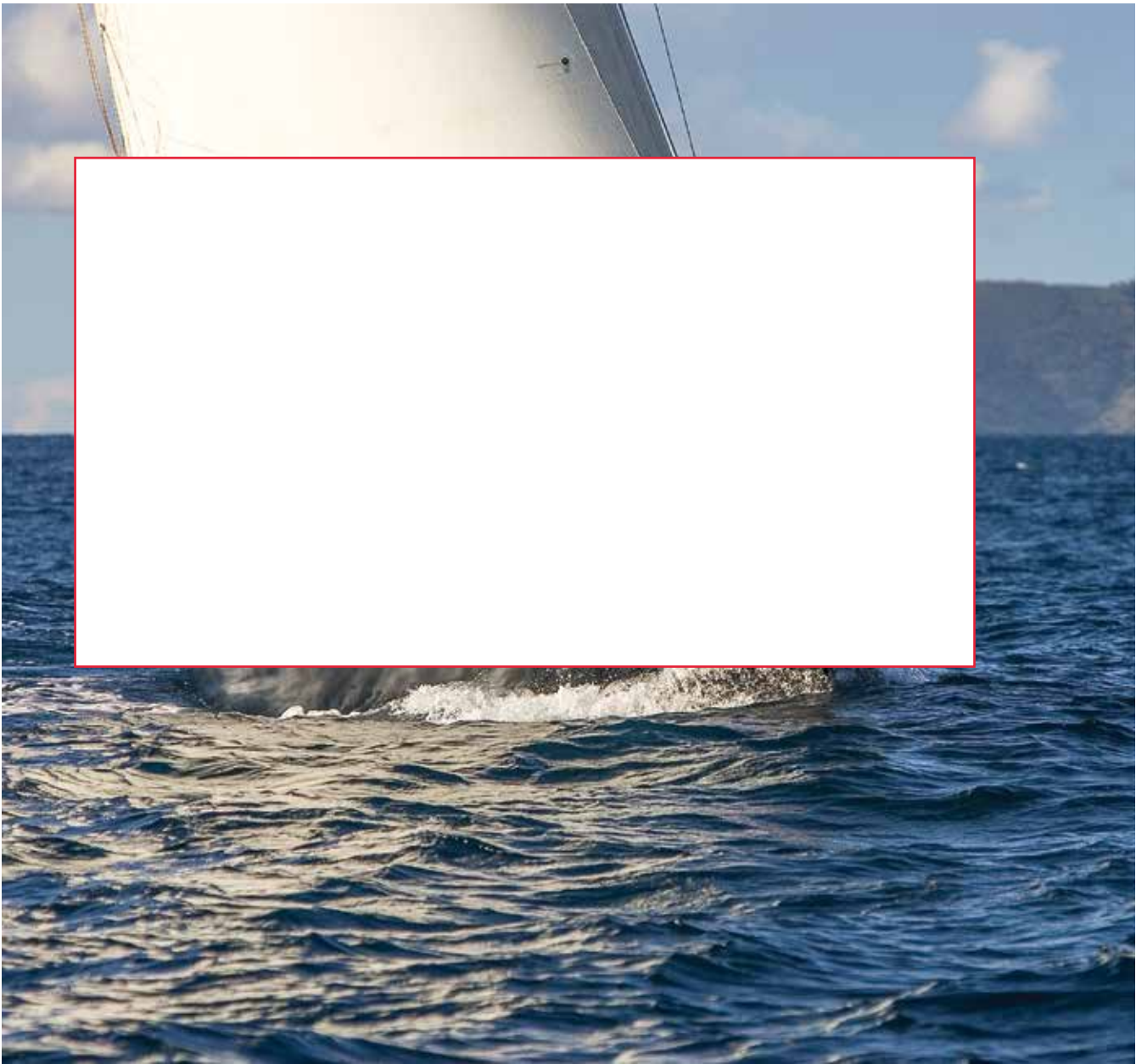


Special Report



TEMPEST *Temptations*



Powerful storms that pounded the northern Caribbean, Florida and Texas last fall were potent reminders that severe weather causes severe damage. Still, every dark cloud has a silver lining. As insurance claims are paid out and piles of vessels are untangled, hundreds (perhaps thousands) of handyman skippers are going to end up with amazing boats, literally for pennies on the dollar.

I know of which I speak. My wife, Carolyn, and I purchased the salvage rights to a Hughes 38 found sunk on the beach after Hurricane Hugo struck the Virgin Islands in 1989 for \$3,000 — then fixed her up and sailed her twice around the world.

