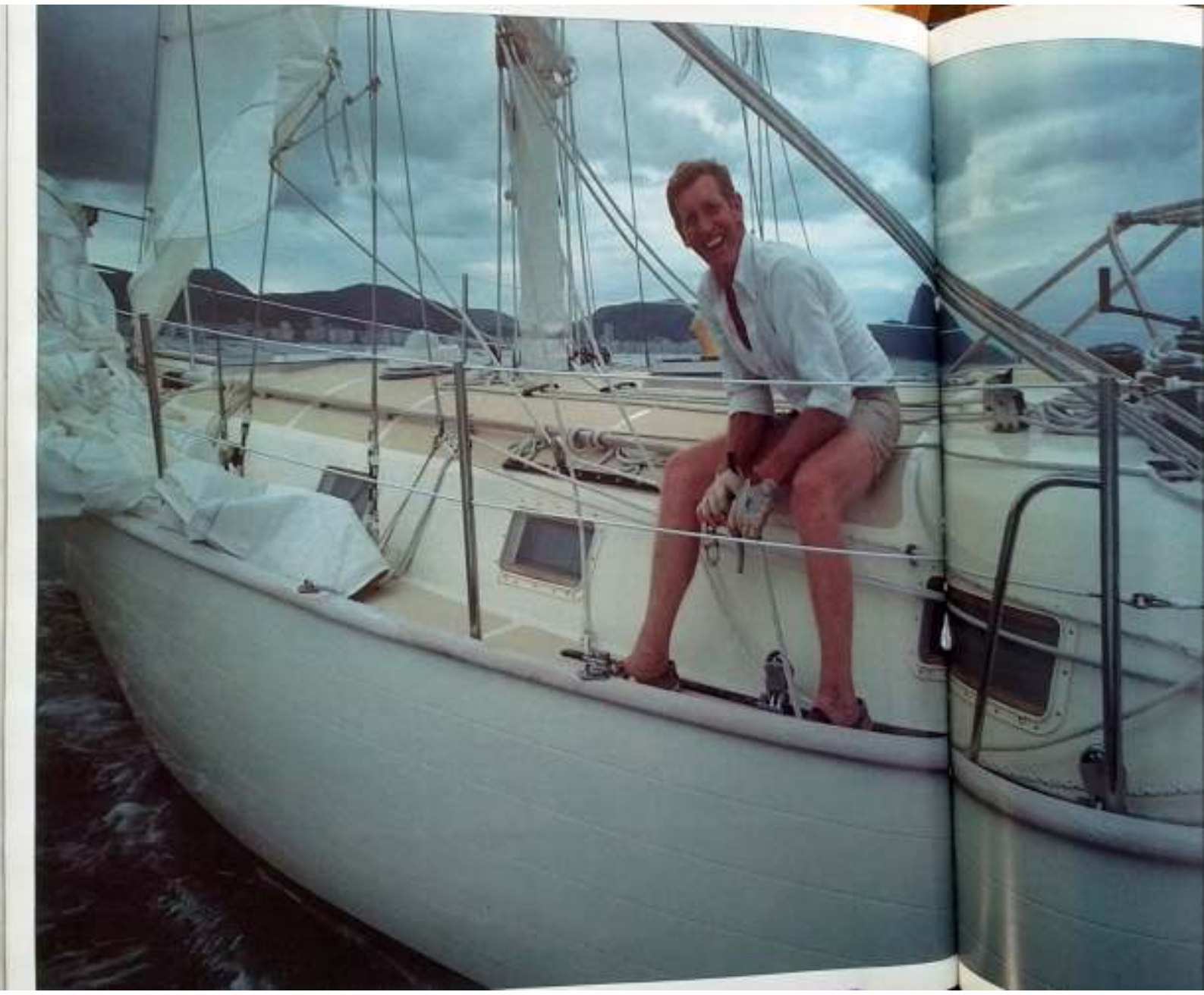
FRANCIS STOKES

SINGLEHANDER EXTRAORDINARY (AND ORDINARY)



Francis Stokes had a dinner bet with fellow competitor Bill Homewood that he would beat him into Newport at the end of the 1980 Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race (OSTAR). It looked as if he might be successful—until he hit a pocket of calms 100 miles east of Nantucket Light. Stokes was wallowing out there for a day, sails flapping and nothing happening. That was until the Coast Guard came along. □ "The Coast Guard spotted me on radar," Stokes says as he recollects the incident. "But they never came up on the radio. They circled a few times, just watching me. There I was with my race numbers on, just looking back. Finally, they came up on the radio; but that was after they spent the last 20 minutes staring at me." □ Stokes chuckles. "There were three officers on board, and they said they wanted to board my boat for a routine safety check. Something about compliance with U.S. law. I think it was a pretext for boarding so they could look for drugs, although they never mentioned drugs. Well, they left me with a list of shortcomings. My fire extinguisher didn't have a tag on it, my MSD wasn't working, and I didn't have a bell. They were very nice guys. It was an expensive boat, and they had some good talent there. I was just sitting out there anyway. Wasn't moving. So it was kind of a diversion for me."

In these photos, Francis Stokes finishes the third leg of the BOC Challenge in style, flying a bright spinnaker on the run into Rio and looking fit and well-scrubbed on deck. He finished the 8200-mile passage in 59 days, rounding Cape Horn within sight of land in what he described as "the most tremendous experience of my life."

Stokes finally got his wish. He beat Homewood, who was sailing the 32' trimaran *Third Turtle*, and collected a free dinner. He was eleventh in the Gipsy Moth Class (boats 32' to 44') on *Mooneshine*, a production Valiant 40. Homewood, who had said at the start in Plymouth, England, that his greatest wish was to beat "that bloody old fart Francis Stokes," was twelfth.

The interlude at Nantucket Light cut across the grain of what friends and colleagues know of Francis Stokes. At age 57, he is, above all, consistent. And he is thorough. That the Coast Guard would find him short on anything was a stroke of luck for the men who boarded Stokes's boat. And in keeping with the nature of the man, a source of merriment for Stokes.

He fits the stereotype of the lone sailor about as closely as saying a seagull lives in trees. He is, in fact, as connected to land as an individual can get. Stokes is the father of five children, ages 17-28; he has a small grandchild, a 67-year-old home on a tree-lined street in Moorestown, N.J., and a wife of 30 years who teaches piano lessons in the family living room. When he's home, he does the grocery shopping, balances the family checkbook and pays the bills. "It's a nice place, it really is," Stokes says of the family home on Maple Avenue. "I rather look forward to spending time there in the summer by the pool and under the trees. It's very attractive. But it always needs work. You have this pile of work looming over your head. Like the roof needs work, or the cellar needs cleaning and refurbishing and on and on. There's no end to it. . . I've always been a person who hates to hire help. I'm more comfortable when I do things myself. That's been my way of operating. I've always tried to manage on my own."

