

WoodenBoat

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Around the World Alone...In Wood
A Runabout for the Pacific Northwest
Schooners of the Canadian Maritimes
Tales of A First-Time Boatbuilder
Clamps for Strip Planking

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BRUCE SCHWAB

Bruce Schwab on a Tightrope

Soul of an artist and spirit of a badger

by Dennis Caprio

Clang, clang, clang, clang. A miniature switching engine announced its intention to shuttle a handful of cars along the narrow-gauge track that separates Portland Yacht Services from the waterfront. “Have you ever been in there?” Bruce Schwab asked, glancing over his right shoulder to indicate a 19th-century two-story brick building, cradled in the arms of the Portland Yacht Services complex. “I love that stuff,” he said without waiting for my answer. The object of his enthusiasm was the Maine Narrow Gauge Railroad Co. & Museum.

Schwab and I sat on a picnic bench a short distance beyond the track, the morning sun of August turning up the heat for another scorcher. He faced the slips and

the mooring field, and I the dockmaster’s shed and the railroad. The dockmaster’s VHF periodically squawked two-way conversations, clipped short by the conventions of marine communications, and the ever-hungry gulls cried “mine, mine, mine,” as they swooped and dived over the water. OCEAN PLANET (“OP”), Bruce’s cold-molded Open 60, sashayed around her mooring within his line of sight. She’d carried him twice around the world—to fifth in class in the Around Alone of 2002–2003 and to ninth overall in the Vendée Globe nonstop solo race around the world of 2004–2005. His affection for her shone as brightly as the sun when he told me that she had emerged from the Vendée in remarkably

good condition. "It's a great boat," he said.

Although a stylish pair of Oakley sunglasses hid Bruce's eyes, I sensed their restless *pas de deux*, choreographed by years of challenging the odds, going his own way, and playing a game of catch-up in the rarefied world of professional solo racing. He sniffled a bit, as though he were fighting a cold, and apologized for being late.

We had agreed to meet at 0800 on a Wednesday. I would phone when I arrived, and he would join me in a matter of minutes. Schwab had written 0900 on his calendar, so my phone call had awoken him. "Nine o'clock it is then," I said. "I'll be here." He arrived about 30 minutes late, admitting that he's frequently behind schedule.

Behind schedule and on a tightrope is where I found him early in September of 2004, less than two weeks before he had to set sail for Les Sables, France, the port from which the Vendée would start on November 8. In Les Sables, Schwab planned to bend on his new mainsail and complete a staggeringly long list of chores (long for so late in the game). He had gambled everything on this attempt at the Vendée—his house in the San Francisco area; the relationship with his longtime mate, Jeanie; his boat; his credit rating; maybe his future.

OCEAN PLANET had been at Portland Yacht Services

for about a year that September. The yard's owner, Phineas Sprague, had donated space in a shed, but it fell short of OP's 60' LOA and leaked rain through the roof. "I always told Phin that we came closer to sinking in the shop than we did on the Southern Ocean," Bruce said. He and his helpers had rigged a tarp to shelter the boat and themselves.

Sprague had met Schwab at The WoodenBoat Show in August of 2003, when the show's revolving venue took it to Rockland, Maine. Bruce had taken OCEAN PLANET to the show to solicit support from the public—to sell T-shirts, fleece pullovers, caps, and other swag emblazoned with the Ocean Planet Foundation logo. Sprague had watched this diminutive, energetic man captivate the public with his sense of humor, disarming smile, glib answers to naïve questions (Why do you want to race around the world? "It's easier than growing up." Is your boat made of wood? "We like to say the boat is composite cellulose fiber."), and grace under fire. Seeing in Schwab the will to fight like a badger to achieve his goal, Sprague offered the space at the yard and some of its services. "I won't do everything for free," he'd said, "but I'll help as much as I can." Schwab said that Phin eventually threw away the yard bill, or most of it.