Wild Card certainly wasn't the most pristine yacht we saw in the 100,000 ocean miles we sailed her over the course of 23 wonderful years, but at an initial cost of 3 cents per mile, she was certainly among the cheapest.

The problem with buying a hurricane-damaged fiberglass sailboat is that a good buy can look like it is practically

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worthless, and a worthless vessel can look like a good buy. So the first concept you need to understand is that you're not only buying a boat, you're buying a tremendous liability as well. And once you buy it, the only way out involves either a pile of cash or a lot of blood, sweat and tears, sustained over a long period of time.

When it comes to salvage, tenacity is the key. If in doubt, don't. I repeat: Only masochists need apply.

However, big risks can equal big gains, and each deal is unique. I've seen insured boats with barely any damage sitting atop uninsured boats that were totally crushed. The owner of the insured boat says shrilly, "She's totaled!" Meanwhile, the crushed boat's owner says, "I think I can fix her. It's really just cosmetic!"

The first priority of a successful salvage is finding a wrecked boat that looks bad and thus sells cheap, but is actually fairly straightforward to remove and repair. Reinvigorating a vessel doesn't only include the expense of

buying the materials and smearing them on; transportation and shipyard costs must be factored in as well.

Some of the best deals happen fast, as each passing day, more and more sanity enters the marketplace. My buddy Kevin Rowlette, aboard *Husky*, was hired to drag a damaged Beneteau from the beach into deep water to sink it. But, instead of scuttling it, he tossed a single dollar bill at the owner as he attached his towline to the vessel. He eventually repaired it, and it became the famous *Fast Buck*. We sailed together during many a regatta. In fact, I think we did the entire Caribbean

In the wake of Hurricane Hugo, a crane was brought in and the Hughes 38 that would become *Wild Card* was removed from a National Park Service beach in the U.S. Virgin Islands.



REFLOATING HER,

Most storm-damaged bargains are offered "as is, where is," with the boat still semi-sunken in place along the shore. Here's a quick-and-dirty plan to rescue them for pennies.

First off, temporarily patch any holes with two pieces of plywood and some foam rubber, placing one wooden patch inside and the other outside, with bolts between them holding them tight. You can also toss a truck, car, airplane, motorcycle or bike inner tube between the plywood and the damaged hull to achieve semi-watertightness. The idea here isn't to make the vessel totally dry, just to plug up the holes well enough that the pumps can keep up on the way to the shipyard.

Once the boat has empty bilges and is capable of floating, find out when high tide occurs. Gather your workers together just after low tide and be fully ready well before high water. Note: The boat must be surrounded by water (even an inch will do) for this method to work.

The first thing to determine is the easiest rock-free path to deep water. Place your own or borrowed anchors in the direction you need to drag the vessel and put a strain on the rodes, using the cockpit winches and anchor windlass. Or, better yet, put blocks and tackles between the anchors and vessel to increase your pulling ability.

Next, get towlines out to your tugs, which are vessels with largish inboard engines and owners willing to pull. Have them ready to take a strain at your signal. Free up a masthead halyard and get a dozen of your fattest friends to hump the halyard up and down on command. And finally send in three large inflatables throwing the largest wake possible at the grounded vessel.

When everyone and everything is ready (about 45 minutes before high tide), yell, "Now!"

Wait two minutes, then scream, "Stop."

