

# THE LATITUDE 38 INTERVIEW

## Tom Corogan

*There's no end to the interesting people you meet when you take the time to walk the docks. As we were making the rounds in San Diego last month, we met 84-year-old Tom Corogan, before he departed on October 9 aboard his Westsail 32 TLC. The Ohio native has many thousands of miles under his keel, including two Atlantic crossings, but has yet to accomplish his ultimate goal of rounding Cape Horn. This will be his sixth attempt at the feat. We think you'll find him as fascinating as we did.*

**Latitude 38:** It's our understanding that you're 84 years old and are about to sail singlehanded to Cape Horn. Have you done much sailing before, singlehanded or otherwise?

**Tom Corogan:** I do have quite a bit of sailing experience. I singlehanded my Brewer 44 *TLC* to Europe and back in '87, and did it again with my Westsail 32 *TLC* in '97. And this will be my sixth attempt to sail around Cape Horn. The closest I got was a little more than a year ago when I made it to three days past the Galapagos. But yes, I am 84, and yes, I am sailing to Cape Horn.

**38:** You look terrific for 84. What's the secret for staying healthy and having so much vitality?

**TC:** I eat dandelions. I drink well water. And I sleep with my head pointed north.

**38:** (Muted laughter) You're not pulling our leg, are you?

**TC:** I'm not. (Said with no umbrage at our stifled laughter.)

**38:** Are you on some kind of health regimen, and how many dandelions do you eat?

**TC:** I eat as many dandelions as I can get. I started eating a plant called lambsquarters, one of the most nutritious plants there is. Dandelions are second best. I eat them raw, and I eat the whole thing — blossom, stem and root. But no, I'm not on some specific health plan.

**38:** Do you eat meat or fish?

**TC:** I eat very little meat. I catch and eat fish.

**38:** (Laughter) I guess we could have guessed the latter based on the fishing net on the bulkhead behind you. Do you follow an exercise regimen?

**TC:** No, but I do own a 150-slip marina at Port Clinton, Ohio, on the shores of Lake Erie, and there can be a lot of physical work involved. By the way, the west end of Lake Erie has good fishing for walleye — a delicious fish — as well as perch, so my marina has mostly powerboats, with about a dozen sailboats. Our season runs from April to November 1. It takes me a month to secure things after the season, by which time it's almost Christmas. Then I usually go to the Miami Boat Show in February. When I get back, it's time to get the marina ready

*"It was so rough that we were unable to have coffee for six days. We just couldn't keep the pot on the stove! It wasn't a storm, just the normal 20+ knots of trades and 8-ft seas."*

for another season. I've owned the marina for 35 years.

**38:** Thirty-five years? We started *Latitude* 35 years ago.

**TC:** *Latitude* is an excellent magazine. I picked one up and thought it would be mostly ads and stuff, like other magazines, but I was impressed with the articles and particularly all the

factual information.

**38:** Thank you. Tell us a little about your trip to the Galapagos last year.

**TC:** I started in Port Clinton, did the Erie Canal, the Hudson River, New York, Bermuda, the Virgin Islands, Panama, Colombia and Ecuador. But I broke my leg getting off my boat and into a *panga* in Panama. The break was at the top end of the tibia at the knee joint, and tore the meniscus and cartilage. I flew home for medical attention, then returned to the boat and sailed to the Galapagos. I was three days into the passage from the Galapagos to Easter Island when my knee got too bad to continue. So I sailed back to Florida and shipped the boat home. I worked on her all winter, then shipped her to California so I could try again this year.

**38:** What have you found to be the good and less-good qualities of the Westsail 32?

**TC:** I've owned *TLC* for 15 years and done a lot of ocean sailing with her. The upside is that she's comfortable. The downsides are that she's relatively slow and doesn't point well. But speed isn't important to me. Furthermore, it can get uncomfortable enough on the ocean in heavy boats like my Westsail, so I wouldn't go in a lighter boat.