Charm, good looks, enthusiasm, determination—all

With one hand for the tiller and the other for a winch, Bruce Schwab (opposite) sails OCEAN PLANET to windward through rough seas near the Gulf Stream. The 60' Tom Wiley-designed sloop shows good speed (below) in a moderate breeze.



ERIK SIMONSON/PPL



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

What a difference a rule makes. In light air, OCEAN PLANET (plumb ends, long waterline) sails off Boothbay Harbor, Maine, in company with the restored New York 30 ALERA (long overhangs, short waterline): different times, different rating rules.

— The Building of OCEAN PLANET —

Tom Wylie has an enviable reputation for designing fast boats, and OCEAN PLANET (OP) merely adds to it. With her length measuring 4.8 times greater than her breadth (60' LOA, 12'6" of beam), OP is very narrow by the standards of solo marathon raceboats, which typically have a length-to-beam ratio of less than 3. Like the rest of the fleet, OP has a very shallow underbody and a flat run. She'll surf at the slightest urging. The upwind sail area of 2,196 sq ft and a displacement of about 19,000 lbs indicates her power. Downwind sail area is 5,005 sq ft. Her unstayed carbon rig built by Composite Engineering distinguishes OP from every other boat in the Vendée fleet. The mast at the base is 12" in diameter and has a 7/8" solid carbon wall.

Schooner Creek Boat Works, Portland, Oregon, built OP of wood veneer vacuum-bagged over a core of structural foam. The yard's owner, Steve Rander, calls the system COVE (core, veneer, epoxy). He used the process for the first time in the construction of MAGIC CARPET, a 42' racer/cruiser designed by Robert A. Smith (see WB No. 90, "The Structure of

a Winner"). COVE consists of 1/8" double-diagonal planking of Western red cedar over Klegecell foam. Rander laminated spruce on the outside of his 70' RAGE.

Although COVE won't create the very lightest boat in the fleet, it has other advantages. "It's economical; it's good insulation; it absorbs a punch when you hit it," Schwab said. When you're alone at sea for more than 100 days, what little pleasure you can get from the boat's ambience belowdecks becomes very important. "It's a psychologically good feeling when you're inside the boat looking at wood. It's a warm feeling. To me, there's nothing better-looking than wooden boat structure."

In order to stiffen the structure, Schooner Creek laminated carbon-fiber straps athwartships, which served the same purpose as the bronze straps Herreshoff employed in the construction of highly stressed boats. The deck is thin (2.5mm) birch ply over a honeycomb core. The cabintop and cockpit are foam/carbon.

"To do what we needed, it was the way to go," Bruce said. —D.C.

of these characteristics working in harmony with Schwab's musicality and a willingness to play his guitar at the merest nudge attracted droves of fans and supporters. Some of them lent their hands and gave freely of their time; some gave money, others their products. Together, they formed a psychological flotation device. To meet Schwab one-on-one is to fall under his spell. Even the governor of Maine, John E. Baldacci, seemed smitten—if entertaining Schwab at the Blaine House,

the governor's mansion in Augusta, is any indication. Notwithstanding good wishes, helping hands, and small private donations, Schwab needed more. He needed millions, and that amount of money could come only from corporate sponsors.

Unfortunate for Schwab, he couldn't willy-nilly stroll into corporate offices and expect executives to meet with him. This bit of reality disarmed his most potent weapon of persuasion—his personality. He sent



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

Throughout the Vendée Globe around-the-world race, Bruce often walked out on the boom to handle various rigging chores. Here, it's an easy stroll in pleasant weather. He tells of hanging out there in rough conditions, "...but nobody was around to shoot a photo!"

go sailing. He bought a Baltic Sea Cruiser, a hard-chined boat made of plywood, which he kept in Marina del Rey. "It was actually a pretty cool boat," Bruce said, and it gave father and son their first taste of the sailing life.