It has been that kind of attitude that has seen Francis Stokes through two OSTARs, three Bermuda One-Two Races and, most recently, the BOC Challenge singlehanded yacht race around the world. Stokes was within a hair's width of winning Class II honors in that race, but the Japanese entrant, Yukoh Tada, beat him by less than 36 hours. "I worked, and I worried," Stokes says of that last 5300-mile leg from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The stakes were high: a $25,000 cash prize and an elaborate gold and silver trophy from the BOC Group, which sponsored the race, slipped through his fingers. But that wasn't why he wanted to do the race.

"I wanted to see what the ocean was like, for myself," Stokes says of the adventure. "That's the reason I first sailed the Atlantic in 1970. I guess that's as good as any reason for going." Stokes discards the word adventure with the same aplomb as the street urchin who insists he's not looking for trouble. But sailing alone anywhere looks adventure in the face. And Francis Stokes has seen his share.

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Stokes was born in Moorestown on March 28, 1926, eight miles from where his Quaker ancesters first stepped onto American soil in 1677. His grandfather, John Whitall, was a sea captain who was born in 1800 and went to sea at the age of 23. Stokes was brought up as a Quaker, but believes that the Quakerism his grandfather practiced bordered on the obsessive. Stokes has spent long hours reading the old man's logs. "He had a flair for numbers, I'm sure," Stokes says. "So he learned navigation. He was quite different from the other sailors, as you can imagine, because he never employed coarse language or bought women in the ports they went to. It's a wonder the rest of the crew didn't beat him up. He sounds insufferable. But I'm sure he made himself valuable to the officers of the ship.

"I remember being struck by his logs because he was more absorbed in his spiritual journey than he was in the details of his sailing, or even describing the Chinese ports, which would have been really fascinating. But what do we hear when he gets in port? He thanks his heavenly father for safe deliverance on the voyage."

Stokes says that as a child he was taught to say "thee" and "thou." As an adult, traces of that Society of Friends background remain. In the third leg of the BOC round-the-world race, Stokes was becalmed for seven hours just 17 miles from the finish line in Rio de Janeiro. Just as he had written about this frustration in his log, a breeze came up, allowing him to cross the line under full spinnaker. "Oh ye of little faith," he later wrote in his log.

Stokes and his two older sisters spent many summers at a small cottage at Seaside Park, N.J., just north of what is now Island Beach State Park. Living in Moorestown was too far from the water—eight miles from the Delaware River, but 40 miles to the seashore. "It was along a barrier beach and I had ample opportunity to look out over the ocean," Stokes says. "I think I always wanted to see beyond. I wondered what it was like to really move out on the water." Stokes sailed a Comet during those days, but never raced. He insists that to this day he has not acquired a keen sense of racing; he says that his sons, Whitall, 21, and Arthur, 17, both give him grief about that.

Whitall sent his father a letter midway during the BOC Challenge. He teased him about having a slow boat, and then offered this advice: "This race is only half over. It sounds like you just have to get that spinnaker up more and do some hand steering."

Ironically, it was Francis Stokes who won a small boat one-design race shortly after the BOC Challenge was over. The BOC Group organized a race among the solo skippers in Illusions, the 10' replicas of a full-scale 12-meter. The race was only for fun—an around-the-buoys skirmish adjacent to the docks where the BOC competitors' boats were tied up. Stokes won, to his own delight and not to anyone's surprise.

Stokes's childhood ended rather abruptly when he signed up for the Army at age 17. He had spent the previous 13 years at a private Friends school in Moorestown and convinced the headmaster of the school to let him take half of his senior year courses in the summer so he could graduate in February instead of June. In April, 1944, he joined the Army Air Corps, less

than a month after he turned 18. "It seems to me that I was the only one at the time who did that," Stokes says. "The Quakers, with their peace testimony, rather expected me to apply for conscientious objector status, but I had not the slightest inclination to do that."

The romanticism of flying was partly responsible. But Stokes ended up wasting 20 months in a reserve pool awaiting training. The Army finally discharged him in the fall of 1945, and he entered Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. Stokes went through a program tailored for returning veterans in 2½ years. He was graduated as an economics major and Phi Beta Kappa in June, 1948. He worked a short while in a Del Monte plant in California to gain experience for working in his father's food-processing business in Vincentown, N.J.

The Francis C. Stokes Co. was entering hard financial times and was nearly bankrupt. Being the only son in the family, Stokes felt compelled to step in. He rescued the failing business through hard work and ingenuity, putting in long hours and attacking the most menial jobs himself. It was a trait he picked up from his mother—an indefatigable woman who spent a lifetime volunteering her time to civic and community projects. Stokes has the same energy, but it has gone in other directions. "Francis got along well with the employees at the plant," his wife, Nancy, says of those years he spent in the family business. "He was always ready to go into the plant at any hour of the night to fix a piece of equipment that broke down. He was never afraid to roll up his sleeves and work with the rest of them."

Opportunities for Stokes to indulge himself in things he might have preferred to do were lost along the way. Against his father's wishes, he enrolled in a music program at Columbia Teacher's College in New York City. He had learned to play the piano in college and dreamed about having music as a career. Unfortunately, family pressures made the plan untenable, and Stokes was back at the food processing plant after a year. The factory, 12 miles from Moorestown, was canning raw vegetables and tomato juice in the early days. Eventually, it got into the business of canning other products such as Hawaiian Punch, Gatorade and, oddly enough, dog food. Stokes calls it "reprocessing," because it meant taking processed foods and reconstituting them in another form. It was a natural evolution for New Jersey's dwindling farms.

Stokes made the business regain its health, but it chewed through 27 years of his life. When he finally sold the company in 1976, he was ready for a change. "A gentleman came into the office one day and said, ' I want to buy your business,' " Stokes recalls. "I thought, if you don't sell it now, you may spend your entire lifetime in this one business. I was 50 years old at the time, so I thought maybe I would make the change. He was serious enough, we came to terms, and, by golly, we did it. I was planning to do the 1976 OSTAR anyway, so it all worked out."