I would like to mention that I have a lot of respect for my Monitor windvane, which is made by Scanmar of Richmond. I met the owner, Hans Bernwall, at the Miami Boat Show. The stronger the wind blows, the better the Monitor works. It's the reverse of a lot of marine equipment — such as my Autohelm autopilot. When beating up the western Caribbean for the Cayman Islands in the northeast trades last year, the Autohelm kept popping out of the bracket and trying to go over the side. Luckily I had it tied to stay on the boat. I wanted both the vane and the autopilot because the vane follows windshifts, which isn't always a good thing.

**38:** That's a nasty trip from Panama to the Cayman Islands — you're battling the trades, the seas and the current.

**TC:** It was so rough on that passage that my Argentinian crew and I were unable to have coffee for six days. We just couldn't keep the pot on the stove! It wasn't a storm, it was just the normal 20+ knots of trades and 8-ft-or-so seas. It was the end of November, and we were just bucking into it. By the way, I only had crew because my knee was in such bad shape.

**38:** You have to excuse us, but we just have to get back to the dandelions for a minute. Do you get them from — and we're not trying to be disrespectful — a nursery or what?

**TC:** I get them from my lawn. Unfortunately, you can't save them because they wilt. There is a big grocery chain in the Midwest that is starting to carry dandelions, but only the tops. If you go to the internet, you'll find that there is quite a bit of info on eating dandelions.

**38:** It reminds us of the guy who invented petroleum jelly. He ate a spoonful of the stuff every day, and lived to about 100.

**TC:** My father had a bowel problem, so his doctor had him take a medication called Petrolagar, which was mineral oil, little more than Vaseline in liquid form. He took a teaspoon a day and he lived to 70.

**38:** Where did you start from on your West-sail trip to Europe, and how long did it take?

**TC:** I left from New York. It took me 20 days to get to the Azores and another 10 days to get to Portugal. That's standard. On the way back, I sailed from Portugal to the Canaries to the Cape Verdes to Barbados. The last leg across the Atlantic took me 18 days.

**38:** Those aren't bad times at all. We once did the Canaries to St. Lucia in a Jimmy Cornell Atlantic Rally for Cruisers. What fabulous sailing conditions!

**TC:** Back in '98, I did the Columbus 500 that Jimmy Cornell headed up. Spain to Madeira to Porto Santo to San Salvador. I didn't sail with him, but he's a super guy. I have all his books.

**38:** What are your plans for this trip?

**TC:** When I attempted this trip last year, I was three days out of the Galapagos when my knee collapsed. But I was making so much leeway because of the Humboldt Current that I was getting driven toward Pitcairn Island. So this time I plan to sail to the Horn from Salinas, Ecuador, because I'll have about a 400-mile edge on beating the current. But the Humboldt Current is vicious, running at up to four knots.

I originally figured that I would get to Ecuador in October, Easter Island in November, and Cape Horn in December, which is summertime down there. But I've been prevented from starting by all the hurricanes off Mexico — there have been five of them in October. So I'll be about three weeks to a month later than my original plan. And instead of one long passage to get south, I'll be doing some shorter ones and checking the weather. But I'll be leaving tomorrow.

**38:** October 9? A lot of the powerboats have headed south or are about to, but when it comes to sailors, you're going to be an early bird.

**TC:** I'll stop in Turtle Bay, Mag Bay, and Cabo to check on the weather. Maybe Puerto Vallarta, too. Then there is the Gulf of Tehuantepec. I met a guy at Downwind Marine who told me that he got caught in a blow there for 10 days.

**38:** You don't want to get caught in one of those, but they are pretty easy to predict. In some ways the *papagayos*



farther south can be more troublesome. They don't blow quite as strong, but they are more frequent and more difficult to forecast.

