

Sailing Mad

BY
ROBERT
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The fanatical life of yacht racer Michael Kane

Michael Kane steers his fifty-five-foot trimaran, *Crusader*, across the calm, crowded waters of Newport Harbor, gliding past high-priced houses and condos in a paradise of southern Californian affluence. It's a bright winter's day and the canal is jammed with weekend boat traffic: Windsurfers, rented rowboats, growling outboards, spacious motor yachts, and sailboats of every description. "Boozers and cruisers," scoffs Kane. Most of the ten thousand boats in California's largest yacht harbor don't venture past the breakwater, he says. But Kane and *Crusader* are different. *Crusader* is an open-ocean racer, stripped down and built for speed, coated with a fine crust of salt from its thousands of miles at sea. Kane, who hates motors, sails *Crusader* through the shifting maze of craft and charges a string of moored yachts, a lineup representing thousands of dollars in liability. He tacks smoothly away at the last second, swinging the huge trimaran around to clear the row of boats by a couple of feet.

the middle hull. The expansive deck is smooth and streamlined, an uncluttered plane designed to minimize wind resistance and to wring all possible speed from a breeze. It gives the boat its nicknames ("the floating tennis court," "the junior aircraft carrier"), but as you stand in the center of the boat, watching one stiletto hull lifted out of the water and the other slicing neatly through it, the impression is more of a sleek spacecraft, an Imperial Starship. Six delicately balanced tons of cedar, spruce, and fiber glass—lighter than just the keel of many smaller yachts—*Crusader* is the biggest, fastest trimaran on the West Coast. Kane angles across the wide canal, judges the speed of the Balboa Island ferry, and cuts close by its stern, drawing stares from the passengers and nearby sailors. The ride on *Crusader* is like a prow down Main Street; its mere appearance issues a silent challenge, an unspoken dare.

Kane is a rarity among yachtsmen, a single-handed sailor; he prefers to sail his multihulled yacht alone. He won the 1980 Singlehanded Trans-Pacific Race, sailing 2,200 miles in ten days, nineteen hours, and breaking the San Francisco-Kauai rec-

Crusader's three slim hulls span thirty-three feet across. The top of the boat is flat, its narrow, Spartan cabin hidden inside

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ord by two and a half days. The second-place boat finished five days later. Kane won the 1982 race in thirteen days, five hours, beating the next finisher by three and a half days.

Single-handers are a breed apart, and Kane is intimately familiar with their brief, vivid history. "Single-handers have a propensity to eliminate themselves," he says. A devout Catholic, he acknowledges the danger with a small brass plaque hung in *Crusader's* cabin that reads: HE THAT WOULD LEARN TO PRAY, LET HIM GO TO SEA. He pores over accounts of solo voyages, studded with stories of boats being capsized or pitchpoled (thrown end over end), colliding with freighters or fishing boats, running aground, being torn apart by high winds and seas and rammed by whales, sharks, or swordfish; of skippers becoming injured or ill, hallucinating from fatigue and isolation, or falling overboard, which Kane describes as "the ultimate 'Oh, shit.'"

Nothing fuels Kane's desire and his cocksure confidence in himself like opposition. He's convinced that most yachtsmen are stodgy traditionalists who are prejudiced against single-handers and the trimaran, the newest and fastest yacht designed. Single-handing is for crackpot adventurers, he hears them sniff. And trimarans—aren't they those high-tech hot rods that fall apart in heavy seas? "It's like we're in the back of the bus," says Kane. "We're flakes, you see. We're not establishment." But Kane relishes the role of the outsider—"It gives me identity," he says—and loves to tweak the noses of "Neanderthal" yachtsmen. He defends the faith in speeches at yacht clubs throughout southern California and even pokes fun at one of his sailing heroes, Sir Francis Chichester, for epitomizing the gentleman yacht racer, the gourmet who attended just the right schools and always wears a blazer. Kane, who usually sails in a grab-bag collection of old clothes and something advertising Notre Dame, his alma mater, is precisely the opposite. "Give me a few cans of dog food and something to wash it down with and I'm off," he says. It's like he's on a one-man campaign to demystify the stuffy, arcane world of jibs, sheets, and spinnakers that is yachting.