You will think nothing happened, but you're wrong. It did. The lines

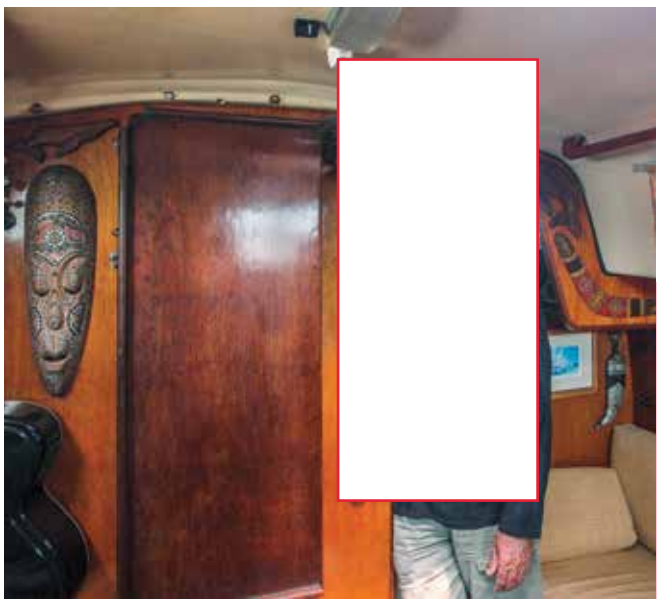
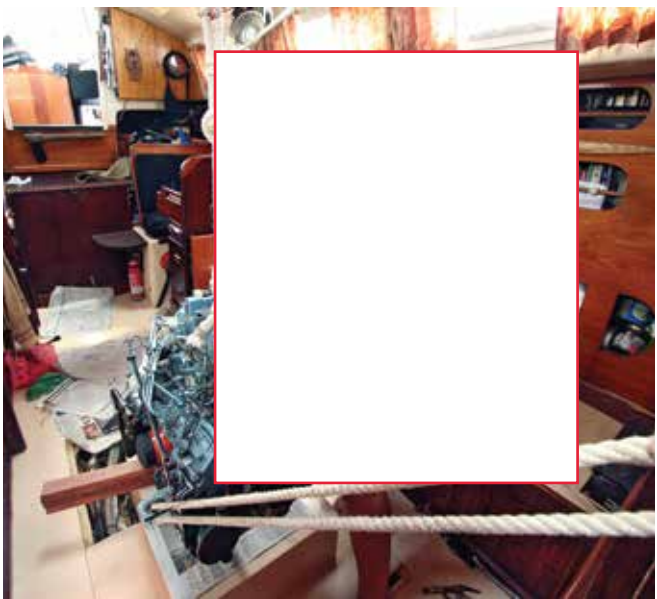
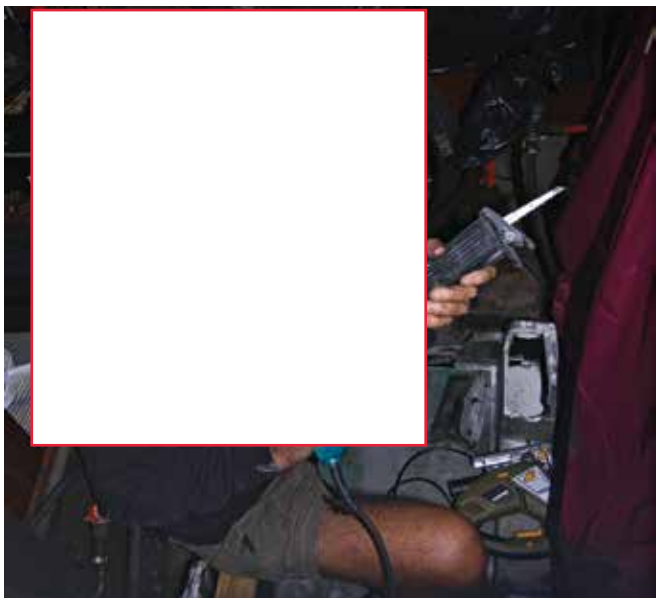
to your anchors will be slack, so re-tighten them. Then try again with tugs, halyards and max dinghy wakes.

After each effort, you'll find the lines slack again. Tighten them and then: repeat, repeat, repeat!

Eventually, the boat will noticeably (and audibly) shift. You'll have moved her a quarter inch or so. You've won, dude! She has broken her suction. It is now only a matter of time, and she will come off faster and faster if you just keep at it.

Warning: Working with massive loads while wet, with crappy gear and well-intentioned folks who have never done anything like this before, is truly dangerous. Count your fingers and toes before and afterward. This may all sound crazy, but the key is to make sure the boat is surrounded by water before you start.

I've done this a dozen times and never failed. We once got a 35,000-pound wooden ketch called *High Country* off the hard, to the utter astonishment of its owner.



Ocean Racing Triangle series on it in the early 1990s, and every time Kevin would buy me a beer, he'd lament, "Damn, that's twice what I paid for the boat,"

Many people are scared by holes through the hull. Don't be. These can be fixed easily if they are of small to moderate size and the boat hasn't lost its shape. Use clear-cedar battens inside the vessel to maintain a fair curve as you fiberglass. Start outside, then once the shape is locked in, you can remove the battens and finish the repair on the inside.