**TC:** I'm also going to stop at Cocos Island, because it's in a straight line from Tehuantepec to Salinas, Ecuador. I never heard of Cocos Island until my doctor in Cleveland, who is from Costa Rica and who was treating my knee, told me that I had to stop there. On my second visit to him, I brought a chart of Cocos, and he showed me what bay I should stop in and where the dock was. But there are apparently no supplies or services there.

**38:** You've been to Ecuador before. Did you get along with the officials?

**TC:** Ecuador is my favorite country! Number one, all the people have smiles on their faces.

Overall, the people aren't as nice in Colombia,

but I had a very special experience there. It was on my fourth attempt at Cape Horn. By the way, some attempts haven't gotten very far — on one, I didn't even leave the Chesapeake before I had to have my engine rebuilt. But on my fourth attempt, I sort of got shipwrecked on the Pacific Coast of Colombia while on my way from Panama to Ecuador. I'd sailed through an area of branches and logs, the biggest of which were three feet in diameter. I hit one of them with my Max-Prop, causing the prop to stick in the feathering position. When I put the engine in gear and hit the throttle, the prop spun but didn't do anything except throw water up the side of the boat. By the way, I still have that prop, and it's for sale.

So I had no usable prop and there wasn't much wind. Fortunately, I was upwind of Buenaventura, Colombia, which just happens to be the largest port in that country. The wind and tide filled in as I approached the dock and, with no water flowing past my rudder, I hit two small boats, one of which almost landed on top of me. Fortunately, once the yelling was over, the locals treated me decently. They did, however, make me anchor out rather than let me dock, and they charged me \$10 every time I brought my dinghy in or out. The port captain also made me hire a ship's agent to clear in, and since the ship's agent didn't speak English, I had to hire an interpreter, too. I think I was the only *gringo* in this town of 365,000 people.

For many days the agent and interpreter tried to find somebody who could dive on my boat and get the prop off, or haul

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the boat so the prop could be easily removed. But they had no luck. On the sixth day, the interpreter said, "Come with me, we're going to the church to pray." So I put on a clean shirt and went to his church. After the sermon, he had me stand before the congregation and explain — in English — my problem. Then the agent translated what I said. When that was over,

*"When people used to say, 'I'll pray for you,' I didn't put much into it. But I look at it differently now. And I guess the more people praying for you, the better."*

he made me get on my knees in front of the altar and pray my boat would get repaired, and had the congregation pray for me, too.

A diver showed up on the dock the next morning with two scuba tanks! It took him three hours to get the Max-Prop, which is a very complicated beast, off the shaft. But he didn't lose any of the many small parts. And he put on my replacement three-blade fixed prop. It didn't fit all the way on the shaft, but it was good enough for me to get back to the States. I never believed in the power of prayer before, but I saw it at work with the arrival of the diver. It changed my life.

**38:** Do you go to church?

**TC:** I don't think church has anything to do with it. It's about

communicating. But if there is something really serious, I will pray. When people used to say, "I'll pray for you," I didn't put much into it. But I look at it differently now. And I guess the more people praying for you, the better. *(Laughter.)*

**38:** How many miles is it from San Diego to Cape Horn?

**TC:** It's 2,500 miles from San Diego to Ecuador, Ecuador to Easter Island is 2,500 miles, and from Easter Island to Cape Horn it's 2,500 miles. So it's a total of about 7,500 miles.

**38:** Six attempts at Cape Horn from Port Clinton, Ohio. We guess the big question is 'why'?

**TC:** I never could figure that one out.

**38:** Do you have any friends who have done it?

**TC:** Yes, the famous American sailor Hal Roth. I met him in the Azores years ago when he and his wife were getting his Santa Cruz 50 ready for an around-the-world race. I saw a man working on a boat with an American flag, so I stopped to talk. The name of the boat was *Whisper*, so I told him that that was the name of Hal Roth's boat. He laughed and said, "I'm Hal Roth." I went shopping with his wife Margaret. She bought some eggs and later greased them the way sailors used to do to keep them from going bad.