Cool or not, the boat failed to impress Bruce's mother, for the best reason of all. Len had failed to tell his wife about the purchase, which fired the first salvo in the marriage war. "My mother wasn't going to tolerate that," Bruce said. Mr. Schwab eventually sold the boat, and Mrs. Schwab bore two more sons, the first a year after Bruce was born and the other three years later. Then the family moved to Seattle and Len to another job. Some time after Bruce turned nine years old, his parents divorced. The boys lived with Mom, and visited Dad during the summer. These visits opened the door to Bruce's lifelong association with wooden boats.

Dad had bought a wooden-hulled double-ended ketch designed by Billy Atkin. He kept it in the San Juan Islands, and the boys helped him maintain it and sail it. "His goal," Bruce said, "was to sail the thing to Hawaii." So in the spring

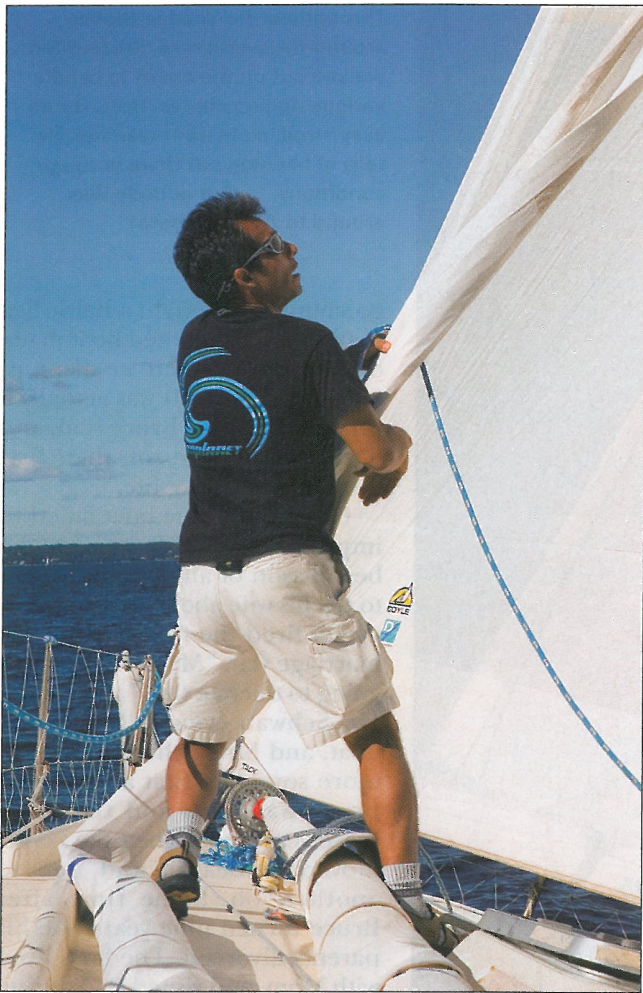
promotional packages—more of them than he cares to remember—but his status as a relatively unknown quantity (he's not Ellen McArthur) no doubt relegated those proposals to the round file.

Although everyone seems to ask "Why?", maybe the better question is, "How?" Hidden among the details of how Bruce made the journey from rigger and entertainer to the only American skipper on an American Open 60 to finish the Vendée Globe, we find the man. "I guess I should start from the beginning," he said.

Schwab went sailing for the first time when he was five years old, as he remembers it. His father, Len, who was born in Illinois and took canoeing trips with his brothers, always dreamed of sailing. He married and moved to southern California, forever chasing the best job opportunities in his field of engineering. There, Bruce was born in 1960, and Len realized the beginnings of his dream to

of 1973, Len Schwab, accompanied by a couple of his friends, set sail for the islands, but the Pacific Ocean—and the boat—had other plans. The weather turned ugly, and the boat wasn't up to dealing with it. Neither were the crew. Although Len was still a rank amateur sailor, he and his mates had the sense to abort the passage and head south along the coast to Marina del Rey. Safely tied up there, they discovered that the internal ballast had shifted, and the boat had developed a disconcerting list. When Bruce and his brothers arrived for their summer visit, they found the boat in disarray and on the block. That was not, however, the end of Dad's quest for the perfect boat.

