



The Whole 12 Meters

**Off the coast
of St. Maarten, a
career in sails**

By Timothy Harper

In the warm blue Caribbean waters of the Lesser Antilles, a sailing dream came true.

I have sailed on many boats, on many bodies of water. Dinghies on rivers and lakes in the Midwest. A felucca on the Nile. A windjammer from Florida to Bimini. A junk on the South China Sea. An old-fashioned Turkish gulet on the Aegean. A traditional Dutch tjalk sail freighter with moveable side keels on the Waddenzee.

All those sailing experiences fade like a sunset at sea, however, when I find myself helping sail a 12 Meter Class yacht, the class that contested the America's Cup be-



tween 1958 and 1987, in Great Bay off Philipsburg, the capital of Dutch St. Maarten.

Our crew—a skipper, two professional sailors and a clutch of tourists like me—has a match race against another 12 Meter yacht on an America's Cup-style course. But the competition is not just any other boat. We are racing against the *Stars & Stripes* '87, arguably the most successful 12 Meter yacht ever, the boat that Dennis Conner, the United States' best-known America's Cup captain ever, skippered to an upset victory in Australia to reclaim the Cup in 1987.



That race also marked the end of an era in yacht racing—it was the last year in which the America's Cup was contested with 12s; for the 1988 Cup, the specifications were changed, and the future for these boats dimmed. Without the America's Cup there was little reason for anyone to spend millions building these sleek, finicky "greyhounds of the seas."

Colin Percy, an Englishman who worked as a hospital management consultant in Canada before moving to St. Maarten, was a hard-core sailing fan who hated the idea that the 12 Meter Class yachts might be mothballed, or sold off to casinos and exclusive resorts to become floating cocktail bars.

One night in 1989, during the annual Antigua Race Week, Percy went into his usual lament: It was a crime that the old 12s were no longer racing. Someone suggested that Percy buy one of them. He could sail it in big open-class races and take paying customers for day sails. "Or," Percy mused, "I could buy two and race them against each other." He could, in other words, give everyday sailors the chance to crew legendary boats that they had only read—and dreamed—about sailing themselves.

Percy founded a partnership, the St. Maarten 12 Metre Challenge, and bought two Canadian 12s. He began racing them against each other in 1990. He later bought two more 12s, *Stars & Stripes '87* and *Stars & Stripes '86*, and an unfinished hull that was completed



and christened *True North IV* (or "Ivy").

It's a typical winter day in the fishing-diving-sailing haven of St. Maarten (the French half of the island is called St. Martin), sunny and 80 degrees Fahrenheit (about 26 Celsius), with a fresh breeze, when I join the crowd of tourists on the main pier at Philipsburg. Most are nonsailors whose travel agents, concierges or cruise directors told them the St. Maarten 12 Metre Challenge has won a number of awards for being one of the best "soft adventures" in the Caribbean.

Percy and several of his employees begin working the crowd, dividing us into crews of 15. They try to make sure the crews look about the same physically, with comparable numbers of young adults, older people and children

(12 is the minimum age). Each crew in turn boards a launch and is ferried out to its yacht. My group steps from our launch onto the yacht *True North IV*.

One of the three tanned young crewmen gives me a hand, grins at me and says, "Welcome aboard. Any health problems?" When I say no, he motions me to a spot toward the front of the cockpit. I am going to be a grinder, the most physically demanding job on the boat. Other people are assigned jobs pulling lines or trimming sails. A couple of senior citizens say they just wanted to go along for the ride, and are directed to seats amidships where they can see and hear everything but won't have to work. One cheerful gray-haired grandmother from the Midwest is named honorary captain and given a

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stopwatch. "Timekeeper is the most important job on the boat today," our young skipper declares.

For the next hour, the skipper runs us through a series of practice maneuvers, trying to get us to control a boat that is 70 feet long, weighs 35 tons and has an 86-foot mast. I am one of four grinders at the front of the boat, facing each other two and two, furiously cranking a winch forward or backward, a certain number of revolutions, on the skipper's command. The two guys on the other winch have no problem, but the woman opposite me can't keep up. Her hands fly away from the winch handles as soon as we start cranking, and she cries out, "I can't do this." Within seconds another woman has replaced her. "You are the new winch wench," a crewman tells the substitute. She blushes, smiles, grabs the handle and starts cranking for all she is worth. Within minutes, the four of us are panting and sweating, looking enviously back at our shipmates, who seem to be enjoying a relatively leisurely ride.

When our skipper spots the signal flag from the officials' boat monitoring the race, he tells the grandma from the Midwest—excuse me, the timekeeper—to start the stopwatch. The race will begin in six minutes, and we want to position *True North IV* to cross the start line as soon as possible after that. If we cross the start line even a split second before, we will have to turn around, circle back and go through the start line again. In the America's Cup and most other races, the boat that wins the start usually wins the race. Our timekeeper calls out the time every half-minute, and then we all help her count down to zero. We swoosh across the start line seconds later, just ahead of *Stars & Stripes*.

When I'm not hunched over and cranking furiously, I speak to the young skipper and the other two crewmen, who skitter about the deck showing landlubbers how to raise and lower sails,

Yacht-a, Yacht-a, Yacht-a!

haul lines, jibe and tack and come about. Our three crewmen are among approximately 20 professional sailors on Percy's staff, most of them young guys in their 20s from the Caribbean, England, Australia, South Africa and the United States. Most are serious up-and-coming sailors, and a stint with Percy and his 12s is an important part of their sailing résumés.

The crewmen tell me that Percy has made few concessions to the paying public. For example, he ran a waist-high lifeline around the deck to keep customers from getting knocked out or falling overboard. And the sail area was reduced slightly. But there are still no restrooms on board (guests are advised "to make prior arrangements") and no padded seating. The only changes were made for safety, not comfort, and these boats are still bare-bones, meant to race. Indeed, Percy still occasionally races

The St. Maarten 12 Metre Challenge

stages races virtually every day during the winter tourist season and most weekdays during the summer off-season. It's best to phone in advance for reservations. Races begin at 8:30 a.m., 10 a.m., 11:45 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., starting from the main pier in Philipsburg. The price starts at US\$70 per person.



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the 12s in major Caribbean races.

The daily St. Maarten races are on a shorter version of a regulation America's Cup course, five miles instead of a typical 22 miles. As *True North IV* and *Stars & Stripes* leave the start line, they immediately separate on broadly differ-

ent tacks, back and forth through the course, for the next half-hour. Every few minutes, our skipper tells us that the boats appear to be about even. After one tack about 30 minutes into the race, however, he frowns. "We're behind them," he says. "We've got dirty air. That means they've positioned themselves to take our wind." He tells us we could try to catch up from behind, or we could make a series of sharp tacks. "It's a lot more work," he says, nodding meaningfully toward us grinders, "and we might not catch up anyway, but it's our best chance."

Our boat unanimously agrees to go for it, and the next 10 minutes are a mix of concentration and perspiration for us grinders as *True North IV* sweeps back and forth across the course. In the decisive move, *True North IV* and *Stars & Stripes* appear to be headed toward the same spot on the water from sharply opposing angles. We get there first. Heeling over at 15 degrees, holding on, the salt spray in our faces, our boat moving so fast that we can hear the swoosh of the bow slicing through the waves, we cut in front of *Stars & Stripes* at a right angle, almost close enough to reach out and touch its bow from our stern. The good-natured jeers from *Stars & Stripes* fade quickly in the wind as we move away.



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