No one would mistake Mike Kane for a yachtsman. The fragile wire-rimmed glasses make him look bookish, like a deskbound accountant or an insurance salesman, which he happens to be. His work clothes—suit, tie, button-down shirt—conceal the solid muscles built up by years of sailing, running, and weight lifting. An inebriated woman in a Newport

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Beach bar looked at his glasses, tousled auburn hair, and open, boyish face and declared him a dead ringer for Radar on *M*A*S*H*. Kane is a vice-president of an insurance company and, like many weekend sailors, he has had to spend many more hours at the office than on his boat. Still, he's logged more than 105,000 sea miles in trimarans—more, he claims, than any other yachtsman. He earns about \$100,000 a year but is, by yachting standards, a middle-class guy playing a blue blood's sport. His workouts have left him in great shape, knocking ten years off his forty-two, but single-handed sailing is an endurance test, a battle between the elements, the boat, and the body. Changing heavy, unwieldy sails in a gale and climbing the mast in a pitching sea are brutal physical demands better suited to youth. Kane, however, has a single-minded dedication to the sport that over the years has crystallized into an obsession. The white-collar image is only camouflage—protective coloring for the fanatic within. "If people knew what I was really like," he says, "they'd never buy insurance from me."

Kane conceals his intensity under a barrage of corny jokes and raillery, but it frequently surfaces. One afternoon he rowed his dinghy to shore after spending hours cleaning algae off *Crusader's* hulls and bird droppings off its deck. A hefty yacht motored slowly toward him on an obvious collision course. When his passenger pointed it out to him, Kane glanced over his shoulder and kept stroking. "I've got the right-of-way," he shrugged. "I'm rowing, and he's under power." The boats drew closer and the passenger repeated his concern. Kane grinned. Visions of liability suits danced in his head. "I guess this is how I'll afford that seventy-eight-footer," he said. Just before impact, the yacht veered away. "Beautiful, just beautiful,"

yelled its skipper, a gray-haired executive type. His two younger mates shook their heads scornfully. Kane wheeled his dinghy around so he could face them and stood up in the rocking boat. "If you knew your rules and regulations, you'd know I have the right-of-way," he shouted, his voice hinting a commitment to violence. "Hit me, and you'll lose your boat!" The yacht, its skipper silenced, drifted away. "Happens to me three or four times a year," said Kane, pointing out a deep groove cut into one oar handle. It came from bashing a stanchion off a yacht that refused to yield to his dinghy. "When I'm right," he said, "I refuse to be intimidated."

A few years ago a wealthy Newport Beach developer, impressed with Kane's seaman-

ship, offered to pay to have *Crusader* built for him. The boat was already under construction when the developer's marriage foundered and he backed out of the deal. Kane was stuck with a bill for \$170,000. He had ten thousand dollars in the bank. He asked his banker to arrange some creative financing and was told he could afford to build a ten-footer. "Then I told him I was going ahead with *Crusader*," says Kane. "He said, 'Mike, you're out of your mind.'" Kane mired himself in debt, mortgaging his house, borrowing from all his friends, doing without, and working overtime on nights and weekends for three years.

"How do I hang on to *Crusader*?" he says. "Because my lovely wife and kids have been good enough to live on peanut butter and Spam for the last three years. It put an unbelievable strain on them. It's a wonder we all survived." Now, with *Crusader* nearly paid for, he's pushing himself harder to build a bigger, faster trimaran. He's put *Crusader* on the market and is looking for investors to help raise the \$500,000 needed to build a seventy-eight-foot, state-of-the-art "superboat." He recently engineered the purchase of two insurance agencies and hopes his share of the deal will eventually make him wealthy enough to build the boat by himself if he can't find partners. Kane has already chosen its name: *Challenger*. He plans to use it to attack some of the most prestigious speed records in yacht racing, like the transatlantic mark of nine days, ten hours, then go after the record he yearns for: the single-handed, around-the-world mark of 167 days. The dreams are like an endless fair wind at his back, which he summons up to push him through the dreary hours of overtime, workouts, and sacrifice. "It's a madness," Kane acknowledges, "but it's a fun madness. I don't do it for money. I do it for the challenge. Single-

handing is the greatest challenge for any sailor."