"We piled into a VW van and a trailer with all our stuff in it," Bruce said, "and a dog and my dad's girlfriend, and did this big cross-country adventure. Stopped in Illinois to see the family and went to the East Coast to find another boat." Their search led them to Chesapeake Bay, where they eventually found a 40' cutter designed by



A crew of one, Bruce works the foredeck.

Winthrop Warner and built in 1942 by Paul Luke. Luke had planked her with mahogany over oak frames and fastened her with bronze screws.

“Galvanized bolts through the floors had busted all the frames,” Bruce said. “The garboards were all loose, and the thing leaked like a sieve.” So they did the impossible. They sailed her to Florida, one hand for the helm, the other working the handle of the Whale Gusher 25 bilge pump. In Florida, they lived aboard the boat and worked on her for about six months. Although she still leaked, the Schwabs sailed SARAH B (after Bruce’s grandmother) to the Bahamas and dropped their hook off a small community near George Town in the Exumas.

They had to slow the leaking before they set sail again, and chance played the starring role in what happened next. SARAH B didn’t have a generator, and who had ever heard of a cordless drill? The Schwabs couldn’t fix the leaking without drilling holes, so they tied up next to a big fiberglass cruiser and talked the owner into lending them AC power. Bruce’s father ordered strips of oak, resorcinol glue, fastenings, and other items to use in the repair and had them sent to George Town. They laminated three frames into the boat with Anchorfast nails and glue. Dad then drilled the pilot holes for the bolts from the inside of the boat. He plugged each one with his finger while Bruce and his brothers dipped the bolts

into polysulfide bedding, dived over the side, and hammered the bolts home. “That got us to Jamaica,” Bruce said. In Jamaica, they hauled the boat and, while they lived aboard, installed 21 laminated frames below the waterline. “The thing hardly leaked a drop after that,” Bruce said. From Jamaica, they sailed west through the Panama Canal, up the coast to Costa Rica and then to San Diego. “We arrived in San Diego after the whole adventure, and my dad had about \$20 left.”

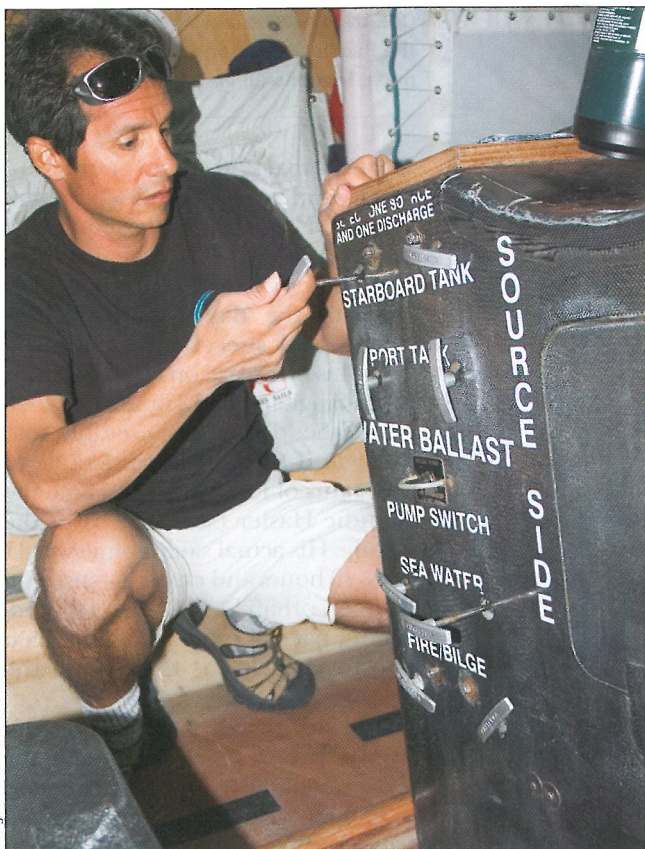
Bruce’s introduction to the world of high-performance wooden boats came in the form of IMPROBABLE, a 42’ lightweight downwind screamer that was designed by the late Gary Mull and cold-molded in New Zealand. David Allen, a well-known sailor from San Francisco, owned and raced her successfully all over North America. In 1971, Allen drove her to first place overall, winning the Pineapple Cup, in the Miami/Montego Bay (Jamaica) Race. The world-renowned designer Ron Holland was among the crew for that race. “It was a landmark boat,” Bruce said, and one that he’d read about in the marine press when the Schwabs were in Jamaica.

