

The Newport Bermuda Race

Race Description

By Sheila McCurdy

The Newport Bermuda Race is a 635-mile ocean race, most of it out of sight of land, usually lasting three to six days. It crosses a stretch of the Atlantic Ocean known for challenging weather, especially in the Gulf Stream, where there are strong currents.



Every two years in mid-June, over 180 boats start from the historic seaport of Newport, Rhode Island. The fleet has five divisions to allow seaworthy boats of many sizes and types to be raced fairly and aggressively for an array of trophies awarded in Bermuda at an elegant ceremony at Government House, the residence of the governor of this tropical island.

In keeping with the 100-year traditions of amateur sailors and strong family spirit, 90 % of the boats in 2006 had amateur crews comprised of friends and family members. The race maintains its international prestige through competitive fairness, an exemplary safety record, and a responsive race organization handled by the volunteer members of the Cruising Club of America and the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club. Sailors everywhere dream of adding the Newport Bermuda Race to their life list of adventures.

Newport Bermuda 2008

The 2008 fleet – expected to be over 200 boats – will cross the startling line off Newport, Rhode Island on Friday, June 20. The Bermuda Race Organizing Committee (BROC) begins its work over a year beforehand to plan a first-class ocean race. The skippers also have much to do through the winter and spring before the start to prepare their boats.

The entry process begins in the fall of 2007 with the publishing of the Notice of Race. Skippers interested in participating should contact the BROC to request an invitation to compete and receive assistance with qualifications, ratings, safety-at-sea training and boat inspections. The application deadline is April 1, 2008. Follow-up forms, documentation and other details have deadlines between mid-May and early June. Long experience shows that skippers who prepare well in advance do better in the race than those pushing the deadlines.

Divisions and Trophies

The race has five divisions – essentially five separate race fleets: St. David's (for amateur crews on dual purpose racer-cruiser boats), Gibbs Hill (professional crews on modern competitive boats), Double-handed (only two people on each boat), Cruising (amateur crews on boats not designed for racing) and Demonstration (boats of a size or construction type beyond the normal range of the fleet). The divisions are divided into classes so that boats of similar size start together and compete for class honors. Each division is scored using a handicap or rating system by which slower boats are allowed more time than faster boats to complete the race. After the finish each boat's "elapsed time" on the course is "corrected" based on the time

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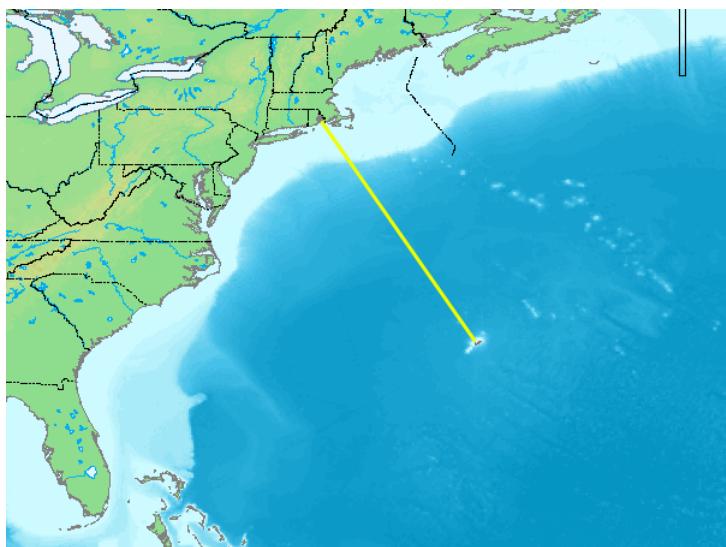
allowance. The boats with the best corrected times win. Trophies are awarded for the top finishers in each class and each division.

In addition to the class trophies, boats can compete for special awards such as winning navigators, best finish for a boat over 15 years old, and top-finishing family crews. The Newport Bermuda Race is one of several races in a series sponsored by several yacht clubs and sailing organizations. In addition to the Newport Bermuda ocean race, which has been co-managed by the [Royal Bermuda Yacht Club](#) and the [Cruising Club of America](#) since 1926, the oldest collaboration is the 44-year-old [Onion Patch Series](#) in which teams of three boats compete in day races in Newport and Bermuda, as well as in the ocean race. The team with the best combined score for all phases wins.



