

# Off Watch

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**S**t. Patrick's Day 2020: It was time to write this monthly magazine column, a task that almost always gives me simple pleasure. On any other St. Paddy's Day, a Guinness or three would have also been in my immediate future, a pub crawl here in my hometown of Newport, Rhode Island, always a very lively place on this very Irish holiday. But not this year. All the bars and restaurants were closed, and usually busy Broadway was a virtual ghost town, all shut down by the COVID-19 virus that had turned everything—Wall Street, the educational system, the entire sports world—upside down. I don't often get writer's block, but my mood was as gray as the afternoon's leaden skies. I was desperately in need of some sort of inspiration, some kind of spark—anything, really.

And then I remembered the young French sailor, Guirec Soudée. More specifically, I thought of his steadfast sailing partner: his little red hen, Monique.

And I felt a little better.

The 28-year-old Soudée had recently been in the sailing press after winning the prestigious Cruising Club of America's Young Voyager Award for 2019, in recognition of his five-year, 45,000-nautical-mile voyage from the Arctic to the Antarctic. Technically, it was a solo trip, but not really, because Soudée had company: the chicken he'd picked up in the Canary

**Soudée and Monique, aboard *Yvinec*: intrepid shipmates.**

## FOR THE *Bird*



Islands on his outward leg from France, ostensibly for the fresh eggs she'd provide. But you could say Monique got, well, promoted, pretty early in the expedition. Soudée's children's book about the adventure, *The Hen Who Sailed Around the World: A True Story*, makes it clear that the relationship between the two quickly evolved beyond the man/protein dynamic.

At 22, after working in Australia for a couple of years to earn the dough for the journey, Soudée had set out from his home in Brittany (his 38-foot steel cutter, *Yvinec*, was named after the rugged island where he grew up) to cross the Atlantic via the Canaries, where he picked up his "fowl-weather" friend. After a brief spin through the Caribbean, he was bound north for Greenland, where he purposely overwintered in the ice for 130 days. From there, at the now ripe old

age of 24, he transited the Northwest Passage, becoming the youngest skipper to do so singlehanded. But he was just getting started.

A long, nonstop voyage south brought him (and her) around Cape Horn and on to Antarctica, which he reached in February 2018, too late in the season to do much real exploring. But by now, Soudée was a man on a mission, to close the circle on his loop around North and South America, and return home. He did so on three long, zigzagging transits of the Atlantic Ocean in tandem with the most favorable breeze: from Antarctica to South Africa; from there to Brazil and French Guyana via St. Helena; and onward to the Caribbean and the Azores before finally finishing where he began, on December 15, 2018.

I spent a couple of hours perusing Soudée's entertaining website ([guirecsoudee.com](http://guirecsoudee.com))

while fussing around with this piece, and was struck, really, by the joy and wonder it conveyed. I've sailed around the Americas and can testify, it's a pretty complicated mission. But Soudée made it all seem so pure, and possible. His quest could not have been more straightforward: He was a young man who'd grown up in a wild and pristine place, and appreciated the incredible beauty of it, and wanted more. A whole world's worth. To see it, he needed a sailboat, and the skills to operate it. But he'd already acquired those nautical abilities, inspired by the legendary Breton long-distance sailors he'd grown up idolizing. And while it's tempting to say the whole exercise was very "French," it was actually much more than that. It was very human.

In the most fundamental way, Soudée had a dream, and in these troubled times, with the currency crashing and personal risks rising, what could be more real? Or more important? And what better dream is there for a sailor than setting off to a safe place on a sound vessel with the person or people you love?

Or, of course, with a bird. You can definitely go with the bird. As young and able Guirec Soudée has ably demonstrated, that works too.

*If you're looking for a pleasant diversion during these strange days, Google "Guirec Soudée YouTube" and check out his Greenland video, and other vids. They're wonderful.*

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“It was something Patrick had no control over that did him in: contracting the coronavirus in South Africa this past spring while with his wife, Rebecca, on their Valiant 40, Brick House.”