IT WAS A BOOK, ARTHUR Piver's *Trans-Pacific Trimaran*, that hooked Michael Kane on sailing trimarans. He discovered it in 1964, when he was a young Marine lieutenant in command of a tank company on Okinawa that made occasional forays into Vietnam on "unofficial" police actions. Piver, an early designer and tireless champion of trimarans, wrote about his voyage through the South Pacific. "It sounded like a great idea," says Kane. "What an adventure." First he had to learn to sail, a task made easier when he was transferred to a base in Santa Ana, not far from Newport Beach. He and a fellow Marine built his first boat, an eighteen-foot trimaran. They used three canoes they had "liberated" from a local college for the hulls and scrounged up sails, a rudder, and a tiller from other boats. Their maiden voyage was a cruise across the harbor with stores of beer and a crew of stewardesses. It ended when they couldn't figure out how to turn around, opting finally to beach and dismantle their creation. "It was embarrassing," says Kane, "so I got serious and took some lessons."

He bought a twenty-four-foot trimaran with teak bows that he proceeded to ram into several other yachts. "We dinged up every boat in the harbor," he says. "At night my girlfriend and I would row out, fill the holes with putty, and sand and paint them. That's how I learned to sail, bumping from boat to boat." Next Kane bought a forty-foot trimaran designed by Piver, and in 1967, with more nerve than know-how, he set out to duplicate Piver's tropical voyage. "I was a terrible sailor," says Kane. "I thought I knew what I was doing, but once it starts to blow out there you're in a whole new school." He picked up passengers at ports along the way, charging them \$2.50 a day and training them to crew. "I followed Piver's book page by page," he says. "Everywhere he went, I went."

Kane wrote Piver to ask him if anyone had sailed a trimaran around the world. Piver's answer reached him in Tahiti. He said it hadn't been done, and Kane made it his goal. Two months later he heard that Piver had disappeared off California's coast on a solo voyage to qualify for the 1968 single-handed transatlantic race. "He was as crazy as I am," Kane says with hushed admiration. "Maybe a lot crazier, because he was single-handing in a little thirty-foot trimaran off Point Conception, which is one of the roughest places in the world."

Kane continued his journey, gaining proficiency and confidence. "You learn in a

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hurry or you don't survive," he says. "A forty-foot boat isn't that big in the middle of the ocean." When he returned to Newport Beach after twenty-two months at sea, he was the first to successfully circumnavigate the world in a trimaran. "It was quite a feat in those days," says Charles Chiodi, editor of *Multihull Magazine*. "He was something of a hero for it." When Kane returned, he had a new goal: to become the first American to win the 3,300-mile Observer Singlehanded Trans-Atlantic Race. This quadrennial event, known by the acronym OSTAR, is the oldest, grandest, and toughest competition in solo sailing. To learn the intricacies of racing, Kane bought a forty-foot competition-proven trimaran, renamed it *Hurry-Kane*, and began to compete. He married in 1972, and though Cindy had never sailed before, she was soon swept up by his passion for it. They christened their union by going into debt to build a sixty-thousand-dollar, fifty-six-foot trimaran for Kane to race in the 1976 OSTAR. Lean years of scrimping and saving followed, a tougher financial battle than that with *Crusader*, because Kane was just starting out in business. To finance the trip to England, Kane worked furiously until a few days before the race.

