

## **A Way of Life**

### **A Presentation to the Holland Professional Club**

**May 12, 2016**

#### **Prologue:**

In the past, my presentations have focused on issues of public policy. And, certainly, the current state of our politics presents a “target rich environment”. However, tonight I am choosing to honor another tradition of our club, and speak to you of an activity that is my life-long passion and through this passion has become the organizing paradigm of my life. So tonight we will discuss the benefit of a life devoted to racing sailboats.

I recognize that skeptics among you will scoff at the concept of racing an antiquated mode of transportation where there is no profit and achieving 10 miles / hour is a thrilling achievement. However, for me, the experience of racing sailboats provides a way to process the reality of life. It is an activity that that has developed skills to understand and benefit from the exigencies of our lives. For me, sailboat racing has become a core existential activity.

As we begin the discussion, please allow me one clarification. There is a distinct difference between “going sailing” and “going sailboat racing”. People sometimes tell me “You must find sailing so serene and restful”. My response to them is “not the way I do it...” Racing heightens and intensifies the experience, bringing the activity into sharper focus.

#### **Immersion in the Physical World**

Sailboat racing immerses you in the physical world.

Sailboat racing is a multi-faceted, physically demanding activity. Racing takes place in a variety of boats and the choice of boat and venue makes racing a suitable and challenging activity for people from 8 years old to above 80. Races can be organized in the form of a sprint or an endurance contest lasting days (in some cases, months). The suitability of the sport for all ages, body types, and abilities is evidenced by “adaptive sailing” being included in the Para-Olympic games. Probably the most unique disability accommodated in these events are helmsmen who are blind (assisted by sighted crew).

But the sport is not just raw physicality. To be fast, you need to engage the world on a more theoretical level. Sailboats sail against the wind. To make that happen, we are engaging Bernoulli’s Principal, using the same physics that makes flight possible. The Principal is true in both through aerodynamics and hydrodynamics. Sails are flexible airfoils whose shape can be modified dynamically through the adjustment of approximately 6 different control systems. Making those adjustments is a constant process of “thinking like an air molecule” and adjusting

for the appropriate amount of aerodynamic force. Interestingly, sail trimmers almost never have perfect conditions. Sails are either not producing sufficient power or are producing more power than the boat can handle. This “power on / now power off” dynamic is as critical as a race car braking when going into a corner (failure to do it right will lead to a crash).

Likewise, while for the most part, the shape of the hull is fixed, imagining a water molecule flowing across the bottom of the boat assists you in preparing the bottom surface for the least friction and highest amount of “attached flow”. Interestingly, a bottom finish that looks just like your newly waxed car is not optimal. Your car finish causes water to bead, making it easier to remove. That type of finish is slower than a dull, flat finish that allows water to “sheet”, staying adhered to the surface as it flows off the back edge. Subtle shaping of trailing edges of keels and rudders supports efficiency by reducing eddies (known as tip vortices) that form as the water separates from the hull.

Sailboat control systems are based on Newtonian “Simple Machines”. Pulley systems and geared systems are essential to controlling sails. Understanding leverage and friction in practical terms is essential to rigging and maintaining your boat.

Racing sailboats develops practical skills. I learned about sandpaper, paint, resin and fiberglass because of a need to maintain our equipment. Working on boats gives you a working knowledge of electrical, plumbing and electronic systems. Racing elicits your “inner MacGyver” as you confront problems and create workable solutions in the pressure of the moment.

Navigation develops math skills. My introduction to Geometry and vector analysis was not in High School, but when I learned how to navigate.

Successful racing requires an ability to observe the physical world and understand how it operates. Attention to wind is essential. Competitive sailors are highly sensitized to variations in wind direction and speed. The ability to make observations and predictions regarding the patterns and trends of wind speed and direction is a critical skill for racing success (so much so that people with that skill are in high demand and can, in some classes, earn a living with this skill).

Sailboat racing has been the way that I have become engaged with the physical world. To compete is to be out in God’s creation, study it closely, and wonder in its beauty. Many of us may have had a “conversion experience” where the reality of God’s creation of our world became self – evident. Mine occurred a number of years ago in the Manitou Passage early in the morning as the surface fog lifted and the sun shone on the Sleeping Bear dune. Faced with such beauty, belief became fact for me.

## **A Game of Strategy and Tactics**

Sailboat racing is a game played against other competitors. Whether one-on-one or against a group, your performance is relevant only in how you compare to others. (As opposed to golf, track or other sports where the concept of “personal best” is relevant).

Sailboat races are run according to a detailed set of rules that govern fair competition and the rights and obligations of boats as they maneuver around the course. It’s an interesting bit of trivia that the individual who drafted the first universal set of racing rules is the same person who invented contract bridge. I suspect Cornelius Vanderbilt had a lot of spare time. The rules of racing are, for the most part, self-enforced. It’s instructive to watch children learning how to race. They come from sports where there are umpires and referees making calls, and approach our sport with a “no call, no foul” mentality. It’s an interesting progression to see children grow to a level of maturity where with a moment of reflection, they can concede that their actions violated the rules and voluntarily accept the penalty.

The rules provide a framework for tactics. When competitors meet on the course, what can we do to advance ourselves relative to our competitor? How can we engage them with an advantage? Or, how can we defend ourselves from a competitor with an advantage? Add other boats into the mix and the game gets even more complicated.

Sailboat racing places a premium on the ability to think strategically. The race course is presents a series of questions. Which end of the starting line is favored? What side of the course is favored? How will conditions change over the race and how will that impact our strategy? How should our competitor’s likely strategy impact ours? The ability to craft an accurate strategy prior to the race is a key element for success.

