2019 Race to Alaska (R2AK), 46 vessels jockeyed for position in a nasty blow. The fleet, a quirky mix of designs, included multihulls, two SUPs, dories, kayaks and one absurdly ancient gaff-rigged Dory. Launched in 2013, Ziska was the oldest competitor in the R2AK – ever. Built for speed, the 38ft (11.6m) gaff cutter had collected a bit of silver in her 116 years, which might be why owner Stanford Siver decided to point her north. The grand prize in the R2AK, nailed to a tree in Ketchikan, is $10,000, and second place is a coveted set of steak knives! Beyond that, the prize for ringing the finish bell is a sense of accomplishment because, as organisers describe their brainchild, it’s like the Iditarod (1,000-mile Alaskan husky-and-sleighbone race) on a boat, with a chance of drowning, being run down by a freighter or eaten by a grizzly bear. Race rules are loud and clear: no engine; start in Port Townsend; and travel unsupported without food drops or shore assistance. Finish one of three ways: in Victoria (short course); in Ketchikan; or with the rolling, disqualifying sweep boat. If it passes you – game over.

Ziska’s role in this zany odyssey began by happenstance when Siver fell for a neglected boat. Living in Port Townsend aboard his Atkin Dragon, Blue, he watched the cutter’s demise. “I rowed her in 2017,” he recalled. “Heartbreaking to see a boat go down so far, so fast.” He inquired if the owner wanted to sell and the answer, he joked, was: “There’s nothing as expensive as a free boat!” He bought the boat for the price of the sails, and was paying out for every bit of first aid that followed. “I started this as a rescue then realised there was no engine.” And that’s when the Alaska plan hatched.

Siver, a 1992 graduate of the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding, understood the magnitude of need. Rats had all but destroyed the interior, the rudder was about to fall off, the rig was in shambles and she was shedding paint like feathers. He hauled, de-rigged, and moved her to his yard.

As work unfolded, history seeped out. Built by the Crossfield Brothers of Armside, England, of pitch pine and double-sawn oak frames, she was fashioned after the Morecambe Bay prawners, designed to sail the catch home fast. The boat spent time in Ireland, served as a pre-Second World War cruising yacht, then drifted through owners until she was wrecked in Cowes in 1973. A lengthy rebuild started but was abandoned.

For a wooden boat to exist for a century, there are saviours, and a pre-eminent one was Ashely Butler. At the age of 19, on a small boat he’d built, he spotted her at the same time her owner saw Butler’s vessel. Within 30 minutes of meeting, the men exchanged boats and Ziska’s fate was sealed. Finally, that rebuild was completed and Butler sailed 25,000 miles singlehanded across the Atlantic, through the West Indies and on to the States. A new proprietor tried chartering, another trucked her to Port Townsend and the next would have been the last, were it not for the proximity of Siver.

THE RACE TO THE RACE

In his workshop, Siver began what he calls “the race to the race”. With only 18 months to complete a bulging list of repairs he recruited Port Townsend’s talent. Designer Carl Chamberlin and Jack Becker used photogrammetry to produce a 3-D image and, ultimately, drawings with finished offsets. Shipwright Patrick Mahon created gaffs, booms and bird’s mouth spars of Douglas fir. J Galloway refastened topsides, patched and re-glazed the deck, and built the sculling oar set-up and filler base. The job of traditional running and standing rigging went to Matt Fabey, while a full set of Locust blocks came from Ed Louchard.

No engine and a decision to forgo solar panels equalled the need for a serious electrical system. Jo Abeli installed one along with 900Ah of carbon foam batteries that, Siver reports, “carried us all the way to Ketchikan”.

New Clipper Canvas sails were cut by Force 10, and finish artisans Bailey Farneth, Nick DeLorne and Jon Blanchard layered on the gleam. Siver had a multitude of deck projects and built a classy, ergonomic interior.

In early spring of 2019, Ziska hit the water. Tasks on the list – and there were plenty – were carefully calculated for the 3 June start. The inaugural row and sail gave owner and crew their first notion of what the boat could do. Two weeks before the race, it was hard to imagine they could beat the clock. The interior looked uninhabited; systems were in place but not necessarily functional; above decks, more bits were bolted on.

During the final week, unessential tasks were jettisoned until Team Ziska – “Sail Like a Luddite” – was ready.
Left: The route of the Race to Alaska; Right: Stanford and team earn the prize of ringing the finish line bell.

Main picture: After an intense restoration, this Morecambe Bay Prawner is ready for another century of graft.
"I highly recommend not doing what we did – launching two months before the race. We only got out four times, sailing in light winds." Auxiliary propulsion (oar power) distributes 12 tonnes between two sets of arm muscles; a yuloh was planned for back-up. Being the only full-keeled contender, it was easy to claim "we’re going to win the gaffer’s division".

The day before the race, small craft and crew lined the main street, psyching up for the last frontier. During 'The Ruckus', a pre-race party fuelled by beer, onlookers wished them well while silently wondering why they were doing it.

"A funny thing happened on the way to the race," Siver joked. At 2200hrs, they were pinned to the dock, oars no contest against a gale, so a tugboat pulled them into the bay, where they spent the night reefed down, hove-to, waiting for the 0500hrs start. The centenarian was on the line with time to spare.

During stage one – the Proving Ground – vessels have 36 hours to cross 40 miles of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, designed to break teams' weakest links while a hardware shop is still in reach. A trimaran finished in 3 hours, 52 minutes; Ziska in 18 hours, 2 minutes. Thirteen did not finish at all. Beat up and tired, they entered Victoria Harbour near midnight. Wind was lighter inside, but the race tracking system was down and no one answered the VHF. They shipped the 14 ft (4.3m) bowsprit at the 'No Sailing' zone and started pulling. "I tried to head into the wind, but she wouldn't come up. That left us heading toward pilings," Siver said. "We threw the tiller over, cleared the pilings, but then we were set to hit the seaplane dock. Somehow we greased past them."