## GOOD GUY *Gone*



Patrick landed some big ones in his day, but his greatest “catch” of all, by far, was his wife and partner, Rebecca.

Patrick Childress was one of the most annoying people I’d ever met. You know the type—the kind of guy who does whatever strikes his fancy as interesting or worthwhile ridiculously, effortlessly well. Building an addition on a house. Shoring up a 27-foot stock production boat and sailing it around the world alone. Not only repairing the blisters on a seriously pocked cruising boat, but also producing an exceptional YouTube video series of professional quality on the project. To top it all off, he was married to a beautiful woman, they’d retired early, and together were in their second decade of wandering around the planet on their own whims and schedule, with no end at all in sight.

Seriously, dudes like that are just hard to take.

All joking aside, it was something Patrick had no control over that did him in: contracting the coronavirus in South Africa this past spring while with his wife, Rebecca, on their Valiant 40, *Brick House*, and passing away from the insidious, horrible disease in early June. Rebecca caught it too but recovered quickly; unlike her husband, there was no kidney failure, dialysis or ventilator. But she was no less a victim, losing the love of her life and ending up stranded in a strange land.

Today’s reminder that life is not fair.

Like everybody who met him, I felt lucky to know Patrick. He was a seriously good guy. For several years, he

was married to then-managing editor of *Cruising World*, Lynda, whom he met here in Newport, Rhode Island, after beefing up his Catalina 27 for that lap around the planet (a Catalina 27!). During this time, while working locally as a contractor, he knocked off several projects on my old house; to say he was a tad handier than me would be a major understatement.

Patrick’s first marriage didn’t work out, but it set the stage for his second, with Rebecca, which turned into a true, lasting love story. It started, appropriately enough, at sea, when Patrick was skipping a big Swan from Newport to St. Maarten, and Rebecca, thirsty for offshore miles, signed on as crew. In the midst of a 60-knot tempest, something between them clicked. And there were many, many more miles to come.

Lucky Patrick: Rebecca came with that 40-footer called *Yellow Rose*, her consolation prize at the conclusion of her own first marriage. (“My ex-husband got the appreciating asset—the house—and I got the depreciating one.”) A year after they got together, Patrick bought in to the vessel, and *Rose* became *Brick House*.

Soon after, around 2008, they set off to sail the world: the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean. I actually crossed paths with them early in the trip, in Belize. If ever I saw happier, more compatible people, I can’t recall.

They’d made it to Africa, with big plans to cross the South Atlantic and spend

a long while exploring Patagonia, when they came down with COVID-19. Rebecca recovered fairly quickly; Patrick did not. Over the course of several weeks, things went from bad to worse. A friend set up a GoFundMe page for the couple, which Rebecca updated regularly. (Ultimately, nearly 1,500 people donated to the fund, to the tune of nearly \$90,000. It’s the silver lining to this sad tale, being that the entire terrible experience did not leave her in financial ruin.)

On June 8, she was called to the hospital in the early hours and allowed to see Patrick for the first time since he’d been hospitalized. He was in grave condition, very much out of it. Later, Rebecca wrote what is easily the singular saddest thing I’ve ever read:

“In his good ear [I said] I was here and that everything was OK now, he could go and I will catch up with him, and that we would have fun together again someday. He flicked his eyes and looked right into mine, I swear, and a tear came into his left eye, the same eye a tear came into as we were marrying 13 years ago... I will never forget that either.” Twenty minutes later, he was gone.

Whatever one’s take on the virus, believe me when I tell you that it all becomes a lot more real and urgent and awful when it takes out one of your mates. It’s more than a little “annoying.” It’s a goddamned tragedy.

