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How the 95 Marion-Bermuda Race was won

by James E. Hackett

Kemancha hull #809 crew: Charles Sabino, cook; James Hackett, navigator; Don Porter, skipper; Carter Cordner, owner.

<https://www.marionbermuda.com/1995-winners>

<https://sippican.pastperfectonline.com/archive/3D1D3023-4593-4060-A2F1-805181162857>

<https://oceannavigator.com/how-the-95-bermuda-race-was-won/>

One week after returning to my home in Mattapoissett, I was still basking in the glory of our 1995 Marion-Bermuda Race victory. While exchanging sea stories, one of my friends suggested that our winning boat *Kemancha* was under power because that's the only way a Westsail 32 could win the race. I felt compelled to relate the details of our voyage. This race was won by a combination of good fortune, excellent boat preparation, good strategy, and determined execution.

The smallest and slowest boat in the '95 fleet, *Kemancha* is a heavy-displacement Westsail 32, weighing 20,000 pounds. A double-ender with tiller steering, she sails with excessive leeway when overpowered. Sailing best at approximately 62° apparent, she certainly is not a thoroughbred. Nonetheless, she is a very seaworthy boat. A reasonable choice for a reaching race, *Kemancha* enjoyed a one-day allowance on the scratch boat *Columbine*. One day in five equates to a 20% rating advantage over a custom Hylas 51. Which boat would you consider advantaged?

Kemancha was exceptionally well prepared by her owner, Carter Cordner. She was afforded superb bottom preparation and a new suit of Hood Sails. With rating in mind, we chose to limit our headsail to the 110%, optimizing reaching performance in moderate conditions.

We subscribed to several weeks of NOAA Gulf Stream data to help us forecast the stream's behavior. On the morning of the race, we received a final report. Crucial last-minute information on a developing cold eddy was used to our advantage during the race.

Our strategy was conventional in many respects and included hugging the northwest shore hug out of Buzzards Bay. Our plan was to maintain boat speed to the stream without deviating significantly from the rhumb line. With luck, we would enter the Gulf Stream at a point somewhere near the rhumb line. Endeavoring to quickly cross the stream, we would take advantage of any favorable meanders. Small boosts from warm eddies on the north side and advantageous use of the westerly side, of cold eddies would increase our velocity made good (VMG).

The unique aspects of our strategy included a nontraditional eastern approach to Bermuda. We contrived to take advantage of a stationary high south of Bermuda. Stable weather conditions favored an eastern approach. Many boats wishing to avoid the high would stay west, forcing a confrontation with a menacing cold eddy northwest of Bermuda. Additionally, a race day NOAA Gulf Stream report indicated a developing cold eddy near the Gulf Stream well east of the rhumb line. In a metamorphic evolution, the meander was transforming into a cold eddy.

After taking a conservative start, *Kemanhchi* tacked up the northwest shore of Buzzards Bay in a brisk 15-knot southwest breeze with heavy chop. We exited nearly last. We maintained boat speed; reaching in moderate southwest breezes for the next 200 nm. As we approached the Gulf Stream, we were surprised to find that we were in the close company of 18 other vessels, a significant percentage of the fleet. The steady 12 to 15-knot breezes had turned light and variable. Many boats seemed to be caught at the edge of the stream, making very little progress toward Bermuda. After some discussion, we decided the best strategy was to go wing-on-wing in front of an oscillating

breeze and get across the stream as quickly as possible. We realized *Kemancha* would be set dramatically to the east. This didn't concern us particularly because our strategy allowed for a significant eastern set. Possibly, we could take advantage of the developing cold eddy on the south side of the stream.

Sailing before the wind in light conditions can be extremely frustrating, and this was no exception. But we prevailed and the wind backed just enough to encourage us. Discouragingly, the fleet around us appeared to be making rapid progress towards the west while we made dismal progress towards the south. The frustrating conditions prompted lively' debate on the boat. In reality, *Kemancha* was being set rapidly to the east while making steady progress across the stream. The fleet, in an effort to get their boats moving, were reaching west, largely into the head of the stream's current. This misguided strategy Was nautical suicide and reflected fundamental navigational error. Without VMG and other real-time electronic feedback, many of these sailors were not sensitive to the developing constraints. The fleet was making no "over the ground" progress—they were stalled in the stream.

All the while, our little Westsail was swept nearly 30 nm east of the rhumb line and directly into the boost generated by the west side of the cold eddy. The celestial fixes lit up our charts. We were cooking. Continuous fixes confirmed extraordinary leeway, cumulating an amazing 150 nm drift. That's a lot of distance to recover. This leeway, coupled with our disappointing point of sail, was pushing us farther and farther east of the rhumb line. At 60 miles east and 250 miles out, the crew was beginning to panic. We were betting the farm that the predicted lift would avoid a disastrous beat to Bermuda.

Patience prevailed, and 200 nm out we were rewarded with the predicted 40° wind veer which lifted us to Bermuda. *Kemancha* finished without making a single tack outside Buzzards Bay. Once inside the 50-mile radius of Bermuda,

our first electronic fix was within four miles of our estimated position.

Radio reports were encouraging: class C boats finished four hours ahead of us. *Majek's* (Tripp Javelin) finishing report, however, concerned us greatly. Considering our ETA, an exceptional finish would be required to beat her time. This drove us to pay particular attention to our sailing in the last 30 miles. Although confident that we had beaten the boats whose finishing reports we heard, these boats comprised a small percentage of the fleet.

As we approached the Royal Hamilton Amateur Dinghy Club, we were met and led to a prominent slip by the dockmaster. Gathered friends, family, various dignitaries, and a small press corps gave us the first indication that we had won this race. The excitement of the occasion soon overwhelmed us.

Kemancha won first in class F and first overall. She crossed the finish line ahead of approximately one third of the fleet, edging out two-time winner *Wildflower* by 29 minutes corrected. Jim Hackett (that's me) won the coveted Navigators Trophy.

Any boat can win the Marion-Bermuda Race if the crew prepares well and does its homework. It is very important to make sure you understand and follow all the rules, so you do not give up a good finish. You will certainly need some luck with conditions to realize a handicap advantage, no matter what the boat.

Develop a strategy and stick with it. Remember, west is not always best. Small boat, "seat of the pants" sailors may have an advantage when real-time VMG data is not available. The modest advantage afforded celestial navigation by the race committee continues to be an important aspect of the race. I would recommend a sight reduction calculator if you expect to reduce more than 100 sights during the race.

Jim Hackett, a J-24 owner, holds navigator grade with full certificate from the Power Squadron. He has sailed in two Bermuda Passages and two Mackinac Races.