Stokes married in 1952. His wife, the former Nancy Taylor, of Westerly, R.I., was brought up in a Navy family and spent most of her life near the water. She knew how to sail; she loved music; and she too was a Quaker. She raced with Francis and the children after the family bought its first cruising boat in 1968. They sailed weekend races out of the Corinthian Yacht Club of Cape May, N.J., and occasionally they would take weekend jaunts together. "You experience ocean sailing that way," Nancy says now. "I have never worried sailing with Fran. He was always right on it; I was never with him that he didn't know exactly where he was."

The family is dispersed now, and only 17-year-old Arthur lives at home. He has not sailed with his father as much as Whitall, who made two transatlantic crossings with him. But Arthur is still very much involved in what his father does. The two took a ham radio course together before the 1980 OSTAR so they could talk while he was at sea. And Arthur flew to Sydney, Australia, during the BOC Challenge to help his father prepare the boat for the next leg—the dangerous rounding of Cape Horn along the

Singlehanded sailing is a family affair for Stokes. His wife, Nancy, joined him in Rio, below; to prepare Mooneshine for the final BOC leg, son Arthur had done the same in Sydney, as well as keeping in touch with his father on ham radio; son Whitall made two transatlantic trips with his father to deliver boats to Plymouth for the 1976 and 1980 OSTAR starts.

route to Rio de Janeiro. At times, the two looked like school chums rather than father and son; Francis with his long, wiry frame and shock of red hair that refuses to concede age; and Arthur, the huskier-built son with brown instead of blue eyes, but with the same earnest look about them. They spent hours on the 39' *Mooneshine*, refastening the deck hardware, changing frayed lines and leading antenna wires. At dusk, the two of them could be seen trudging down the dock together in search of a "simple" meal that more often than not was a McDonald's near their hotel. The night his father sailed into Newport Harbor at the end of the round-the-world race, Arthur was there. "I'll never forget that sight as long as I live," he said. It had been a dramatic moment, even for the casual onlooker, as Stokes sailed across the finish line in a teeming rainstorm and driving southwesterly. The floodlights of following camera crews illuminated *Mooneshine's* mainsail, and the boat looked like something out of a Jules Verne novel. For Arthur, the impact was immeasurable.

Whitall has been less visible, mainly because of school. As a third-year student at the Webb Institute of Naval Architecture, his support has been limited mainly to letters of encouragement. Before the 1976 OSTAR, Whitall helped sail the Valiant 40 to England for the start. "My older son was 13 that year, and for some reason my wife let him accompany me," Stokes says. "It's hard to imagine him now. He was just a little boy then. My wife has always had a rather ridiculous faith in my sailing ability—much more than is warranted.

"We were three or four days out when we got in a pretty good gale, and the self-steering went, and I didn't exactly know what to do about that. Poor Whitall was seasick, and I asked him if he wanted to turn back. But he said, 'No, let's go on.' That was the same gale in which Phil Weld (winner of the 1980 OSTAR) flipped over about 50 miles south of me. Of course, I had no idea he was there at the time."

They made it to England in 22 days, mainly through the grace of John Letcher's book, *"Self-Steering for Sailing Craft,* and its diagrams on sheet-to-tiller steering. "I used part of the excuse of taking Whitall out of school so that he could learn his history while he was there (in England)," Stokes says. "He was supposed to keep a journal. I tried to show him London, the cathedrals, Westminster Abbey and so on. But the only thing he liked over there was the *Cutty Sark* in Greenwich."

Stokes' three daughters had varying degrees of interest in sailing. His wife, Nancy, Agnes and the two boys sailed with him for several years in Atlantic City Race Week. Now that Stokes is so involved in solo racing, they bemoan the fact that they can't sail with him as much. Distance is another factor. Clare, now 28, is married and has a two-year-old son. She and her husband live in Ithaca, N.Y. Agnes, 25, is a photography student at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York State; and Rachel, 24, is a student at Rider College, in Lawrenceville, N.J.

He and Nancy took the Cal 25 on at least one cruise to New England; it was a morsel of offshore sailing that whet his appetite forever.

The children see him when they can, and while he is alone at sea he writes them letters. When Stokes sailed around the world, he carried a small watercolor of a farm scene painted by Clare over one of the bunks. "He's really close to his kids, to all of us," Nancy says. "He's a wonderful father. He's taken a lot of responsibility around here. He talks to the kids for hours."

Probably the greatest tragedy in Stokes's life was the loss of his daughter Marjorie, who died in 1964 of a brain tumor. She was only eight years old. He was particularly close to her; had taught her to read and to play the piano. He doesn't speak of it often, but there are signs that it turned his life around—made him more introspective and less willing to accept life as it is.

Stokes's first cruising boat was a Cal 25, which he bought in 1968 and moored in Barnegat Bay, close to where he had sailed as a child. He and Nancy took it on at least one cruise to New England; it was a morsel of offshore sailing that whet his appetite forever. In 1969, Stokes was off alone for the first time, a trip from Barnegat to Montauk Point in about 36 hours. "I got quite a kick out of it," Stokes says. "I just enjoyed being alone there by the shore and being there in the evening by myself. I can remember, I stayed up the whole time. I remember the sensation I felt after you go without sleep for awhile. Your concentration begins to relax a little, so I kept making a second person out of the shape of the jib that was furled on the foredeck. You know, you see this lump up there, and you begin to turn it into a person. It wasn't an hallucination. I can't call it that. It was just kind of a mild sensation of somebody being there."

Stokes experienced brief moments of what it must have been like in the days of Joshua Slocum, when sailing alone meant balancing the boat and lashing the tiller. "I had a glorious run down Long Island Sound," he says. "I had a strong southeast breeze and found that by dropping the jib and reaching off with the mainsail and the tiller tied, the boat would self-steer. That kind of inspired me to think more about making a longer offshore trip. I got this idea of going to England. It was the logical place for me to go because I'm an Englishman basically—300 years back."

When he got back to Moorestown, he wrote to the harbormaster in Plymouth, who then forwarded his letter to the Royal Western Yacht Club, organizer of the OSTAR. It was all the inspiration he needed. He bought a new Cal 2-30 at the boat show in New York in 1970. It had a rather exaggerated reverse transom for its time, but it seemed right. It was listed for $14,400, but with a liferaft and extras, he ended up with a $17,000 boat and a bankbook with 36 monthly payments to prove it. "I couldn't really afford it at the time," he says. "But even when I bought the Cal 25, I couldn't afford it. Basically, I've been on the verge of financial ruin ever since I've been in boating—mainly because you're always over-extending yourself."

