

# A WILD DASH TO SEA

Before the new Bahamas 500 powerboat race, drivers agreed the idea was terrible. Most of them—who exploded, sank, swamped or burned up—were right. Winner Lewis (opposite) said he was pushed by fear **by BOB OTTUM**

These crazy ideas come to Promoter Sherman F. (Red) Crise in the middle of the night—he sits right up and dictates them into a handy bedside tape recorder. “Why not,” he mumbled to himself one midnight, “stage an ocean race all around the Bahamas? Call it the Bahamas 500 and con the world’s best motor racers to come down and break their spleens on some of the most treacherous water anywhere?” Next morning, when he thought it over, Crise’s notion still sounded insane enough to work, and last week it became a reality.

It was not so much a race as a high-speed happening. Sure enough, the best-known racers in the world showed up, revving some of the most expensive engines in the world’s wildest boats. There were monster inboards with foam-rubber-padded cockpits, a chorus line of outboards and—glory be—two 40-foot houseboats, complete with kitchens, living rooms, toilets, sun decks and vastly more power than any respectable houseboat ever ought to have.

There were 63 boats in all. Before the race almost every one of the drivers insisted he could never make it. Practically all of them protested they should not even try, and the future proved them right. In various little dramas all across the sea, 47 conked out. Three boats sank outright. Another caught fire and burned to the waterline. One outboard went down so quickly that its driver, Bob Nordskog, was tossed into the sea with just a life jacket and a flashlight.

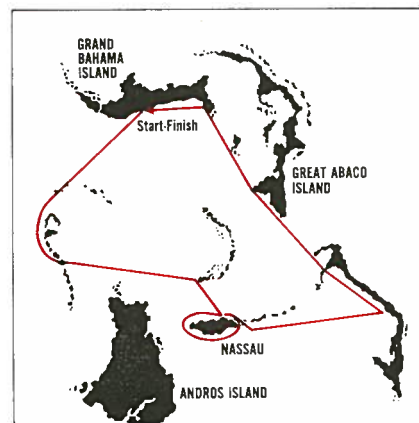
Another outboard—slamming through

the black Atlantic night at top speed—plowed into a shoal and flew inland. The driver radioed his plight to race headquarters, and he was solicitously asked if he could get enough foothold on the bottom to push his boat off the reef.

“Foothold, hell,” he barked. “I can get right off and walk all around the boat—I’m 20 feet up on the beach.”

At the end only 16 boats survived, and for being the toughest of all of them, the winner; Odell Lewis, got \$25,000, which will buy a lot of liniment.

As he roared along in a new 30-foot Bertram-Nautec with 1,000 hp, Miamian Peter Rittmaster’s eyes were caked half-shut with salt, his lips were burned raw and his hands were so swollen he could not close them. Through the last two hours, in a sort of hypnotized trance, he kept himself awake through the pain with only one single, driving thought. He was



The course actually covered nearly 570 miles.

going to finish, tie up his boat, then walk up the dock and punch Red Crise, the guy who dreamed up this torture, right in the mouth.

But neither Rittmaster nor anybody else punched Mr. Crise. And when the whole gaudy affair was over, some even conceded that he had given the world of ocean racing a new event that promises to be the winging, absolute backbreaking daddy of them all.

The course began off Lucayan Beach near Freeport, dashed off around Bimini almost 50 miles away, cut across the Bahamas Bank to Chub Cay just north of Andros, went down to Nassau (and once around New Providence Island for a little extra touch), swung over toward Eleuthera and through a reef-studded alley called Current Cut, wound back up to Great Abaco Island and led home to Lucaya via Sweetings Cay. The “500 miles” in the name was as unreal as the rest of it—the actual distance was more like 570 miles, if you wanted to steer clear of the reefs along the route. Outside of being the longest, it was the richest ocean race ever, with a \$91,000 purse. But never mind all that money: there is every indication that ocean racers care only for danger and kicks. They are all slightly daffy. But they also are the last of a splendid, gutty breed, and if someone sets a course to the Sea of Okhotsk and tells them they don’t dare run it, they will try.

From a start soon after dawn Winner Lewis, who piloted a 32-foot aluminum Maritime armed with three 427 Mer-

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**A WILD DASH** *continued*

cruisers, made it around the course in 12 hours, 36 minutes and 20 seconds—coming home at 8:06 p.m., about the time the sun was going down. He then opened a can of cold beer, looked out at the world through a pair of bloodshot eyes and summed it up handily. What had made him run so fast and finish while it was still light?

