

Sailing

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Transat finish could be sign of things to come

For the first time, a major international yachting race will finish in Boston Harbor, and this month some 37 high-tech racing machines will be on display here after being sailed solo for nearly 3,000 miles from Plymouth, England.

In fresh breezes and lumpy seas last Monday, the fleet crossed the starting line off the Eddystone Light and made way for The Lizard, the southern-most tip of England, and then west into the North Atlantic.

One competitor is Joe Harris, a lifelong sailor from Hamilton who is attempting his first ocean crossing and the first major elite-level race of his sailing career.

"It was a pretty good start," said Harris by radio phone Wednesday. "It was a very breezy day and blew up to 35 knots, and we had a tight reach to the Eddystone Light. There was a little confusion out there but it was exciting."

Harris is sailing the 50-foot Wells Fargo-American Pioneer, a proven winner in the Open-50 class. Designed by French naval architect Jean-Marie Finot, Wells Fargo has reached over 30 knots and in one 24-hour solo run logged 345 miles, the fastest ever for a 50-foot monohull.

Just days before the start, Harris admitted to a slight case of nerves. "I am preparing for the task at hand," said the businessman who lives in Hamilton with his wife Kimberly and sons Griffen (6) and Emmett (8 months). "I am trying to stay focused on weather and routing strategy. My family has been here for the last few days and their support has been wonderful. From here on out, all systems are go."

But early into the race last Monday, Harris and his sloop experienced a couple of mechanical glitches. The most troublesome was a motor failure that changed the angle of the keel as the boat's angle of heel increased.

"It was just a fuse," said Harris, "but it makes me wonder what blew it."



PHOTO COURTESY MEAGHAN VAN LIEU
Joe Harris of Hamilton is attempting his first ocean crossing in the Transat.

Wells Fargo-American Pioneer is designed with a great deal of redundancy in its systems, Harris says, which is a confidence builder as he heads into the often ferocious North Atlantic.

"The first week, there's a nice sailing window before things get light as we go into high pressure," he said. "Then I'm hoping for a fresh southwester for a couple of days before we hit the first low-pressure system. It may be gale force from the south for three days of rough weather, and we have another low before we get across."

Whatever weather Harris runs into, his Open 50 has quite a track record. Former owner Brad Van Lieu won the 2002 Around Alone race, sailing

24,000 miles around the world in five legs.

"When Brad got back, I met him in New York and said, 'Congratulations, would you like to sell your boat?' And he said, 'As a matter of fact, I would.' His goal was to sell it to a fellow American who would continue to campaign the boat the way he was. So it has been a great handoff between Brad and me, and he has stayed involved in this program. We have great continuity."

The Transat, which evolved from the first single-handed trans-Atlantic race in 1960, is held every 17 years. And though the race will be Harris's first major blue-water challenge, his eye is on an even bigger prize.

"This has been my focus for the last five or seven years, but the big goal is Around Alone, which is now being called Five Oceans. That begins in the Fall of '06. So now I have a state-of-the-art boat for that race and two and a half years to get familiar with it and get myself up to speed. So it's Transat this year. Next year it's Bermuda One-Two, Marblehead-Halifax, and then a double-handed race from France to Brazil. And then Five Oceans beginning in the fall of '06."

The Ocean 50 is one of two classes heading to Boston in the Transat. After the withdrawal of the French boat, Bonduelle, 14 Open 60s remain in the race, and both classes will reconnoiter in Boston in about two weeks. The fleet will be moored off the Marriott, where several events are planned, and there will be public access for about two weeks until the fleet continues racing. An awards ceremony is planned for June 20 at the Corinthian Yacht Club in Marblehead.

The inclusion of Boston in big-time ocean racing coincides with the decade-long cleanup of the harbor, said Harris, who for years has based his racing out of Newport. "Even though I live here, I sail out of there

because there is a much larger single-handed community down there," he said. "But I would love to get Boston more involved. We are going to meet with Robin Knox Johnston in Plymouth [England], who is head of the Five Oceans Race, and try to convince him to make Boston the host city. I love Newport, but I think they've gotten a little blasé. No one turned out when the last Around Alone finished there."

Harris believes that with the heavy involvement of the Boston Harbor Hotel, the local Coast Guard, and the Boston Harbor Police, the port could become a race center. "I think the momentum is building," he said. "I'm trying to get the interest of the local business community involved, and if we can get the mayor and governor down at the finish area for some of the celebration, it would really be fun and help the cause of the port of Boston."