He spent the next two months getting the boat ready in Lippincott's Boatyard along the Delaware River, not far from Philadelphia. Compared to 30'

boats today, it was heavy; the boat weighed 10,500 pounds and had a 4500-pound lead keel. The hull was strong and reasonably stiff. In retrospect, it seemed a suitable choice, Stokes says. If he had it to do over again, he would settle for a stronger spar, which was adequate for the boat, but not necessarily for a transatlantic trip. He sealed the main hatch and lower companionway slots to keep the water out; and that was it. The only instruments he had were a Walker knotmeter and log. He later complained about the undersized winches that gave him a case of tendinitis for the next three years.

He sailed across in 27 days. It was his first trip abroad, and the lush green countryside around Plymouth was not wasted on Francis Stokes. "My choice of Plymouth was just great," he says. "I didn't realize what I was getting into. It was early in the morning—a beautiful morning—when I made my landfall. I saw the green hills of Devon and Cornwall. It was like no place I had ever seen before. I hadn't traveled very much, so it was a beautiful introduction. I was rather pleased with myself."

Stokes shipped the boat back to the States. The canning business was beckoning, and he had no time to dally. The boat stayed in the family for five years, but Stokes always regretted he hadn't sailed it back. It robbed him, somehow, of feeling like a true translatantic veteran. When the 1976 OSTAR rolled around, that gnawing feeling got the best of him. He was like the man who paddles his canoe upriver, and then loads it on a cartop for the ride back downstream. Stokes, it was clear, wanted a shot at the rapids.

In 1974, Stokes traded the Cal 2-30 in for a Tartan 34 and moved the boat from Barnegat Inlet to Cape May. The family joined the Corinthian Yacht Club, and spent weekends on various informal short races. He kept the boat for two years, but then started getting itchy about entering the OSTAR. He had his eye on a Valiant 40. He spotted one at the Stamford Boat Show, laid down a $2000 deposit, and had it delivered in January, 1976. He had until March 15 to complete a 500-mile qualifying voyage for the race. His plan was to get the boat ready in Salem, Mass., and then sail it from Cape Cod to Cape May for the qualifier. It took an endless string of weekends to get it ready, with Stokes and his two boys trekking north by plane or car to finish the job. The boat was ready by March 1.

Stokes named his Valiant 40 *Mooneshine*, with an 'e' in the middle. The name came from Samuel Eliot Morison's tales of the exploits of John Davis, a 16th-century English explorer whom Stokes greatly admires. When Davis was searching for the Northwest Passage, he used two ships. One was called *Sunneshine* and the other *Mooneshine*. Stokes has always had a keen interest in history, and the fact that he should name his Valiant 40 from a rather remote chapter in American history is a measure of how far his interests range.

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He is always quick to put himself down; his humility wears out those who admire him most. But for every spark of individuality, there is a dash of dry wit tossed in with unabashed delight. To carry on a conversation with Francis Stokes is to wait for the unexpected. And he seldom lets you down: "Yeah, John Davis was one of the really great sailors of the early explorations. So that's the origin of the name.

"I find that *Mooneshine* has immediate recognition around the world... people connect it with corn liquor. I don't mind the association, but actually, it has nothing to do with my boat."

"Was the Tartan also named *Mooneshine*?" you ask sincerely.

"No. The Tartan was named *Charlotte*...after my dog."

"For your dog?" you ask.

"Yeah, and the Cal 2-30 was named *Crazy Jane*."

"Crazy Jane?" you say.

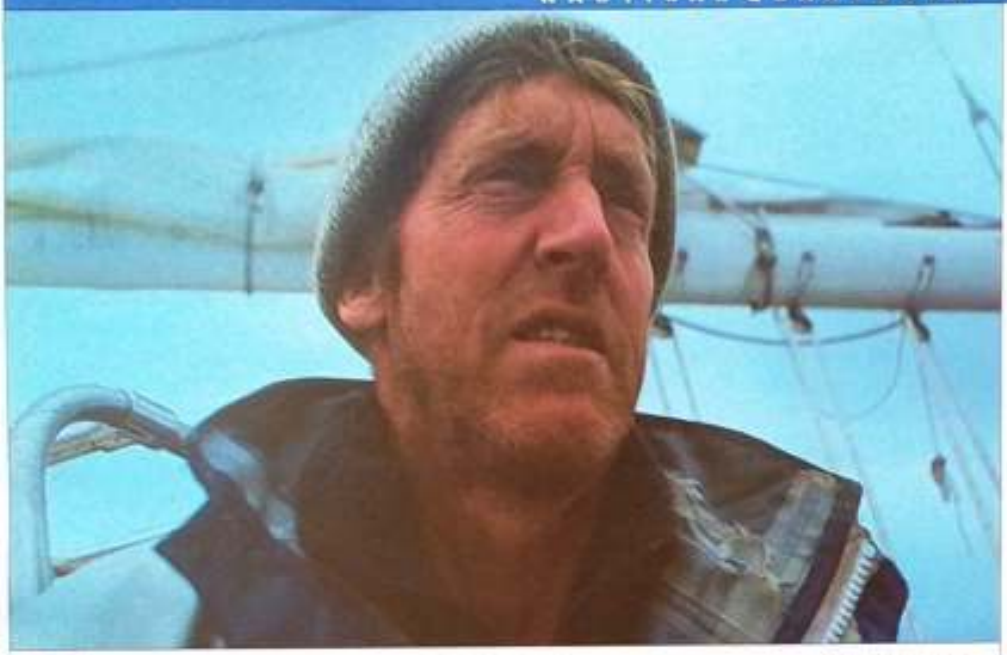
"Yeah. It came from Yeats. He has a number of poems that talk about Crazy Jane..."

Stokes set sail from Salem on a chilly March morning. His only self-steering gear—a Tiller Master—was too small for the size of the boat, and it started blowing fuses 20 miles offshore. The wind kicked up until the Tiller Master gave up altogether. The reefing system snagged, and the staysail sheets twisted into a ball. Stokes finally decided to bag it for the night and try again in the morning. Things went better the next day, but then a snowstorm moved in and forced him to take the sails down a second time and lay a-hull. It took four days to complete the 500-mile triangle around Nantucket Light, down to Ocean City, Md., and back up to Cape May. Stokes had completed his initiation into the OSTAR and felt a touch of the brutal reward he could expect in traversing the Atlantic. "I thought it was quite a romantic adventure," he says. "My hands kind of swelled up from the cold, and I could feel them for weeks afterwards. I got my log in on time, and at the same time I was winding up my affairs at the business that I sold."