"Fear," said Lewis.

Oldtime Racer Don Aronow, driving a 28-foot outboard with three Mercury engines, churned in second, an hour and 40 minutes later, well after dark. His forward ballast compartment had spilled early in the race and the boat had spent the day butterflying all across the sea.

"Coming in," he said, "the three of us were like a boys' choir. God! It was black and we couldn't read the sea; the boat would fly way up and then slam down. One man would go, 'Ooooh,' and the next one would go, 'Ugggh,' and I would go 'Aaaargh,' all in perfect harmony."

Next day the drivers were still grumbling. "Terrible race," they all agreed happily. But it was clear by the glint in all those pink eyes that Mr. Crise had fashioned a dream event.

Red Crise is built along the lines of a brontosaurus; he strides through the Bahamas looking nicely rumpled, wearing a battered yachting cap and a faded red mustache. And he is just imaginative

enough to keep the Bahamas on the map.

"This race is like, say, an Indy 2,000," he said. "Or like running these boats hell-bent through the Black Forest. Man, 80% of these waters are unknown to most of these drivers; you miss one checkpoint and you are out in the Atlantic Ocean." He smiled happily. "It's a real bitch," he said.

After he dreamed it up, Crise sold the race to the island government. It put up \$30,000, and the Grand Bahama Port Authority added another \$30,000. Then Crise talked most of the big hotels into providing free rooms and nightly cocktail parties, the background fuel on which all ocean races are run.

Crise is regarded by boaters with what can best be described as an affectionate dislike—but he always pulls them in. At the drivers' meeting before the race he bullied them into starting at 7:30 a.m. instead of daybreak as promised, "because the press can take better pictures of you guys at that time."

"Well, what time does the sun go down?" asked one worried driver.

"The sun goes down when I tell it to go down," growled Crise.

All the drivers then promised they would not enter the race. No, sir. Never. Not under any circumstances. Absolutely not. They were going to teach Red Crise a terrible lesson.

On race day they were all lying off

Lucayan Beach, revving their engines, waiting for the flag.

The start of an ocean race is a good deal like the start of a riot; everybody churns up the water and not everybody takes off in the same direction. They all drew an imaginary bead on where they figured Bimini lay, and headed out.