There are certain types of damage to avoid: snapped-off rudder skegs; displaced keels; severe hull-to-deck-joint

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damage; smashed-off bows; crushed or cracked stems; and any damage that displaces such things as the engine, propeller shaft, mast step or rudder.

A vessel sunk for a day or two is a problem. A vessel underwater for more than a couple of weeks is a nightmare. Why? Because everything mechanical and electrical will have to be thrown away. In addition, all the wood will delaminate,

Clockwise from top left: Once the Hughes 38 was pulled from the sea and dried out, Carolyn went to work stripping out the interior. Bulkheads, furniture, you name it, had to go. Big jobs call for big tools, like a reciprocating saw that can cut through just about anything. The restored interior proved to be the perfect showcase for collectibles. At first the [redacted] sailed their restored Wild Card without an engine, but eventually, installing a new diesel greatly expanded their cruising fun. Once the boat was gutted, grinding away the damaged fiberglass hull could commence.

swell, split and crack, meaning you'll have to replace all the structural bulkheads, chainplate webs, mast steps and, of course, the entire interior.

That aside, the good news is that any fiberglass boat can be fixed.

There was an ace "glass mon" on Tortola who happened to end up with a new Beneteau 456 that had its deck burned up by an electrical fire in the headliner.

He stowed it in the corner of the boatyard until he could find time to repair it. Later, an identical boat pounded hard on Anegada Reef. He bid peanuts on the vessel and then used a circular saw to cut both boats horizontally along the waterline before fiberglassing the good halves of each back together. He was totally honest with the new buyer on the boat's history, and the guy learned to live with an

A WIN-WIN SALVAGE

Each salvage operation is different. Just remember, the seller is often as desperate to sell (and get out of his or her liability) as you are desperate to buy. What you want to find isn't merely a repairable boat, you want a win-win deal.

Here's how we acquired *Wild Card*, our Hughes 38.

Back in the day, I knew New York Johnny well. We worked together at WVWI Radio One on St. Thomas. He was in sales. I was riding a mic. I liked him; he had a great outlook on life. We'd had him aboard *Carlotta*, our home-built 36-foot ketch, a number of times for dinner.

Johnny had been a commodities broker in New York City. Then he'd sailed down to paradise and, alas, fell into a rum bottle. It happens. Still, he was a swell guy with a great sense of humor who owned a fine boat.

But, honestly? I wasn't thinking about Johnny as I fled to Culebra as Hurricane Hugo approached in 1989, and he wasn't thinking of me as he sought safe harbor for his Hughes 38 in Leister Bay on St. John's north side.

During the storm, we both tuned in to Radio One as executive producer Rick Ricardo broadcast into the height of the Category 4 hurricane. One minute, everything was fine at the radio studio, and the next, it wasn't. Rick was broadcasting with 1,000 watts in a control room snaked with high-voltage wires when blown-down palm fronds unexpectedly jammed the roof drain holes of the three-story Franklin Building in downtown Charlotte Amalie. The added weight of all that water on the roof caused it to catastrophically collapse. Rick had his headphones on and was shouting into his mic when a tsunami of unexpected water flooded into the control room. It forced Rick to leap onto his desk and try to flick the circuit breakers off with a broom handle as death swirled under him. At about the same moment, Johnny's S&S-designed sloop sank out from under him and our beloved *Carlotta* piled onto the rocks of Culebra.

Damn! Rick, Johnny and I (and most of a hundred thousand of our dearest, closest West Indian friends) were out of our jobs, soon to be penniless and already homeless. And it all happened in

the blink of a hurricane's eye. Rick and I recovered fairly quickly, but alas, not Johnny. He waded ashore at Mary's Point to find a dozen wrecked charter boats, all well-stocked for the upcoming Virgin Islands Charter League's charter-yacht show. He went through each and every vessel's liquor locker, sip by sip. By the time the National Park Service dragged him away, Johnny was incoherent. His family airlifted him into a rehab center in the Catskills in New York.

I called him a few days later and told him his boat was being broken up in the surf. I offered to put her on a barge and stow her ashore at Independent Boat Yard and he could pay me later.

"I never want to see that damn thing again," he hissed. "It tried to kill me! Leave the boat there; let it get destroyed."

I tried to change his mind but he refused to budge.

"Well, then," I asked, "how much for you to sign over the U.S. documentation to me? I'll take a chance. Hell, I need a boat and I've got nothing left to lose!"