There were few restrictions on the size of boats in the 1976 OSTAR. It was a hodgepodge of streamlined racing yachts and backyard one-of-a-kinds. It was also the year of the big storm, the year that Mike Flanagan and Mike McMullen both disappeared at sea. Stokes was third in his class, which included boats up to 65'. He attributes his winning time to the storm; the larger boats that were ahead got the brunt of the storm and were knocked out of the race, he says, opening it up for the smaller boats.

It was the year Walter Greene sailed his trimaran, *Friends of New England*. Greene sawed two inches off the stern, making it eligible for the smaller Jester Class. If Greene had been sailing in the Gipsy Moth Class, he would have been second or third, Stokes says. "So it's little flukes like that that gave me third. It doesn't mean anything at all. But it gave me a trip to London that fall. We all received our trophies from the hands of Lady Chichester, and that was pretty nice."

Tony Lush, a fellow singlehander whose racing circuit has paralleled that of Stokes, assesses his friend's performance differently. "Every time he sails, he's always fast," Lush says. "He's fast even though he's sailing on production cruising boats like the Valiant 40. The thing about Francis



Stokes is known for his skill and aplomb in bad weather and taking mischances. Here he looks tired but confident in an unshaven self-portrait taken in the latitudes of Cape Horn. After several days of poor visibility and uncertain celestial sights, he was unsure of his position until the day brightened and Cape Horn came into view.

is that he's a thinking sailor. He's always in control. As a navigator, he's very precise. He has constant attention to detail, which epitomizes his efforts." Lush should know. It was Francis Stokes who saved his life in the BOC Challenge during a Mayday in the southern Indian Ocean. Lush then sailed with Stokes the remaining 5500 miles to Sydney after he was forced to abandon his own boat at sea.

Lush's assessment of Stokes has proved true time and again. A June 8 entry in Stokes' 1976 OSTAR log is a lesson in point: "Nasty-looking clouds ahead hold more wind. I took off the Yankee, and we seem to be dead in the water, but are doing five knots on course. I am trading peace of mind for two knots for now. I raised the staysail, which would be the best solution in this wind (25-30 knots), but the mast looked too bendy, so I took it down. I should have running backstays to support the backstay load. Next thing is to raise the staysail on the forestay. I am waiting to see what the weather does. Poor visibility with rain and drizzle. The barometer is falling."

Eight hours later, the log reads: "Sloth rewarded. It's clearing, and the wind has dropped and veered. Am working to windward with Yankee and two-reef main at 5½ knots. Could almost use more sail."

Stokes developed cautious habits from the start. Regardless of the race, he has been fastidious about keeping watch in shipping lanes and in areas where he is close to land. Where there was traffic, he would try to sleep in the day, and keep an eye out at night. When near land, as he was in rounding Cape Horn during the BOC, he kept watch almost continually. His first bout with shipping lanes was in 1976. The log of June 17 reads: "I was sitting wondering whether to eat breakfast or go back to bed when the radar check beeped. When that thing goes off, the source has to be close because of its low sensitivity. I rushed to look out, and there was a brightly-lit freighter bearing down on me less than a quarter-mile off. We were approaching obliquely, and I passed a couple of hundred yards off his stern. Actually, there was almost no time to take evasive action had it been necessary. The whole thing was over in what seemed like moments. I raised him on the radio . . he didn't see me on radar, which isn't very reassuring. He also said he wasn't sure if it was working properly and had just come close to a container ship bound for Halifax."

Even using extraordinary caution, as Stokes usually does, life alone at sea stretches the outer limits of man's safety. Fear of being annihilated in the bow wake of a myopic freighter is a singlehander's nightmare. But, ultimately, a lack of sleep is the real demon. It doesn't matter what's lurking about—a ship, a reef, rocks, a beach. Oversleep beckons disaster. *Gipsy Moth V*, the famous yacht of the late Sir Francis Chichester, was a casualty last year under just these circumstances. In the solo round-the-world race, helmsman Desmond Hampton overslept and put her on the rocks off the southeast coast of Australia.

Francis Stokes has also been a victim of sleep, but it was two soggy pairs of pants that almost caused his demise. Log/1976 OSTAR: June 15—"I made a ghastly blunder last night for which I am chastened and ashamed. I who think I am clever and careful fell asleep reading *Dorian Gray* with two pairs of pants drying over the stove. I didn't awake until the choking black smoke filled the cabin down to the level of my head. By that time, both pair were a heap of smoldering embers. There wasn't a fire to put out, but vile smoke coated everything. And this while I'm running with a Force 9 gale."

It took Stokes two days to clean up the mess and a lot longer to put it out of his mind. The lingering smell was a continual reminder that caution can go awry. For Stokes, it was a lesson well-learned. It is safe to say that at no time since has he allowed himself to slip that far.

Stokes had convinced himself at the end of the 1976 race that one OSTAR was enough. To do it in the same boat again was especially foolish because it meant repetition. At least, that's what he tried to tell himself—until he ran into Tony Lush and a few other singlehanders at the 1977 Annapolis Sailboat Show. "It was one of those horrible, stormy days that they seem to get at every Annapolis boat show," Stokes remembers. "We were in a tent with the water

dripping around us. They all said they were going to go in 1980, and so I left for home and signed up too."

In the meantime, he and Jim Cobb, a former sales agent for Valiant, opened their own brokerage business in Annapolis in 1978. Cobb & Stokes Offshore Yachts became dealers for several different makes, including Southern Cross, Santana, the New York 36 and New York 40. Since then, the business has grown to a staff of four, but it only deals now with the Fast Passage 39, a cruising production boat built by Tollycraft Corp. in Kelso, Wash. Stokes sailed a Fast Passage 39 around the world in the BOC Challenge.

He stuck to the Valiant 40 in the 1980 OSTAR, and sailed it once again before that, in the 1977 Bermuda One-Two. He raced to St. Georges, Bermuda, alone, and then returned doublehanded with Everett Smith, a friend from the 1976 OSTAR. Stokes was first overall that year. He sailed the Bermuda One-Two again in 1979, that year with his son Whitall for the doublehanded portion. A fierce storm struck the fleet as the boats fought their way back to Newport, and *Mooneshine* had as much trouble as any. "We nearly broke the boat up in the storm," Stokes says. And still he was first. Anyone who has sailed the Newport to Bermuda Race will attest to the tricky navigation required for that 635-mile passage. To sail it alone can be arduous. Stokes did it for the experience. "It's the best kind of training for American singlehanders," he says. Stokes is the race sponsor's best customer; he sailed it again in 1981 (placing second overall in a Santana 35) and would have entered the race a fourth time in 1983 if the start hadn't overlapped with the finish of the nine-month BOC Challenge.