**38:** Where to after Cape Horn?

**TC:** The Falkland Islands and the other Brit or formerly Brit islands — Tristan de Cunha, St. Helena, Ascencion. I've already stopped at Fernando de Noronha. Maybe I'll go to the west coast of Africa after those islands or maybe I'll sail home. I'll be 85 then, so I just don't know.

**38:** You're no longer 50 or even 65. What are the age challeng-

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es? Or are you more relaxed than when you were younger?

**TC:** You could say that I've been in training for this. (*Laughter.*) When I got back from my last attempt in December, I decided I had to go in training. So I quit drinking, did all the exercises to rehabilitate my knee, and started doing more physical work in the marina. Lifting the 40-lb concrete blocks, for example.

**38:** Have you lost weight?

**TC:** No.

**38:** Do you feel stronger?

**TC:** No. But I wish I did. (*Laughter.*)

**38:** How much did you drink before?

**TC:** A glass or two of wine at night. Never more than that. But I notice that I think more clearly and that I get more done now that I've stopped drinking. If you sit and drink for an hour or two at night, that's two hours lost.

**38:** What about your vision, night vision, hearing, mental mistakes and so forth?

**TC:** My vision is getting worse, but I can still see fine. My hearing is getting worse, but I can still hear well enough.

**38:** Are you married?

**TC:** No.

**38:** Do you have kids, and if so, what do they think of your trip?

**TC:** I have kids and they've been very supportive. But there are two ways to look at that. If I were lost at sea, that would accelerate their getting an inheritance. (*Laughter.*) What they don't know is that, under Ohio law, somebody has to be lost

for seven years before they are presumed dead. So if I were lost at sea, I would have the last laugh. (*Laughter.*)

**38:** Anything unusual in the way your boat is equipped?



ALL PHOTOS LATITUDE / RICHARD

**Tom's nav station is as organized as the rest of his boat. If his sixth attempt at Cape Horn fails, it won't be for lack of preparation.**

**TC:** Not really. I have the original Perkins diesel, but it's been rebuilt.

**38:** You're probably a good engine guy anyway.

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**TC:** No, I'm not.

**38:** A backup generator?

**TC:** No. No solar panels either. I have a wind generator that will trickle charge in 10 to 15 knots of wind. But I don't have many conveniences, so I don't need much juice.

**38:** Fridge?

**TC:** No. My ice box holds 150 lbs of block ice, which lasts two weeks. I just use it if I catch fish. Speaking of fish, I know people who spent thousands of dollars on lures to catch marlin and other fish. See these? (*He holds us a Ziploc bag with some lures in them.*) I picked up the lures in this bag for 99 cents each at the Miami Boat Show. The hot pink one has helped me catch swordfish, marlin, dorado, wahoo, and all kinds of tuna.

**38:** When you singlehand, do you use the guard zone on your radar to keep from being hit by other ships?

**TC:** No. It uses too much electricity. But I did buy an AIS, which supposedly doesn't use very much juice.

**38:** What about electronic charts or Navionics on an iSomething?

**TC:** I use both electronic and paper charts. Electronic charts are easy and simple to use, but for planning and analyzing, I prefer paper. See all the rolls of charts I have up forward?

**38:** Yes, that's a lot! It's going to be cold at Cape Horn.

**TC:** I've got a little diesel heater. And I'm from Ohio, so I know a bit about cold.

**38:** We'd like to compliment you on how clean and organized your boat is.

**TC:** Thank you very much.

*The following day, we accompanied Tom Corogan on his boat to the fuel dock at Shelter Island to get ice, during which time he told us that, prior to buying the marina, he'd been a lawyer in*



*Tom pulling his meticulously maintained Westsail 32 'TLC' away from the fuel dock in San Diego, bound for Cape Horn.*

*the little town of Port Clinton. Near the end of his career, he got what he said was the supreme compliment from a lawyer in the next town. "Tom is about the only lawyer who can find his ass, even with two hands," he said.*

— **latitude** / richard

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