The Race Course

The Newport Bermuda Race course looks deceptively simple. The starting line is set near Castle Hill Light at the entrance to Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island. The finish is 635 nautical miles to the southeast across open ocean. This is one of very few long-distances races that is a true ocean race, with land over the horizon almost from the start to the finish. Because the winds and currents change almost constantly, the boats can rarely sail the straight "rhumbline" course of 149° True.



Satellite tracking transponders are fixed to all boats in the race. Several times a day the position of each boat in the fleet is updated and shown on a map at the Newport Bermuda Race website. The site received up to 10,000 visits a day during the 2006 race as family members and sailors from around the world followed the progress of the fleet. The racers also download the positions of their competitors who are spread far across the course and out of sight.

The ocean temperatures off Newport are cool and the visibility can be cut to a boat length in fog. Before nightfall, the fleet is out of sight of land as the crews sail toward Bermuda at speeds of four to 15 knots (nautical miles per hour) depending on a boat's size and the wind strength. The sailors on each boat are divided into watches to allow some of the crew to sleep and eat while the others steer and trim the sails. The watches change every few hours to prevent fatigue. The navigators rely on GPS to track their positions. The skippers and tacticians plan their strategies based on where they expect to be as the weather systems alter the wind strength and direction over the days of the race.

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The shape of the Gulf Stream and the position of related ocean currents become obstacles or advantages over the next day or two. A favorable current is like an invisible conveyor belt that can carry a boat miles ahead of its competition. The warm, swift current of the Gulf Stream also can generate violent squalls and breaking seas. Day and night the crews must react to every change trying to maximize their progress toward Bermuda. The second half of the race typically has light winds. Persistence and concentration are keys to keeping the boats going. The water is warm, the sun is hot and the crews yearn to reach Bermuda.

Only in the last 20 or 25 miles can the competitors glimpse the low profile of Bermuda rising from the horizon. Excitement builds as other boats come into sight converging for the final sprint to the finish line set off the St. David's Lighthouse at the east end of Bermuda [Finish link](#). The navigators stay very wary of the coral reefs that extend miles to the north of the main island. The boats must sail to the seaward side of a set of navigational aids that mark the reef. Once across the line, the boats proceed to Hamilton Harbor using a channel through the reef. It takes a couple of hours before the sailors finally can step ashore and join the post-race festivities three to five days after leaving Newport [post-race schedule link](#).

Race Background and Roll of Honour



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The first race to Bermuda started off Brooklyn, New York in 1906. It was the inspiration of the charismatic Thomas Fleming Day, the editor of The Rudder magazine. Three boats, all under 40 feet, took part in what was considered a life-endangering stunt akin to the extreme sports of today. One boat broke its mast at the start and was towed back to harbor. The two remaining crews – including the 20 year-old woman, Thora Robinson, who was sailing with her husband of six weeks – sailed through stormy weather relying on the spotty appearances of the sun and stars for navigation. Upon reaching the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, they were greeted as heroes.

With the success of the first Bermuda Race, other ocean races followed, notably the Fastnet Race and the Sydney-Hobart Races. A new adventurous sport attracted an enthusiastic following. In 1926 the [Cruising Club of America](#) took over the

organization of the Bermuda Race in partnership with the [RBYC](#). Many of CCA's first members were veterans of the early races. Hundreds of Cruising Club members still compete regularly. Newport has served as the starting location since 1936, and the fleet has grown over the years to the record high of 265 boats that took part in the 2006 Centennial Race. John Rousmaniere has written the comprehensive history of the race *A Berth to Bermuda: 100 Years of the World's Classic Ocean Race* published by the CCA and Mystic Seaport.

The thirty Bermudian and American members of BROC administers all aspects of the race's management including the entry process, class assignments, implementation of international rules and regulations, race committees for the starting and finish

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lines, organization of scores of trophies, shoreside activities before the start and after the finish, and coordination with the necessary sailing organizations, logistical resources and government entities in the U.S. and Bermuda.

As part of the centennial celebrations of the race, The Cruising Club of America and the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club created the Roll of Honour to bring due attention to individuals who have shaped the race. Over the years, the designs and construction of the race boats have evolved, the race rules have changed, electronics and satellites have expanded the understanding of weather and ocean currents, yet the goal of the race remains to encourage relatively small sailboats with amateur crews to test their seamanship and sailing skill on a blue water passage to one of the most hospitable destinations in the Atlantic Ocean.