There wasn't much time to prepare the boat, but Kane was confident. "I felt like I was going to win," he says. Before the race, *Yachting* magazine picked him to finish third out of 121 entries, the largest OSTAR field ever. The bicentennial year brought out the unabashed patriot in Kane. He was easily the most visible of the few American entries: he named his graceful white trimaran *Spirit of America*, flew a stars-and-stripes mainsail, and chose number seventy-six. Before the race he said, "I'm tired of always hearing about the French and English winning here. I'm here to prove an American can do it." The favor-

ites were two Frenchmen, both former winners: Alain Colas, sailing a 236-foot, four-masted ship, and Eric Tabarly, in a seventy-three-foot, ultralight monohull.

Kane was among the early leaders as the yachts broke out of Plymouth, England, on June 5 and headed across the freighter-laden English Channel. He had some early problems—his radio broke down and he had to climb the mast for repairs—but he stayed among the leaders and ahead of the record pace. Kane made tape recordings of his thoughts during the race, and at this point he was giddily buoyant, steering all night and singing along with his stereo. Three days out, Kane and the other leaders sailed into a vicious storm of mountainous seas and forty-knot winds. That

night the winds blew even harder. "The boat was going over when a miracle happened," says Kane. "A real, absolute miracle." The gale-force winds were turning the boat over when the huge mainsail ripped off the mast and a five-eighths-inch sheet attached to the jib up front snapped at the last moment, spilling the wind and saving the boat. "Now, the odds of the main just leaving the mast like that are maybe one in a hundred," says Kane. "The chances of a sheet breaking are even less. And they happened at exactly the same time."

Racing in the OSTAR, Kane says, "is like pouring water over your head for three weeks. You've got to go balls out for at least twenty days. Your battery goes down and you can't recharge it on two or three hours of sleep." It's evident from his tapes that by the eighth day of the race, Kane was physically worn and depressed. With his radio broken, he was unable to contact his family or find out the position and condition of the other racers. Worst of all, a small hole appeared in the bottom of the forward strut connecting the main hull to the outer hull on the side of the boat that charged into the brunt of the oncoming waves. The rushing water was slowly tearing it apart. Kane turned south, searching for calmer seas, but instead ran into the worst storm in race history. Waves heaved up to forty feet, and sixty-knot winds blew for four days. The mainsail ripped off the mast twice more and his life raft—where all his dehydrated food, one third of his total food supply, was stored—was torn off the deck and washed away by waves. By then, four of his five self-steering systems, crucial equipment for a single-hander, had been broken by heavy weather and the damage to the strut had become a gaping hole. For two days and three nights, Kane rode the weather, agonizing over whether

to keep fighting the current and risk breaking up the boat or save it by turning around and riding the winds and waves back to England. On the eleventh day, about 1,800 miles into the Atlantic, Kanè made the decision to go back.

"It was the toughest decision I've ever made," he says, "but in my estimation, there was nothing else I could do. I didn't think I could win, so what's the use of bringing home a crippled boat as a friggin' loser? There was the wife and family, too. If you're dead, you can't very well come back and sail another day."

When he made Plymouth, he discovered two things that piqued his disappointment, facts that he couldn't have known at sea without a working radio and that might have changed his decision to go back: on the day after he turned around, the weather ahead of him finally calmed down; and at that point, he was fighting Tabarly for the lead. Tabarly finally won the race, the roughest and deadliest OSTAR ever. Nearly fifty boats broke up or turned back, and two skippers were killed, the only OSTAR fatalities so far. Kane mourned the deaths. A few days before the start, he had dined with one of the skippers, Englishman Michael McMullen, a top yacht racer and the author of a textbook on multihulls. The next day, McMullen's wife was electrocuted while working on his forty-six-foot trimaran. McMullen raced anyway but disappeared a few days after the start, a likely victim of the storms or a collision with a freighter. Last year—five years after the race—fishermen in the North Atlantic picked up pieces of his boat in their nets.