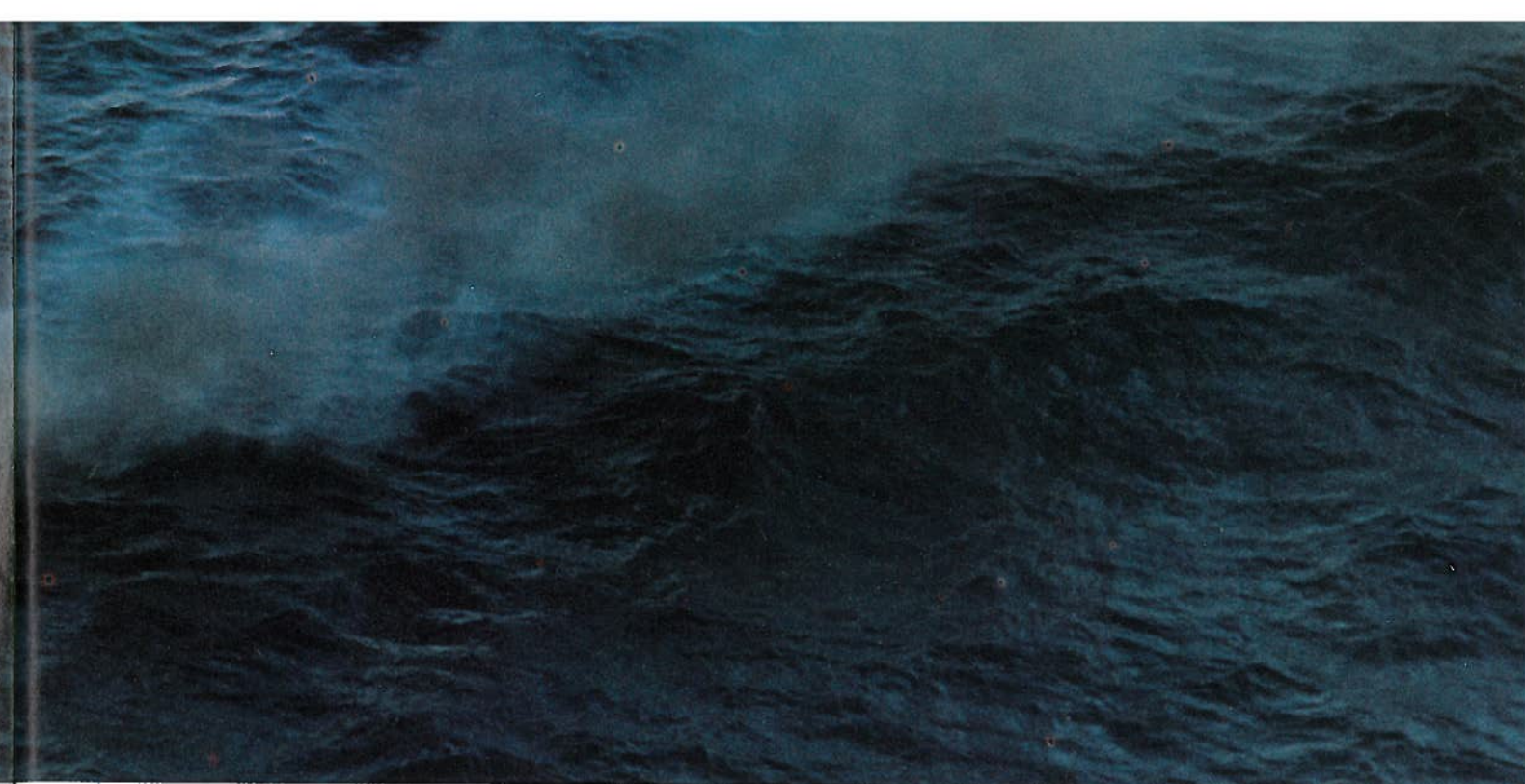
Within minutes the boats were spread out in fingers of white wake across the turquoise water; most of them headed right for Great Isaac Light. Some of them headed for such exotic spots as Nova Scotia and the Azores.

Florida's Dick Bertram, a racer with the sound instincts of a Gardena poker player, took a quick lead and was soon miles ahead of the pack. Behind him several things began to happen: the 23-foot *Pussy Cat*, its fuel lines ruptured and its bilge filling with gasoline, suddenly burst into flames. The crew went over the side. By the time they were picked up, *Pussy Cat* was a ball of bright orange on the water, trailing black smoke over Grand Bahama.

Within an hour 15 other boats had quit, crippled by such items as ripped hulls, blown engines and ruptured fuel tanks.

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*Bill Petty's "Pussy Cat" (top) burns to the water early in the race. A luckier craft (right) streaks through Current Cut without mishap.*





**A WILD DASH** *continued*

From Italy had come a 36-foot, needle-nosed Cantiera Delta racer powered by a brace of 550-hp Daytona engines. It was piloted by Vincenzo Balestrieri, one of Europe's most formidable competitors. Halfway to Bimini, the Italian boat began weaving uncertainly, stitching a snaking line through the straight wakes. Broken steering? Never. From close up in a seaplane it was easy to see the Italians were all arguing violently about the course, all waving their arms excitedly and all pointing in different directions. Nobody was steering the boat. They did not finish.

Two hours after the start Bertram was still leading the pack as it rounded Great Isaac Light, first checkpoint. Nine minutes behind him, in a race-within-a-race, Aronow was first of the outboards and holding fifth overall spot. Then Bertram blew one of his engines and dropped out.

New Yorker Bill Wishnick, who has won several major races and who lost one when he ran out of gas 15 miles from home, roared up. He had 636 gallons of gas aboard the 32-foot Maritime *Big Broad Jumper*, and had no intention of letting that happen again.

What *did* happen was that his rudders broke and he lost his steering. Still, he held the gigantic boat dead on course by steering with the engines—and beat everybody to Nassau for a \$1,000 bonus.

Promoter Crise had urged the racers to take on native Bahamian navigators—"they can tell by the color of the water if you're safe," he argued—and Wishnick had hired Arthur Moxey, a Nassau man accustomed to sailboats. During the time trials before the race, Wishnick had pushed the powerful boat up to half-throttle and skipped it in 20-foot leaps across the waves, which is roughly half what he does in actual races.