Stokes's passion for history carved an unusual alliance for him in the voyage to Plymouth for the start of the 1980 OSTAR. Maj. Gen. George S. Patton III, son of the famous General Patton of World War II, signed on as cook. He had just bought a Valiant 40 in Annapolis—similar to *Mooneshine*—and he wanted to learn navigation. Stokes liked the idea because he got a chance to brainstorm with Patton about European history. Whitall was a senior in high school that year, and he went along too. It was an odd threesome—Stokes in the "owner's stateroom," as he called it, and Patton and Whitall in the port and starboard berths. It was only after they arrived in England that Stokes realized he had assigned the "high" berth to Patton in a trip in which all but two days were on port tack. Whitall, it turned out, had enjoyed the cradle comfort of the lee berth with nary a word.

> "...He's a thinking sailor. He's always in control. As a navigator, he's very precise. He has constant attention to detail, which epitomizes his efforts."

The 1980 OSTAR drew more than 100 entries from 18 nations. Stokes had entered along with singlehanded race stalwarts like Tom Grossman, Jerry Cartwright, Mike Birch, Phil Steggall, Bertie Reed and the highflying winner that year, Phil Weld. It was the year for trimarans; Homewood, who had the dinner bet with Stokes, was in the Newick-designed *Third Turtle*, a 32-footer. And Weld, who set an OSTAR record of 17 days, 23 hours, sailed the

51' Newick trimaran *Maxie*. The Gipsy Moth Class had stricter size limits in 1980 than it did in 1976. Only boats 32'-44' could compete. The larger boats—up to 56'—were relegated to the Pen Duick Class. From the start, Stokes decided he wanted to beat Homewood and Naomi James, because he greatly admired her sailing ability.

"The fact that it's a race adds a lot of interest for me," Stokes says. "If I had to just do it, I don't think I would bother. It's a pretty irresponsible thing to do, anyway. Socially, it's unproductive, so you really need an excuse to go out there. I like just a bit of the competitive edge. But I don't like too much."

A Force 10 storm battered the fleet in the 1980 OSTAR; Stokes was caught on the tail end of it and headed south in an attempt to run around it. Homewood stayed north and ended up throwing out sea anchors to keep his trimaran from flipping in the heavy sea. The larger boats had the advantage this time. People like Phil Weld were just far enough south and ahead to stay clear. It was a tough trip for Stokes no matter what. He caught a cold or flu halfway through the trip and had to force himself to the helm when the going got rough. Then, just when he thought he was home free, a stretch of calms around Nantucket Light slowed him down to a crawl. Stokes knew Homewood was on his tail, but he had lost track of James. "We were all becalmed out there on George's Bank," Stokes says. "I had known for days that he (Homewood) was close, because we had talked on the radio. Bob Bocinsky was there in a nice Tartan 37 with a tall rig, and I kind of wanted to beat him, too. I was not far from the finish line, and I heard Naomi James call me in a beautiful English voice. I had almost forgotten all about her, and there she was, several miles behind me, and there I was, ahead of her. By golly, that was great. And Homewood was also several miles back there. I managed to finish that night, and they didn't finish until the next morning."

Stokes settled back into a summer in Moorestown after the finish. But it wasn't long before he was bitten by the singlehander's bug again. The 1981 Bermuda One-Two took a few weeks out of his time the next summer, and it renewed those old acquaintances who have a way of talking him into things. The chatter around the Goat Island Marina in Newport, R.I., that summer was the impending round-the-world race—singlehanded. David White and Jim Roos, who were organizing what was turning into a leviathan of a contest, were looking for a sponsor. The talk infected Stokes, as similar discussions had so many times before, and within the year he had himself a new boat and prospects for the 1000-mile qualifier. The BOC Group, a London-based multinational company, came through in March, 1982, with sponsorship. It was none too soon; the 27,500-mile race began August 28.

Stokes decided on the Fast Passage 39, partly because he was a dealer for the boat, and he could get it at cost. Beyond that, he had confidence in the hull and felt that it was a reasonable entry for a decent showing in Class II (boats 32'-44'). As a production cruising boat, he had few hopes of winning. With a cutter rig and a sturdy Airex-cored fiberglass hull, he felt that it would handle easily and stand up well. The Fast Passage is a William Garden double-ender with a 5'6" -draft fin keel and a skeg-mounted rudder. Stokes increased the size of the standing rigging, but made few other adjustments. He found that the bulwarks and high lifelines made the decks more secure, and he liked the coamings around the cockpit. He changed some of the deck hardware, including removal of the traveler on the cabin top with its mid-boom sheeting to a handier position on the bridge deck. He also added padeyes on the toe rail for better spinnaker handling. The halyard and reefing winches ended up in the cockpit in an arrangement similar to what Stokes had on his Valiant 40.

Francis Stokes was never a member of the disaster corps. In fact, he was the target of jokes in Rio about how his boat continued to look so new.

Electronics were kept simple—a knotmeter and log, windspeed and direction, and offshore depth sounder. He supplemented the Aries wind vane with an Alpha Marine Systems autopilot for lighter going. He also had a Kenwood 120 ham radio and a short-wave receiver. He eventually installed a whip antenna on the stern and insulated the backstay to increase his transmitting capabilities. In Sydney, he was given a satellite navigation set, which he accepted gratefully from its manufacturer. He was excited at the thought of not having to take sights any longer; the task takes up a large portion of time when compounded over the 209 days Stokes spent at sea. The set broke down now and then, and at the most unfortunate times—such as the day when he was nearing Cape Horn in a fog.

The BOC Challenge was to take the 17-man fleet of solo sailors around the world in four legs: from Newport to Cape Town, South Africa, then to Sydney, on to Rio de Janeiro, and back to Newport in the spring. By the time the first boat crossed the finish line May 9, seven men had dropped out of the race; one boat was demolished on rocks; two boats sank; and two others went aground but were later freed and resumed the race.