Stage Two started Le Mans-style, with 35 teams scrambling down the docks, hoping to get under way first. Ziska's guys brought up the rear. The course runs the Inside Passage between Vancouver Island and the mainland through waters resembling an overstocked aquarium. It's the road less travelled, except for cruise ships, fishing boats, tugs and ferries. Odds of a bear attack are slim, but boardings by otters and seals are real. Logs are an ever-present danger and those pesky whales frequently pass too close.

**LONGER DAYS**

Rising latitudes and the approaching solstice meant longer days for watch-keeping and taking in an ever-changing backdrop of inlets, mountains and old-growth forests. Weather danced between calm and frightful, so they either rowed at ½ knot, messed with sail configurations or sailed in textbook conditions. Human-powered vessels drove due north, but Ziska tacked, as gaffers will do, often between 160°. Slow but steady headway was rewarded by comfort and warmth below decks except, Siver reported, "previously undisclosed leaks were above my bunk".

The Luddites held two-person watches, four hours on, four hours off. No steering gear meant one on the tiller, unless it was time to row. Their crew, Benjamin Gefkin, a collegiate dinghy racer; Shipwright J Galoway; and 16-year-old Odin Smith, proved as strong as the boat. Offshore sailing in tight quarters, sleep-deprived and
wearing cumbersome, damp gear somehow bonded the group, despite an age gap of half a century.

R2AK media pumps out ‘Clip of the Day’ videos with action shots onboard, from drones, and during interviews shoreside. Each one carries a testimonial of life-altering, eye-popping moments that motivate, terrify or simply charm viewers. No one, it seems, does this race without personal benefit, even in vessels with ridiculously low freeboard.

Sanctioned waypoint one, at the entrance to Georgia Strait, was described by Captain Vancouver in the 1700s as “one of the vilest stretches of water in the world”. Currents of 15 knots squeeze through the 750-metre channel of Seymour Narrows, offering a three-mile thrill ride, but only if you’re going the right way. Patient Ziska anchored nearby awaiting the flood, then took off hell-bent for the other end.

Near the top of Vancouver Island, they made a prudent stop to assess Smith’s eye, which was swollen shut. After a three-hour row into Alert Bay, they found a doctor, restocked and slept — but with more miles ahead than behind they quickly set off, Pacific-bound. The rest of the race, wild and bloody cold, was also bittersweet as the improbable adventure neared the end.

At waypoint two, near Bella Bella, they enjoyed a brief respite alongside a trimaran, replaying the journey from opposing perspectives. The multihull crew basically lived on deck while the old-school guys benefited from the fleet’s only wood stove. They parted ways in light conditions, full sail, “then 40 knots hit us with fog and rain — and a tug and tow nearby”. At Dixon Entrance, worse weather assured crew they’d chosen the right boat.

Meanwhile, Team Angry Beaver won the R2AK in 4 days, 3 hours, 56 minutes — obviously not a gaffier. During the following weeks, 20 more vessels finished, several dropped out for all the right reasons, and on the morning of 22 June, Ziska pulled into Ketchikan to ceremoniously ring the bell. To be exact, they completed the course in 15 days, 19 hours, 14 minutes, weeks before the Grim Sweeper wiped the course clean.

Above left: The old Prawner in desperate need of repair

Above right:
Ziska’s jewels
- Murray winches and gleaming varnish

The pedigree of the Lancashire nobby came through; steady and tough with minor issues. By contrast, logging 1,285 miles trashed the crew. “We were all zombies for a few days,” Siver said. Proud ones, for sure!

New Luddites flew in to accompany Siver home along the Outside Passage, a journey with more ease and a chance encounter: “Northwest of Haida Gwaii, we were surrounded by humpback whales. They were everywhere. Maybe 20.”

CELEBRATIONS
Celebrations erupted back home, then the Race to Alaska outlier primped for Port Townsend’s Wooden Boat Festival where she was the sweetheart of the show, her curvy bum pointed at adoring crowds. An event highlight was the R2AK Blazer Party serving a perfect cocktail of irreverence and sarcasm as awards were presented to winners, losers, and the butts of a few jokers. Tables filled with mid-ocean junk food, passed as appetisers, but High Command, Jake Beattie, assured us: “Don’t worry, the food gets better the more you eat it.” Not likely with fried spam!

Prizes were presented for Most in Need of a Stiff Drink, Fastest Last Boat, and Team Most in Need of Keeping Crap Dry. The Dirt Bag Award was handed out and the Safety Helmet of Shame for worst choice but best recovery. When the prize for Oldest Boat was announced, the room exploded with ear-splitting adoration. Beaming, Siver strode forward to collect it, along with other honours for Most Miles Sailed and Largest Age Gap Between Captain and Crew. Luddite Odin Smith took home Youngest Racer to Finish and go figure, he’s already talking about the next race — on a faster boat.

Two years ago, the intention was to save Ziska, race to Alaska, then turn her over to a new owner. Somewhere along the way, plans took a tack. There’s been no grand announcement, nothing set in stone and Siver’s sure not talking. But just in case, stay tuned — the 2020 R2AK is set to start on 8 June.

If you’re interested in joining the race or being entertained, visit r2ak.com
To learn more on Ziska’s rebuild, visit proboat.com/
2019/06/nwswb-alumni-collaborate-on-restoration/