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On Facebook Marketplace, a local friend who's a stellar sailor posted a listing for a sweet Pearson Ensign. For a price that, frankly, didn't seem to add up. ☺☺

## MY Bleacher SEATS



**A harbor tour on a Pearson Ensign is every bit as enjoyable as a Red Sox game in the cheap seats with a cold beer.**

**F**unny, but I didn't realize that what I was looking for was a simple, straightforward, good old Pearson Ensign. Right up until the moment I signed the check and bought one. But, as usual, I'm getting ahead of the story.

Let's put it this way: Basically, I needed a boat. Sort of quickly. As I've mentioned previously in this space, it's a condition of maintaining my city mooring here in Newport, Rhode Island (a mooring I waited over a decade for and hope not to lose anytime in the immediate future). I'd given away my previous little sailboat—a Pearson 26 that was in need of much tender loving care—to a high school senior looking for a school project. I'd kicked a few figurative tires, but suddenly time was of the

essence. The summer wasn't getting any longer.

I'll blame my boss, *CW* editor Mark Pillsbury, for getting me thinking that less could be more. My search had been centered on smallish cruiser/racers with a proper auxiliary and galley, and decent if modest accommodations: a J/30 (I'd owned one previously), an older C&C in a similar-size range (ditto), a Cal 2-27, or perhaps a 30-foot Catalina or Pearson. But then Mark bought himself an O'Day Daysailer (see last month's editorial), and I thought: *Eureka! Cheap, fun and trailerable, something of a placeholder for the time being.* I almost immediately found one online about an hour's drive away and made an appointment to see it that weekend.

Which was when fate

intervened.

On Facebook Marketplace, a local friend who's a stellar sailor posted a listing for a sweet Pearson Ensign. For a price that, frankly, didn't seem to add up: much too inexpensive. I pinged him and got an almost immediate response; it wasn't his boat, he was merely advertising it for a friend, for whom he passed along the contact information.

This is the point in the story where we disclose that anyone who's been kicking around in boats on Narragansett Bay for the past few decades (guilty!) knows a thing or two about Pearson Ensigns. Nearly 1,800 of the Carl Alberg-designed 22-foot, 6-inch daysailers were built just up the road for a couple of decades starting in 1962. Ensigns were, and perhaps still are, the largest full-keel one-design class of racing boats ever, and inspired dozens of dedicated fleets across the country—including one here in Newport when I was just getting into sailing. I actually did some crewing for the great Dr. Charlie Shoemaker back in the day, who kicked some serious Ensign tail in these parts.

So I made another appointment, to check out the Ensign, on my way to the O'Day. And I was stunned. The owner had purchased it several years earlier from a sailor in Maine who I actually knew (once again proving my long-standing theory that there is but one degree of separation in the sailing world). It had been parked on stands in his driveway ever since, never launched. It came with a small chandlery of extras: a sweet, almost-new 6 hp outboard;

six sails, including a very crisp main and genoa; cushions, fenders, dock lines, hardware, safety gear, boom cover, and even a small inflatable and the stands themselves.

What?!

Long story short: He was retiring and relocating, and selling his business, and everything else, including his house and boat. He asked me what I thought and to name a price. I named the one in the ad, and registered his immediate, visible shock. Apparently, he'd asked his friend to move the boat for him, but perhaps not so aggressively. He'd honor the figure in the ad, but not a penny less.

Sold.

I went ahead and looked at the O'Day, whose owner was a local Rhode Island politician (insert your own joke here) who happened to be a very red Republican, which is a rarity in our very blue state. He was hilarious and I enjoyed meeting him. If not for the Ensign, he might've sold me his little boat.

But I'd already recalled my fun with "Doc Shoe" and other buddies over the years, with whom I'd enjoyed a spin around the harbor on their Ensigns, the primary feature of which are their long bench seats. You sit *in* an Ensign, not *on* one. Sailing one is like taking in a Red Sox game from the Fenway bleachers, beer in hand. Just plain fun.

I've come to think I didn't actually find this little gem. Nope. She found me.