Francis Stokes was never a member of the disaster corps. In fact, he was the target of jokes in Rio about how his boat continued to look so new. When Stokes was stalled in a pocket of calms outside Rio, competitors at the dock split their sides laughing about how "Francis was probably outside scrubbing the topsides down with Bon Ami cleanser." He had actually done that before coming into Cape Town.

Stokes was disappointed with his performance in the first leg. He had been following the course he had decided on from the start—a path that duplicated the route outlined in *Ocean Passages for the World*, a book compiled years ago for the square-riggers that sailed the Trade Wind routes in the oceans of the Southern Hemisphere. Stokes chose the traditional course—a decision consistent with his conservative approach to singlehanded sailing. The idea was close to working, except that a cruel southeaster knocked him off course three days before Cape Town. It was enough to allow Yukoh Tada, a Japanese competitor who became one of Stokes' closest friends in the

race, to beat him across the finish line a day ahead. Ironically, Tada ended the race nearly the same way. But then he won $25,000 in doing it.

As usual, Stokes avoided more trouble than he ran into. By taking the "Ocean Passages" route, he was able to stay far east enough to miss two vicious hurricanes that spun their way northwest before finally burning out. Only Philippe Jeantot, the Frenchman who eventually won the race with record speed, defied the storms by shooting between their paths.

Stokes ended up having to climb the mast in an area just south of the doldrums to repair a broken spreader. "I figured I had a jump on the boats that decided to head more east," he says. "I had the lines adjusted and everything set. Then, all of a sudden, this dumb heap of water came piling up from nowhere. I was going about 15 knots. Then I just fell off a wave and landed in a heap." From the start, however, it was clear that Francis Stokes was enjoying himself. It was Big League stuff, and it was risky. It was the most daring thing he had ever done in his life, and up until then he had considered his life pretty dull. It was like a life spent as a guppy in a fish tank, and suddenly he was a frog in a big pond. Inklings of his inner delight surfaced in the log of Sept. 3: "A southwest breeze filled in this afternoon, and we begin to move east nicely on a calm sea. The OSTAR was never like this—a full moon, 82 degrees in the cabin at night, sparkling blue water and little sea. I haven't had much sailing like this."

Despite the highs, the first leg was irritating. The wind played hopscotch across the 7100-mile route to Cape Town, dotting it with high and low pressure systems that teased most everyone. Rarely was there anything substantial. In fact, much of the time the wind was light and fluky. Stokes was feeling like a pawn as much as anyone. Log/Sept.11: "We wandered into or underneath some particularly black-appearing clouds in the night—the black thumb of God ready to squish out some little sailboat. I feel something like a butterfly with the big genoa up. These things (black clouds) haven't produced that much wind out here, but I was chicken and brought the genoa down. Sure enough, not much happened except that the wind couldn't make up its mind. . .I retired to the bunk under shortened sail to wait developments. Prudence or ignoble ease, I awoke to a 15-knot SW wind, hoisted all sail, and off we go."

Stokes has his own little diversions at sea. He is an avid birdwatcher and carries W. B. Alexander's *Birds of the Ocean* on board. He likes to practice ropework and is happy to spend an hour diddling with palm-and-needle whippings. He is apt to give himself a haircut, and then berate himself later about his own hatchet job ("There's no way of seeing what's going on in back. In the front, it's the feeble-minded look.") He notices when a fly lands on deck and notices if it's scrawny or fat. He will follow the flight of the albatross with awe and later write down the species of the 11 kinds he's seen.

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He likes to read, especially if it's history. In the BOC race, content depended largely on who in the family brought which book to the next port. He was well on his way to finishing both volumes of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by the time he reached Newport. Although his diet is limited to canned meat, cheese, potatoes and onions, and fresh vegetables when he can find them, Stokes loves to bake bread. He has been known to share recipes at the slightest provocation and lights the oven even in heavy weather. He also admits to a sweet tooth and carries boxes of cake mixes on board. He has the profile of a 6' 3" beanpole strung out on a 160-pound frame. But if he thinks he's gained an ounce, he will cut out the cakes with the determination of a smoker trying to give up three packs a day.

Boredom got the best of Stokes one day on the way to Cape Town. The surface of the sea was calm, but undulating rollers slid their way down the hull stem to stern. Stokes decided it might be fun to launch his inflatable dinghy and take some pictures. He wanted to record on film his first experience with Trade-Wind sailing. After taking a few bow shots, he swung around to the stern for a different angle. Suddenly, he noticed that the toy-like paddles on the dinghy were losing ground to *Mooneshine*, which was moving about a knot faster. Stokes laughs as he recounts the scene, but he does admit to a few nervous moments. For a man who spends his idle time around a tree-lined swimming pool in Moorestown, N.J., Francis Stokes was getting his full.

Stokes arrived in Cape Town Oct. 28 third in Class II and ninth overall. It had been a rather easy 61-day passage, but Stokes is easily dissatisfied: "It occurs to me that I am the next-smallest boat in the race, as well as the oldest skipper," he wrote in his log along the way. "I will certainly have to keep pressing if I am not to bring up the rear."

The fleet left Cape Town Nov. 13 and headed blindly into a raging storm off the coast. The first night out he lay ahull, waiting for the storm to subside. A giant wave rolled in and threw *Mooneshine* nearly upside down. "It was a classic dump," Stokes says, "because everything was rearranged in the cabin. You find things in unexpected places—like the wine bottles jumping out of the storage in the cabin table and up behind the radios; the books on the port shelves were transferred to the starboard shelves, and the butter jumped out of the icebox into the wastebasket." Stokes was lucky; only the dodger over the companionway was damaged. The same thing happened again the next night, with even more violence. That time, Stokes hit his head and bruised some ribs. It was another five weeks before he felt comfortable again. The weather moderated 100 miles west of Cape Town, and he settled into a routine of raising and lowering sails to accommodate the five or six gales that blew their way through that 6900-mile passage.

The night of Nov. 27 was a disaster for Stokes's friend, Tony Lush. One of the storms threw his boat into a jackknife dive that left him stunned, but seemingly all right. The next day, Lush discovered that the lead keel on his 54' catketch, *Lady Pepperell*, had ripped loose and was hanging by its fiberglass skin. Lush's first radio

message about the incident indicated he was in no immediate danger and was heading for Durban, South Africa. *Mooneshine*, ironically, was the closest boat to Lush, so Stokes radioed to him. His first words were: "How are things with you?" which Stokes found strange since Lush was the one who had the knockdown. Stokes then gave him an ultimatum: "That he (Lush) should think about abandoning ship rather than going to Durban, and we'd give him an hour to think about it." Lush agreed to abandon. He and Stokes decided that the best plan was for *Mooneshine* to lay hove-to and wait for *Lady Pepperell* to sail 50 miles downwind to it. The weather cooperated, allowing Stokes to take sun sights all day, and Lush got his satellite navigation working. Stokes sighted Lush later that day 2.5 miles off. Stokes got on the radio, gave Lush a bearing and then fired a flare.