They saw her in the flesh, bright red hull smoldering in the sunlight, tied up in Newport, California, one of their ports of call as they slowly beat up the coast toward San Francisco. “I said, ‘Dad, there’s a cool boat.’ And he said, ‘What the hell would we do with that?’”

As the Schwabs slogged northward, which is almost always a beat, they stopped at Morro Bay to wait for easier conditions offshore. “It’s blowing like hell, and there are a bunch of cruisers there trying to get up the coast.” Then IMPROBABLE arrived. Bruce helped the crew tie up and asked if they planned to wait for better weather. No, they told Bruce, they had to deliver the boat to San Francisco and would get under way the next day. When the Schwabs made San Francisco, they spotted IMPROBABLE again and asked the crew how their passage went. They explained that they’d motorsailed. Although the boat pounded a bit, they averaged about 7 knots. Len Schwab was impressed—impressed enough to buy IMPROBABLE when she came onto the market in 1976. They took her to Seattle and moved aboard. Bruce went back to school.

He’d missed half of eighth grade, all of ninth, and half of tenth, normally very important years in the life of a teenager, but Bruce was accustomed to “winging it.” His life up to 1976 had been significantly to the left of normal, so this interruption in schooling likely caused little harm. He’d also developed strong enthusiasms. “I was a magazine hound and fanatic about racing boats,” he said. He also loved to play the guitar; his mother had taught him from the time he was about nine years old. When he was in the Bahamas with his father, he listened to recordings of Peter, Paul, and Mary to teach himself the technique of fingerpicking. Although the occasional lesson filled in a few gaps in his knowledge, Bruce mostly taught himself to play at the high level he does now.

In spite of his time away from school, he finished high school in 1978 and entered the University of Washington, for what turned out to be less than a full term. Bruce and formal schooling didn’t get along at all well. Meanwhile, Len moved to California and went into the aerospace



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

This valve manifold controls the flow of water to the port and starboard ballast tanks. When OCEAN PLANET sits at rest, or travels slowly, an electric pump moves the ballast water. When she's going right along in a breeze of wind, scoops bring the water aboard with no drain on the electrical system.

became involved with the Singlehanded Sailing Society, racing IMPROBABLE. One of the races sanctioned by the society is called the Three Bridge Fiasco. The 21-mile course starts off the Golden Gate Yacht Club and includes three marks—the Crissy Field (Blackaller) buoy, Red Rock, and Treasure Island. Boats may run the course in either direction and round the marks in any order and in either direction. The elder Schwab goaded his son into entering the race, so Bruce borrowed a Carrera 38 from Svendsen and won what was his first-ever singlehanded race. He raced that boat for a number of years, winning his division of the double-handed Farallones race eight times.

