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SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 2007 | SECTION B

THE PLAIN DEALER



LISA DEJONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

To pass the time during his solo sails, Paul Nickerson takes photographs, polishes the chrome and listens to *Indians* games and music.

Alone on the lake

Solo Lake Erie event
challenges sailors

MOLLY KAVANAUGH
Plain Dealer Reporter

At night, the Great Lakes can appear vast and empty, especially to a solo sailor. "Is anyone out there?" a sailor once radioed while racing alone on Lake Huron. Within minutes, other single-handed sailors within the 20-mile broadcast range chimed in. "We're here."

Veteran solo sailor Wally McMinn likes to tell this story to illustrate both the solitude and camaraderie of the sport.

"You're out there alone," McMinn said. "But you're not."

Such will be the case Saturday, when at least 15 sailors are expected to compete in a solo race across Lake Erie, a grueling and risky 312-mile run from Michigan to New York and down to a finish in Erie, Pa.

Racing nonstop, day and night, for as long as four days, competitors in the Lake Erie Solo Challenge must rely on wind power for most of the course. They will be allowed to use engines only to maneuver around drifting weeds near the islands and to power lights.

The Lake Erie race is sponsored by the Great Lakes Singlehanded Society, an elite group of sailors who have completed other 300-mile solo races.

The competitors depart Saturday morning and, depending on the wind, could arrive in Erie, Pa., as late as Tuesday. A luncheon and awards ceremony will be held Wednesday afternoon at the Erie Yacht Club.

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Why do solo sailors do it?

"It's kind of a test," one says.

Surviving in solitude:

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The Great Lakes Singlehanded Society:

Complete a 300-mile solo challenge, and you're in.

Sailing solo from an armchair:

Read their adventures without getting seasick.

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Alone on the lake

15 sailors will make the solo trek from Michigan to New York to the finish line in Erie, Pa.

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MOLLY KAVANAUGH | PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

A brief history of the Great Lakes Singlehanded Society

After 17 sailors soloed from Port Huron to Mackinac Island in 1979, they decided to form a club. They called it the Great Lakes Singlehanded Society (www.solosailor.org).

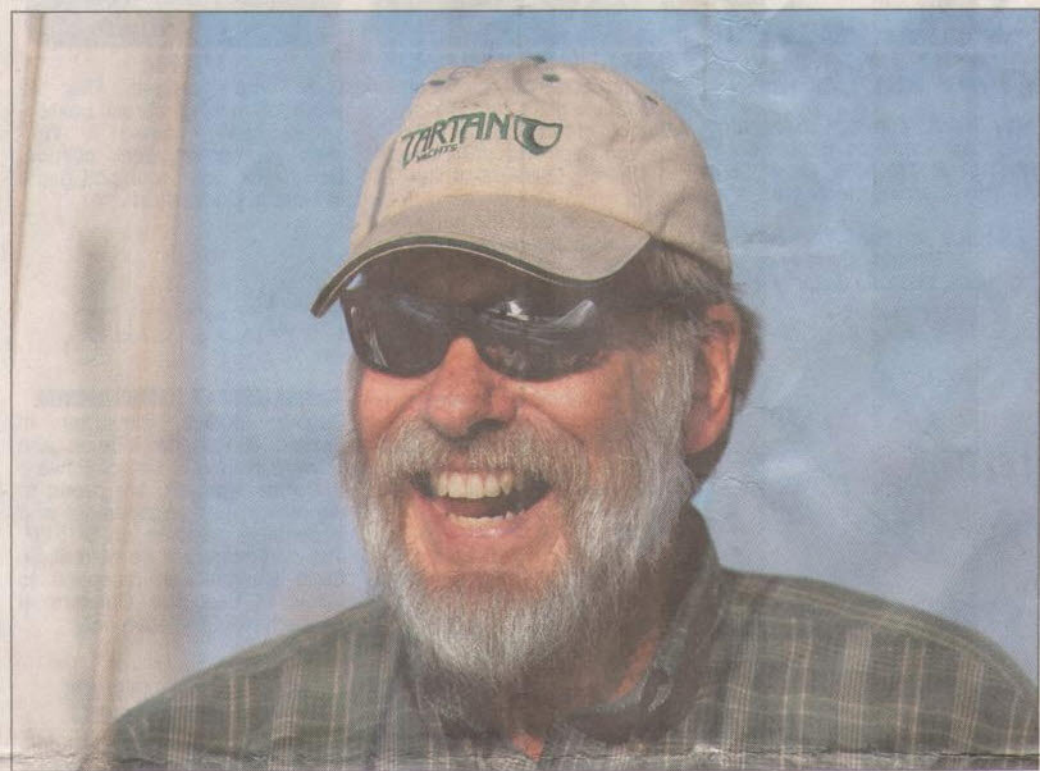
The only way to get into the society is to complete one of the 300-mile challenge races, a feat accomplished by about 250 sailors from the United States and Canada. The members include men and women, age 25 to their early 70s, from all walks of life.