"Moxey hung on and his eyes bugged out," said Wishnick, "and I was afraid I could never get him back on the boat. So I told him, 'Arthur, baby, we *never* go this fast in a real race, and it is *never* this rough out there.'" During the race Moxey just survived while Wishnick did the navigating.

After Bertram folded, Wishnick was in the lead, with Odell Lewis close behind. Halfway through the race 36 of the original starters were out.

Ahead of the rest lay Current Cut, a skinny channel between Eleuthera and Current Island, punctuated with hidden shoals and jagged reefs. Wishnick seemed to hold back (actually he was trying to figure out how to get through the channel with just his throttles), and Lewis caught him.

"I figured he was just waiting for me to show him the way through," said Lewis, "so I blasted on ahead and he followed me."

Meanwhile, there was trouble of another sort on the two houseboats. One of them, *The Tortoise*, was skippered by Miami *Herald* Boating Editor Jim Martenhoff, who intended to do a story on how to race 500 miles in a houseboat. Then three of his four Mercury outboards quit.

"We knew we had a small problem," he wrote later. "Would you believe sinking?" Just after midnight, some five hours after the first boat had finished, Martenhoff gave up and limped toward home.

Aboard the other houseboat, *The Good Guys*, everything went awry at once, which is the way powerboat racing's famed mother-and-daughter team, Rene and Gale Jacoby (SI Feb. 14, 1966), prefer to go. The two women were running their first race with male crewmen. Their boat was powered with two huge 310-hp Chrysler engines, and two Chrysler engineers, along with a co-driver and a navigator, were on board to tend them.

"Never let men on your race boat," said Gale. "Men are such awful tyrants about just everything."

First a heavy blow from the pounding seas off Chub Cay shattered the Plexiglas protective bubble they had installed to protect the front windows. Then an automatic bilge pump faltered, and the forward compartment began to fill with ocean.

"The doors shook off the cabinets and we threw them overboard. Then the curtains began coming down," said Gale. "Suddenly it got rougher—we began slamming into 10-foot seas—and the stupid refrigerator broke loose and started to dance out into the cabin."

The Co-captains Jacoby held a quick earnest conference and issued an order from the bridge: they would either finish the race or they would sink the boat.

Two of the men wrestled for a long time with the runaway refrigerator and finally threw it over the side, food and all, and then Gale and Mama Rene began to bail.

"Somebody asked me what I was bailing with," said Gale, "and I said, 'I'm bailing with this champagne bucket, what the hell do you think I'm bailing with?'"

While the Jacobys were drinking chilled champagne in Nassau and waiting for repairs to be made, two other drivers roared smartly up to a dock there. One man leaped ashore, dashed into a restaurant and ordered two steaks. The two then ran the around-the-island leg, came back to the dock, ate their steaks and headed out.

Another pair, fuel line ruptured, dashed ashore and stole a replacement fuel line from a parked taxicab, installed it on their boat and took off. This marks the first time in recorded history anyone has ever gotten the best of a Nassau taxi driver.

Coming back along Grand Bahama, Lewis hung on steadily and Wishnick was finally forced out. A stormy night settled over the Bahamas, and at 5 a.m. a bulletin reported boats being towed in, anchored in various shelters, disabled and just lost all around the circuit. The last two official finishers, including the houseboat, crossed the line a little after 5 on the second evening (almost 36 hours after the start), and the race was formally over.

All the survivors washed the salt out of their eyes and wriggled painfully into formal clothes for the awards banquet. The Jacoby girls tied up their boat just at cocktail time and walked in, looking fresh in crisp silk dresses—while their crewmen sat and stared exhaustedly into their dinner plates. And Promoter Red Crise made a wonderfully typical speech.

"If you don't like our race," he said cheerily, "don't enter it next year."

Outside, the Bahamian night hung thick and full of perfume. There were lingering traces of lush tropic sunset across the far horizon, and somewhere beyond it there were still some boats hopelessly struggling for port. They would make it, if they made it, in the dark. The sun had gone down because Red Crise had told it to. **END**

"Stern Driver III" (No. 48) was one of many boats that leaped clear of the water. "Honeymoon I" (No. 42) drove right up on the beach.