Kane didn't dwell on the tragedy or on his disappointing showing. "Sometimes I worry about him, he pushes so hard," says his wife, Cindy. "It's always on to the next goal, on to the next challenge." He sold *Spirit of America*, hired Norm Cross of San Diego to design *Crusader* for the 1980 race, and pursued the dream through debt and hardship. It was of a lighter, faster, stronger design, especially in the struts. "I made them bulletproof," he says. But after the builders went forty thousand dollars over the projected cost, Kane couldn't scrape up the extra several thousand dollars needed to prepare the boat and get it to England. He entered the Singlehanded Trans-Pacific race, a shorter and easier run, because it was far less expensive to prepare for and required less time off work, which Kane could ill afford. That year the OSTAR started a week before the Trans-Pac, but for the first time they finished on the same day. On June 25, as Kane surfed *Crusader* down twenty-foot

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swells toward the finish line on Kauai, he picked up something on his transistor radio (his main set had broken again). He heard that sixty-five-year-old Phil Weld, retired publisher of a string of New England newspapers, had become the first American to win an OSTAR. Weld broke the old record by nearly two days (seven boats came in under the old mark in a race calmer than the one in 1976) and led an American sweep of all three divisions. "It was a big disappointment," says Kane. "Phil, God bless him, won the race that my boat was designed for. I wanted to be the first American to win it, but it just wasn't meant to be. I could have won. Could have, should have, it doesn't matter. I didn't."

Kane was as lucky in the Trans-Pac as he seemed cursed in the OSTAR. A few days out, his main self-steering system broke down and he headed south to find calmer weather and let his weaker secondary system take over. By changing course, he avoided a high-pressure area of light winds that becalmed most of the fleet. He sailed home with his trophy and stuck it in a corner of his living room. The cup's copper finish is scarred by large brown spots, caused by the reaction of the salt air and metal on the voyage home. "I love this trophy," says Kane, "with goober on it from the kids and looking like it has leprosy. It depicts me almost perfectly. A beautiful trophy that's been all beaten up and salted. I cherish it more than all the fancy silver ones. But, you know, we don't do it for the trophies. We do it because it's the stupid Everest."

THE KANES LIVE IN A MODEST, comfortable three-bedroom home miles from the water. Without *Crusader*, they could afford one of those expensive houses on Newport Harbor with a private dock for their back yard. *Crusader* is the reason

why the oven got so old the door finally fell off and why the refrigerator doors stay shut only with a dish scrubber jammed between the handles. ("Nothing works around here but the boat," says Kane.) It's a reason why Cindy drives a used Pontiac station wagon instead of a Mercedes, as common as skateboards around Newport Beach. ("But, then, I like it," she says. "It makes me different from the other people.") *Crusader* is a financial black hole, sucking in every dollar it can, requiring new sails, constant maintenance, high interest payments. Cindy finally contracted Kane in writing to supply her with new appliances before spending more on boats. "If we ever kept the money I make on insurance deals, we could live like kings," he says.

"But if you want to accomplish something, climb the big mountain, you've got to give up other things." Money isn't the only thing *Crusader* takes from the family, Cindy says. There's the time together that's lost when Kane works overtime at the office or prepares *Crusader* for the charter trips that help pay for it, trips he can rarely afford to go on himself.

When they met more than ten years ago, Cindy was a young mother recently divorced from a man she'd come to regard as "very studious, very methodical, and boring." Kane didn't look like much of a catch—he was fresh out of business school, a thirty-year-old sales trainee at his first insurance job—but she says he filled a void in her life: "I thought he was a very exciting person, and I really needed some excitement in my life just then." They married soon afterward, despite the warning of a friend whose marriage to a top boat designer had just broken up. "She said, 'Don't marry that man. He's always going to be obsessed with boats and you'll always be second place in his life,'" says Cindy. "I told her, 'I'm going to be on those boats with him. That's the big difference.'"