This year, the Lake Erie Solo Challenge was added to the lineup, bringing the number of challenges to four. The society also sponsors shorter races and encourages regattas to offer a category for singlehanded sailors.

Safety is a big focus of the society. Before sailors can compete, they must complete a 100-mile, 24-hour solo sail. Boats must be equipped with a life raft, which can be rented for the race, and sailors must wear a safety harness tethered to the boat whenever they are out of the cabin. Sailors must check in either with another competitor or the race committee via marine radio or cell phone every six hours.

McMinn, society member and chairman of the Lake Erie race, said every sailor should know how to solo. Many sailors set out with a crew on a trip but through inexperience, illness or injury have to rely on their own skills to get the boat back to dock safely. Sailing solo is a good way to develop those skills, McMinn said.

Since the society started, three sailors have died while racing.



LISA DEJONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

Paul Nickerson's secret ingredient: Ginger ale.

Why do solo sailors do it?

Paul Nickerson, 56, director of WOIO Channel 19's commercial production and a Strongsville resident, has logged 3,000 miles sailing single-handed.

"The appeal of solo sailing is using the boat whenever I want," Nickerson said as he sorted through a stash of flares stowed on NickNack, a 37-foot Tartan docked at Edgewater Yacht Club.

Bill Kruger of Huron can't explain the appeal. "That's the question of the ages," the 61-year-old businessman said, musing that with his children grown and his wife content to stay on land, he's too stubborn to stop sailing.

John Ollila, 60, a retired teacher who lives in Mentor, explains his interest this way: "It's kind of a test to see if you can do it."

Wally McMinn, 67, a Michigan dentist and race chairman, recalls what it is like to reach the finish. "It's a profound sense of accomplishment, a warm, warm glow," McMinn said.

What do solo sailors eat and how do they sleep?

■ Nickerson likes to start the morning with corned beef hash and eggs and nibble during the day on peanuts, cashews and carrots and other crunchy veggies. He always packs ginger ale, a natural antidote for seasickness. And his alarm goes off every 30 minutes. He never knows when he might need a wake-up call.

■ Kruger is a big fan of grilled cheese sandwiches. He avoids sugar and caffeine. He usually dozes in the cockpit, closing his eyes 10 to 20 minutes each hour. "I never set an alarm," he said. "Anything that changes with the boat, you can sense it."

■ Ollila makes omelets by pouring Eggbeaters into a sealed plastic bag and placing the bag in a pan of boiling water for five minutes. He sleeps below, with a timer set for 10 minutes right by his side.

■ McMinn never leaves the dock without his wife's cruising cookies — a concoction of oatmeal, chocolate chips, raisins and nuts. He sleeps in the cockpit and sets an alarm to wake him every 15 to 20 minutes.

They save any beer drinking for when they return to port.