Thus, from such pain and misery, we acquired *Wild Card*, the \$3,000 boat we sailed twice around the world. This past summer, nearly 100,000 miles and 28 years later, we were anchored aboard our present ketch, *Ganesb*, right alongside her in Mount Hartman Bay, Grenada.

Perhaps the most important fact hasn't been stated yet. I'm still dear friends with now-sobber New York Johnny, who lives in Southeast Asia with his wife and young son. In our deal, he not only got 3 grand in cash to pay off his evacuation transportation costs, but he also escaped the tremendous liability of the NPS removing his vessel from national park waters and then billing him for it. We got a new yacht, a new home and a new lease on life. And St. John got a 13,000-pound pile of plastic debris cleaned up for zero dollars. Not one blade of grass was injured in the national park during the whole complicated process. It was, is and always will be a win-win-win-win for all of us.

The bottom line: Don't buy a hurricane-damaged vessel unless you're confident that, years later, the former owner will be able to look you in the eye and say, "Thanks again!"



I started to ask a question, but he growled. "Shut up and grind, [redacted]"

I quickly learned that a hole or wound in fiberglass is like a bullet through a windshield. While the opening is small, the damage is great. Endlessly, I ground away, until our little eggshell wound was 12 feet wide and 3 feet high, and had an actual hole through the hull the size of a basketball.

About 10 days later, I was down to pure fiberglass, with no milky places, and the area was faired with a 16-to-1 angled edge, so there was plenty of raw fiberglass for the new cloth and resin to adhere to.

Time to rebuild. I jammed a piece of waxed Formica inside the boat to keep the proper shape at the hole. Carolyn cut up the biaxial glass, with cloth on one side and mat on the other, in large chunks and placed it on our wet-out board. I slopped polyester resin on the cloth side and flipped it over to wet-out the mat side. Then I placed it over the wetted-out wound and rolled out the bubbles.

You have to work fast. The MEK catalyst makes the resin kick quickly in the tropics. We only put on a few layers at a time to avoid excessive heat buildup or, worst case, having the semi-kicked cloth begin to droop away from the hull. We tried to add new layers on sticky-but-cooling resin to avoid excess grinding. If we allowed

the resin to dry, we reground it to ensure perfect adhesion.

Once the outside of the repair was glassed greater than flush with the outside gelcoat, we went inside the boat, built a plastic tent and attacked the entire area with our grinder, then fiberglassed an additional four layers inside.

This resulted in what I refer to as a hamburger patch, with a small hole where the patty is and two large overlapping buns inside and out.

Next, we block-sanded the repair on the outside using long, commercially available blocks of the gritty, abrasive material to achieve the fair curve of the hull. Then we finished off the job using West System Epoxy and micro balloons.

interior that's a micro bit askew!

In *Wild Card's* case, when we found her, the prominent damage was just a small area of egg-shelling, or cracking with moderate seepage, around the port turn of the bilge where she'd pounded on the beach. We temporarily patched

Glass mon Mike told me during our relaunch, "If you ever hit anything, [redacted] try to hit it on the repaired side. It is much stronger."

her, lifted her onto a barge with a crane and took her to Independent Boat Yard, where I cast myself at "de feet of de local glass mon."

His name was Mike Sheen, and he was horrified when I prostrated myself before him, grabbed his ankles, burst into tears and said, "I'm an idiot! I've just spent all my wife and child's food money on a wrecked boat. Woe is me!"

"Shut up and grind!" he growled.

That's the key to mending fiberglass: Just bite the bullet and grind until your arms fall off. Grinding is the essential skill.

About two hours into it, Mike came by and said, "See how milky the fiberglass is? Grind it until it is clear, then angle the edge 16-to-1."

You cannot see the repair to this day, nearly three decades and 100,000 ocean miles later.

Glass mon Mike told me during our relaunch, "If you ever hit anything, try to hit it on the repaired side. It is much stronger."

When I went to pay him for his consulting work, he waved away my money and said loudly, "Shut up and grind!"

Was it gruesome work rebuilding *Wild Card*? You betcha. Was it worth it? Oh, yes! For less than \$10,000 and 21 days of utter agony, we ended up with an offshore-capable boat worth \$50,000 and lots of calluses.

Though we weren't ready to circumnavigate yet, coming in second in the Coral Bay Thanksgiving regatta was sweet less than a month after we lifted her off the beach.

In the ensuing years, we tossed in a new Perkins diesel and replaced all the electronics as time and money permitted. We improved the boat while still living in paradise, among the nicest, friendliest, most nurturing people in the world.