A huge swell made coming alongside extremely difficult. They passed a 100' line between them and worked the boats like undulating cable cars. *Lady Pepperell*'s stern swung around and clipped the side of *Mooneshine* in the process. They managed to pass a sailbag full of gear across, a bottle of scotch (which they got into that night) and the Argos satellite transponder from Lush's stern. As for getting the rotund figure of Tony Lush aboard, that was another problem: "I wasn't sure what Tony had in mind," Stokes says, "but Tony had decided well ahead of time that he was going in the water." Lush tied a line around himself, put on a lifevest and jumped in. Stokes didn't find out until later that Lush hates water and can't swim. Fortunately, Stokes had a swimming ladder in the aft sail locker, which made the rescue that much easier. He figured that if he'd had to drag him on board, Lush would have had a lengthy swim.

Stokes was now faced with an unusual dilemma. The BOC Challange rules were strict: one man to a boat in a singlehanded race around the world. Obviously, there was nothing either of them could do about the situation, and they were confident that the BOC Race Committee, headed by one of singlehanding's heroes, Robin Knox-Johnston, would understand. Stokes and Lush set the daily routine straight from the start: Stokes would take care of sailing the boat and making most of the meals, but Lush had to cook dinner. Stokes agreed to do the dishes. Just about the only thing that went wrong with the plan was that they ran out of peanut butter partway through the trip, and Lush loves peanut butter.

> Stokes sailed across the finish line in Newport in 36 days. It was difficult to fall short of winning $25,000 by a mere 36 hours, but Stokes never mentioned remorse.

Mooneshine arrived in Sydney Jan. 5 at the end of a 52-day voyage. More than 200 persons, a band and scores of journalists were on the dock at Sydney's Pier One to greet the pair. Stokes was billed as the American hero, but he cringed at the label. He insisted that it is a basic law of the sea to save a fellow human being, and he had done nothing out of the ordinary. As expected, he was asked by the Race Committee to describe what he did after rescuing Lush. He had taken care of all the sail handling, navigation, maintenance and watch keeping, he

said in his report. Stokes added: "Having someone aboard with you changes the character of your race in that there is someone there to share the anxieties and frustrations. You gain in companionship, but lose the pleasures of solitude. I believe the net result is to detract slightly from the racing effort." The Committee responded by deducting 12.5 hours from Stokes's total elapsed time to make up for the time lost in the rescue. He was second in Class II behind Jacques de Roux, the Frenchman who ended up losing his boat at sea in the next leg. The Japanese competitor, Tada, was third in Leg 2.

The third stretch of the race from Sydney to Rio was expected to be the worst—8200 miles through treacherous Southern Ocean waters that included a rounding of Cape Horn. For Stokes, that leg turned out to be the most satisfying. He stayed farther north than many of the other boats, cutting south only when necessary to round the Horn at 56 degrees south latitude. He dubbed it "the old man's route"; but, in fact, his was the most consistent course of any other boat in the fleet. Missing were the dramatic dips and dives that characterized others, especially the redoubtable Tada who skipped down to iceberg-laden waters at 62 degrees south.

Stokes rounded the Horn in what he later described as "the most tremendous experience of my life." He was hounded by poor visibility for two to three days before; he was unsure of his celestial sights and thought he was 20 miles farther back than he was. "All of a sudden, the skies just opened, and there I was looking at Cape Horn," Stokes says. "I was very lucky. . . I just didn't expect it. I felt that I had been rewarded."

Stokes arrived in Rio de Janeiro March 15 after 59 days at sea. Behind him lay an ocean that has throughout history terrorized the strongest of men. But Stokes never looked at it that way. Or if he did, he never let on. Dick McBride, the New Zealand competitor who ran aground on East Falkland Island, summed it up this way: "Francis is what a lot of us would like to be. It was very reassuring for me to talk with him on the radio while a storm was still going on—to hear his calm voice knowing that he was going to go quietly through it. When things are happening, he's just as frightened as the rest of us. But it's the kind of fear that generates respect, not the kind that produces panic. To ask my opinion of Francis Stokes would be like asking a guy who just got his pilot's license what he thinks of the astronauts."

Above, Stokes accepts his prize for second in Class II in the BOC Challenge from Richard Giordano, president of the BOC Group. Below left, he sails into Sydney with his friend Tony Lush as an accidental passenger. Stokes rescued Lush from Lush's damaged *Lady Pepperell* in the Indian Ocean, and Lush provided ballast for the rest of the 6900-mile passage.

The last leg in the race, the 5300 miles from Rio de Janeiro to Newport, was easy compared to what lay behind the fleet. There was more time to chat on the ham radios, and more time to push the boats for that last measure of speed. Yukoh Tada, who had by then developed a great admiration for Stokes, talked to him daily. He called him his "English teacher" because of the endless patience Stokes had with his broken English over the airwaves.

Few in the BOC fleet will ever forget the day Tada asked Stokes over the radio how to bake bread. Stokes told him that he needed flour and water, in certain proportions, and yeast. Tada said he had no yeast, so Stokes proceeded to tell him about making bread with beer. After a long discussion Stokes asked Tada if he understood. Tada said yes, and then added: "But Francis, what is flour?" It was only after they'd come ashore that Stokes realized Tada thought flour was "flower."

The last leg was the fastest: Stokes sailed across the finish line in Newport in 36 days. It was difficult to fall short of winning $25,000 by a mere 36 hours, but Stokes never mentioned remorse.

He returned for the summer to Moorestown—to the leafy streets and stately houses, to his yacht-brokerage business in Annapolis, and to his fatherly and grandfatherly duties. Stokes left Newport calling the round-the-world race the best vacation he'd ever had. There was little doubt that he'd be back for another solo race somewhere, but in the meantime he had slipped back quietly into the lifestyle—however reluctantly—that had occupied most of his 57 years. When he returned briefly to Newport for the BOC awards banquet, Francis Stokes told what it was like to get back home: "Well, my dog looks older. And my cat wasn't there when I got back. She finally came home the next day, but she never did say where she'd been. . ."