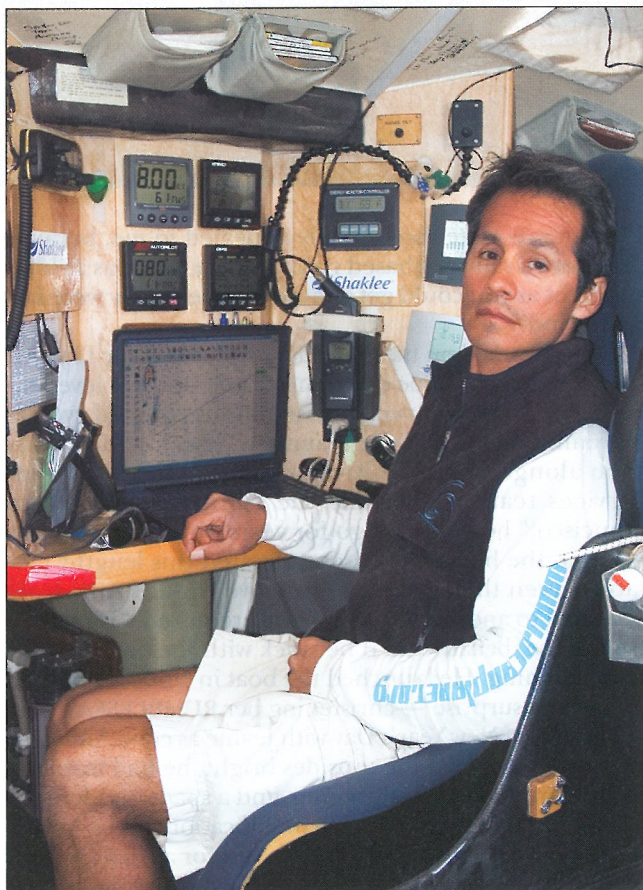
Meanwhile (1980), Bruce had traded his half-share of a Santana 22 for a 30-Square-Meter named HARLEQUIN. She was built in 1930, plank-on-frame, by Abeking & Rasmussen. "Fitted planks," Bruce said. "No caulking." Every one of her frames was broken, and during World War II, someone had taken the lead from her keel, so when Bruce bought her, the ballast was cast iron. The previous owner had sailed the boat since the 1970s but didn't know how she came to the U.S. "It's like a Dragon on steroids," Bruce said. "Very narrow, very light; longer than a Six-Meter and about half the weight.

industry. Bruce headed for Santa Cruz, California, the Mecca of ultralight sailboats and Bill Lee's "fast is fun" school of design and construction. He adopted a vegetarian lifestyle, stopped eating sugar, and played guitar at a place called Nature's Harvest.

"I did the whole Santa Cruz thing," Bruce said. "I was 19 years old and fell in love for the first time." Most important to his future, Bruce also fell in love with the ultralight racing boats. To fill out his income, he repaired fiberglass boats for Homer Lighthall, who'd been one of Bill Lee's craftsmen. He also sailed aboard Olson 30s, Moore 24s, and with Terry Alsberg on and Express 27 (designed by Carl Schumacher). "I learned that I wasn't going to make a living playing guitar, so I went to work at North Coast Yachts." Located in Alameda across the bay from San Francisco, North Coast built the Wylie Wabbit, a hot 24' 875-lb sloop designed by Tom Wylie, and the Wylie 34.

After his stint at North Coast, Bruce took a job at Svendsen's Boat Works, also in Alameda. During his interview, Svend Svendsen told Bruce that he needed someone who could paint a large motoryacht, stem to stern, and do it without constant supervision. "Sure, I can do that," Bruce said, even though he'd never spray-painted a boat in his life. He read the instructions and asked the head sprayer a lot of questions. In 1980, Bruce took over the rigging shop. He would spend nearly 20 years at the yard.

Bruce's father moved back to San Francisco and



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

Bruce works the nav station while sitting in a swiveling Sparco seat that usually is found in race cars.

OCEAN PLANET makes her way along the Pacific Coast: long waterline, bendy mast, lots of sail, very fast.



ERIK SIMONSON/PPL

The Square-Meter boats really appealed to me, because they were a sail-area-based rule, and the hull was as long and light as you could get away with. They really were fast downwind.”