However, like life, things rarely work exactly like we planned. So sailboat racing requires ongoing assessment of our strategy. Is our strategy flawed, or is our current position a result of bad execution? Do we change strategy, or press on? And, facing a strategic failure, do we concede and “follow the leaders” to minimize additional loss? Or, convinced of our superior strategic understanding, continue to split from the leaders, implementing an even more risky strategy? How do we decide when tactical considerations are in conflict with our strategy? Do we “sell short” for an immediate tactical gain, or give up tactical advantage to advance our strategy?

All of these questions are being evaluated while at the same time coping with wind and waves and the demands of controlling the boat. One of the great things about racing is that done properly it fully engages the mind and body. You literally do not have a capacity to worry about things outside of the race. (Or, as I point out to folks... if you’re thinking about what you have to do ashore after the race, you’re not really racing...).

The skills of strategic planning, evaluating and modifying strategic plans developed on the race course have stood me in good stead in many other areas of my life.

### **An Opportunity for Personal Development**

If the aspects of sailboat racing we've just explored were the end of the story, then sailboat racing would be just another sport. But I believe that there is another aspect to the activity that elevates racing to an activity that provides a paradigm for life. Sailboat racing is simultaneously both an individual endeavor and a team sport that develops qualities of character on which a person can build a successful life.

Consider the following qualities of character are developed by participating in my sport:

- Planning
- Personal Organization
- Punctuality
- Neatness and Orderliness
- Work Ethic
- Communication Skills (including mastery of an arcane vocabulary)
- Situational Awareness
- Patience and Persistence
- Self Confidence

I would like to illustrate the way these characteristics are built by sharing just one story. When my younger daughter was 13 she received an invitation to sail on a brand new 40' boat with an experienced and highly competitive crew of 8 guys. Their interest in Danielle was to provide an extra 100 lbs of moveable ballast to bring the entire crew precisely to the maximum crew weight allowed. Danielle was skeptical about this offer, but after some encouragement decided to give it a try. Driving home after the first day on the water with this group, I asked Dani "how did it go?" She answered that she really enjoyed it, but there was one thing that really bothered her. On the way in after the day of racing the owner of the boat had sat with Dani and complemented her on the contribution she made to the boat but described that her role would be "week-to-week" depending on the weight of the crew assembled for that event. Dani expressed to me that if she was going to commit to this project, she wanted to be on the crew permanently. My response was: "Would you like me to show you how you get to sail every week?" Her response was "Dad, you aren't listening!" My response was "I heard you clearly, but I know a way that you will be guaranteed to sail every weekend. Do you want me to show you how?" She said yes, mostly to provide an opportunity to prove her father wrong.

The next morning, Dani reluctantly got out of bed 90 minutes early. I delivered her to the boat and over the next 90 minutes I taught her how to prepare the boat to go racing. She performed all the tasks, from chamois the decks, to preparing the ice chest, rigging the spinnaker gear and

stowing the mainsail cover. Boat call was at 09:00 and at 8:50 the paid hand whose job it was to prepare the boat came running down the dock, late and panicked that he would be in trouble with the owner because the boat wasn't ready. Coming to the boat and seeing it completely prepared with Dani and I sitting on the dock waiting, he asked "Who did this?" My response was "Dani did". His response was "darling we are going to have a great summer together..." From that day forward, Dani was a permanent part of the crew; so much so that when the crew was overweight, 8 grown guys dieted so they could have their "9<sup>th</sup> man" sail. That lesson of a great work ethic served Dani well throughout her formative years.

With regard to the team aspect of the sport, with small exception, sailboat racing requires a team. The qualities of character developed by our sport include:

- Respect for teammates
- Respect for leadership
- Tolerance
- Generosity.
- Ability to connect with people in an authentic manner.

With regard to that last point, in thinking about my life and my racing career, I realize that the people with whom I am closest are people with whom I have raced. Call it the "band of brothers" affect, but for me, it's an important part of the experience.

Sailboat racing has shaped my life in a number of big and small ways. I learned about this club while motoring out of the Holland channel to race. Because of my participation in my sport I have traveled and developed relationships with a diverse group of talented, inspirational people. I recognized that Anne should be my wife while working alongside her during a Mackinac Race. History repeated itself in our family when my daughter Danielle met her husband through sailboat racing. More than a sport, more than a "lifestyle", sailboat racing has become, for me, a way of life. And I am blessed for it.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to close my remarks this evening by taking a tactical risk.

The question I'd pose is "If sailboat racing can provide a paradigm for a successful life, does it make sense to limit access to the sport to only those who access it by virtue of accident of birth?"

My answer is "No".

Holland is blessed with an active and growing community sailing program: the Macatawa Bay Junior Association. The MBJA is a tenant of and operates from the grounds of Macatawa Bay Yacht Club. It is a completely separate 501 c 3 educational organization that instructs approximately 250 kids per summer in learn-to-sail, learn-to-race, and advanced racing classes. Approximately 50 of our students have a relationship to MBYC. The rest are from the

community at large. The tuition for these classes covers the operating cost of the program and is quite reasonable when compared to other “youth sports” opportunities. Capital costs for equipment are supported by a generous group of donors, some of whom are here tonight. Recently, through the commitment of our donors we were able to secure the services of a nationally recognized program director, “Cappy” Capper. Cappy literally “wrote the book” on how to grow a community-based sailing program. We are working to expand our program by promoting high school teams, college teams, and providing adult learn-to-sail instruction.

If you are interested in learning more about the MBJA, please ask... I strongly believe that this program has the ability to change lives and our community.

To paraphrase:

“Give a kid a soccer participation trophy... make them happy for a day. Teach a kid to sailboat race... change their life forever”.