That's how it was for the first half of their marriage. In those days they sailed together, talked constantly about boats, and occasionally raced together. They won a double-handed race around Catalina in a record time that still stands. They even raced against each other in sabots, square-ish eight-foot dinghies. "I beat him regularly," she says. "He took it very badly. He hates to lose. It just does something to him." In 1973 they moved to Australia and lived aboard *Spirit of America* as it was being built in a peach orchard near Sydney. Kane sailed it 5,800 miles to Hawaii and won the nine-hundred-mile Around Islands Race in record time. It was pure adventure for Cindy. "We had a great time," she says.

"We made friends wherever we went." They finally sailed back to Newport Beach and the pattern of their married life was set—sacrifice for the boat. "For the first five years, everything went to that boat," she says. "But I was really involved in it, and it was fun for me too."

But then things happened to pull her out of their shared obsession. There were the births of two more sons—Charlie in 1976 and Benjamin two years ago, on the same day Kane won the Singlehanded Trans-Pac. It is a common conflict among sailing couples, she says; the wife is torn between the responsibility of staying home with young children and the desire to sail off with her husband. It has sent some of her friends to marriage counselors. Illness exacerbated their situation. Cindy had had a rubella shot after having Charlie, to build immunity to the disease and to protect any future children, and suffered a rare, terribly painful reaction that caused chronic pain in all her joints, similar to a case of rheumatoid arthritis. The pain cut her off from almost all physical activity. For the first time in their marriage, she began to resent the sacrifices the boat demanded.

After four years, Cindy says, the pressure is finally easing. The debts and pain are disappearing. And Kane is trying to spend more time at home. A pretty, blue-eyed blonde who could pose for suntan lotion ads, Cindy has started to work out again, with the aim of rejoining Kane on the

boat. "I have to get involved," she says. "We're happiest when we can do things together. I can identify with baseball players' wives. I'm left alone a lot. I used to cry, but now I do things with our boys. I've had to make a life of my own. Some people say, 'Divorce the man. Go out and do what you want.' I know they think that threatening him with divorce will stop him, but it won't. I think he's just obsessed with it and he'll just go on doing it. And I can't see living without him. I just can't see that."

KANE SITS IN HIS LIVING ROOM ON a dismal February afternoon. He's troubled because he's heard that Rob and Naomi James, England's premier sailing couple, have found a sponsor to build them an eighty-five-foot trimaran. Naomi was the first woman to sail around the world alone, and in England and France, where top single-handers are celebrities, companies often volunteer to pay for their boats and voyages. That's a rare luxury for American single-handers. "I'm probably going to have to build the seventy-eight-footer by myself," he says. "I'm not going to make it unless I work my butt off. So where's Mike Kane now? Sitting on his hands. But the volcano is building."

The single-handed, around-the-world trip in *Challenger* is the dream that keeps Kane awake nights. "I really am obsessed with that," he says. "It's like something that gnaws at you from within." He ges-

tures at a painting of Chichester sailing around Cape Horn, the legendary graveyard of ships. His boat is a pale scrap of flotsam awash in the immense violence of a surging, gray-green sea and storm-shrouded sky. There in the Roaring Forties, hostile latitudes named by clipper sailors for the sound of the wind ripping through the rigging, two oceans collide and create monstrous seas. "I've been looking at that picture for years," says Kane. "I want one of my own so I can hang it over the mantel and retire that dream. It's going to happen. It's got to."

His goal is to sail around the world in less than ninety days, averaging three hundred miles a day on the 27,000-mile trip. A few three-hundred-mile days are easily possible, he says, but stringing together ninety such days is comparable to running a marathon composed of four-minute miles. Under ideal circumstances, it might be done. Point out to Kane that it's nearly impossible, that the winds, seas, and even the superboat aren't likely to cooperate and bend to his will. Remind him of his own experience, when things looked so good before the 1976 OSTAR and then fell so flat. He just gets more stubborn, more intractable.

"I don't dream about the hardships and deprivations of doing it," he says. "I dream about accomplishing what I set out to do. Besides, if it was so goddamn easy, then why would you want to do it?" ☉