Bruce worked on the 30-Square on and off for 13 years. Bicycle racing became one of his distractions. “I loved it,” he said. Photos of Bruce dressed in his colorful cycling kit reminded me of Tyler Hamilton, who for a few years rode alongside Lance Armstrong on the U.S. Postal Services team. “I became the running joke in San Francisco,” he said. “I’d go for years without doing anything to the boat.” Svendsen tolerated this lengthy gestation, even though he had to move HARLEQUIN from one shed to another as paying work required. “He couldn’t fire me, because he’d be stuck with the boat,” Bruce said, laughing. He launched the boat in 1993—“much to everyone’s surprise”—christening her RUMBLESEAT, and sailed her on New Year’s Day with Jeanie as crew. Although Bruce had finished the topsides bright, he had installed an aluminum mast, rod rigging, and a spade rudder (see sidebar for more details of the modifications). The Master Mariners Benevolent Association, out for a friendly race, invited Bruce to join them. He passed everyone before

the first mark; waited for them to catch up; and then passed them again. “That was the last time the Master Mariners let my boat race.”

Although Bruce raced RUMBLESEAT in the Bay Area for a few years—and successfully, I should add—his first place on corrected time in the Singlehanded TransPac of 1996 established Bruce as a credible solo racer and raised RUMBLESEAT to the status of legend. He became the Blondie Hasler (see page 5) of the Pacific. His actual sailing time was 11 days, 10 hours and change—just a little longer than Stan Honey’s record-setting pace aboard a Cal 40. “That trip to Hawaii was the one of the greatest rides I ever had.”

In 1997, Pacific Sail Expo invited RUMBLESEAT to be a guest at the show, which started Bruce on a round of seminars about rigging and sailing technique. The boat also established a reputation for Bruce that lives to this day—a willingness to defy convention, to experiment, and to have the doggedness to complete a project his way. “I was still in debt up to my eyeballs,” Bruce said, “and I really needed to sell RUMBLESEAT and get on with my life.” He ran an ad in *WoodenBoat*, which read, as Bruce remembers it, “Beat up on modern ultralights with a beautiful traditional

boat.” The ploy worked. Robin Tattersall, a doctor from Tortola, British Virgin Islands, bought her and christened her DIVA. He still owns her.

During Bruce’s time in San Francisco, he and designer Tom Wylie became friends, both having a strong interest in the Around Alone and Vendée Globe solo marathon races. They followed the exploits of Brad Van Liew aboard his Class II boat BALANCE BAR during the 1998–1999 Around Alone, and the two of them began to think about the boat they’d design and build for that race. In light of the equipment failures many of the boats suffered, Bruce and Tom agreed that a simple boat would serve the solo sailor better than a complex one. The theory behind the simple boat says that the skipper will be able to sail the boat closer to 100 percent for a greater percentage of the time than he would a complex boat, one that required a considerable amount of physical effort to keep in the groove in the ever-changing conditions.

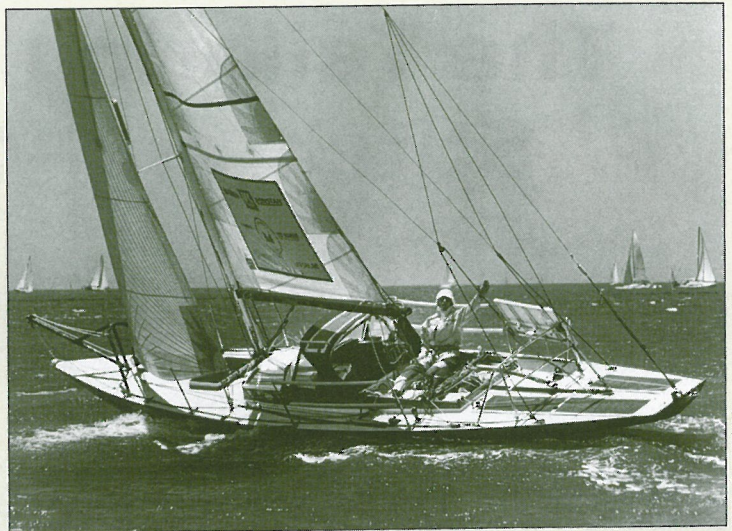
Their collaboration spawned OCEAN PLANET, a relatively narrow 60’ Class I boat with a freestanding rig. Construction began in 1999 at Schooner Creek Boat

The Making of — RUMBLESEAT —

When Bruce Schwab bought his 30-Square-Meter, she was on her last legs. If he hoped to sail her, even casually, he'd have to refit her extensively. On the other hand, he couldn't resist making her better.

He removed the original deck planking and installed a plywood deck sheathed in fiberglass and set in epoxy. He turned the hull upside down and applied a single course of $\frac{1}{8}$ " Port Orford cedar veneer on a diagonal—this sheathed in fiberglass and set in epoxy. He removed all of the sister frames and then laminated new frames over the top of the original broken ones. The old frames acted as a spacer between the skin and the laminated frames. This modification made the boat very stiff.

The cockpit was open, so if the boat were pooped by a large enough wave, she'd fill up and sink. Bruce raised the cockpit sole, installed big drains, and built a bridge deck and waterproof companionway hatch. The self-bailing cockpit made her safe for ocean passages.



BRUCE SCHWAB

Bruce sails his modified 30-Square-Meter, RUMBLESEAT, out from San Francisco Bay at the start of the 1996 TransPac race.

Bruce cut off the keel, leaving the original shape of the underbody intact. He fabricated a steel fin keel with a 1,800-lb lead bulb on the tip. This increased the draft from $5\frac{1}{2}'$ to $7'$ and reduced the boat's displacement by 700 lbs. "Svend, bless his heart, let me get away with having the yard do all this work."

He installed an aluminum mast and rod rigging and set up the boat to fly asymmetrical kites. —DC

Works in Portland, Oregon (see sidebar on page 48 for details of the construction). They had planned to make the 2000–2001 Vendée Globe.


Beginning construction on a high-tech racing boat before Bruce had the money to pay the yard bill involved a great leap of faith, but he knew that he had to show prospective sponsors the seriousness of his intentions. While he waited for response to the proposals he'd sent to corporations in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, members of the marine industry pitched in. "MAS Epoxies was the first to come aboard," Bruce said. Composite Engineering made the mast, and Forespar made the carbon bowsprit. A friend of Bruce's, who worked for AMD, arranged introductions, and eventually the U.K. branch of the computer company donated computers and \$10,000. Kevin and Shauna Flanigan, interested in making a grant to a project that would foster awareness of the world's oceans, contributed \$500,000. "That got the boat in the water," Bruce said, "but we still needed to perform a host of miracles." They couldn't produce those miracles on time and missed the 2000–2001 Vendée Globe. Brad Van Liew persuaded Bruce to enter the Around Alone for 2002–2003, reasoning that the experience and exposure would go a long way toward securing sponsorship for the next Vendée.

"The Around Alone was a novel's worth of adventures and stunts to complete the race." In an effort to pile on more sail area, Wylie and Schwab made the boom too long. It broke twice during the race. He made

two unscheduled stops, one in Spain and one in the Falkland Islands, and every scheduled stop was a fiasco. "It was a miracle that we finished," Bruce said. "I've never been so proud of last place."

Schwab's epic struggle to reach the start of the Vendée Globe of 2004–2005 could fill the pages of a thick book. The emotional strain had drained the life from his face by September of 2004, but not the determination from his soul. "I always had dreams of being competitive," Bruce said, which likely kept him going when most observers gave up on his chances to make the start.

Still massively in debt, Bruce looks forward. He's moved to Maine and has grown wiser. "The lesson I try to give the kids when I talk at schools and do my shows is that if you really want to do something and don't let up...show that you're really serious about it, people will line up behind you and help you do it." Working with the children? "That turned out to be the most gratifying part of the whole experience."

What's next? "I'd like to do a Maine-built, all-American boat and go back and try to win it," Bruce said, but he doesn't necessarily have to be the skipper. "Maybe a guy like Kip Stone..." He'd also like to have a family, now that he's 45 years old. Whatever he chooses to do, we can bet the farm that he'll bring all of his enthusiasm and determination to the program. 

Dennis Caprio, formerly editor of Small Boat Journal and senior editor at Yachting, is a freelance writer living in Connecticut.