



Courtesy photo

Joe Harris works on his Gryphon Solo in Boston Harbor.

SOLO: Man prepares for worldwide water journey

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bit closer to shore, was initially reluctant about his ocean racing. But when she and their two young sons traveled to England this year to watch the start of the Transat race, they were hooked.

"My wife was not that excited about it to begin with, but she kind of came around to it," Harris said.

Though his family has learned to deal with the dangerous nature of his hobby, Harris said there have been some frightening moments. The larger, faster boats in this year's Transat ran into major storms that left two boats without their masts and another without its keel. And though Harris' own crossing was quieter, he's faced some rough weather in past races.

"I've switched from racing mode to survival mode," he said. "That's always a scary moment."

Worse than the heavy weather, Harris said, is when the wind dies and leaves the boat floating in place.

"It's very tough mentally," he

said. "You have to really make a big effort not to get hummed out, not to get depressed."

But mostly, Harris said solo ocean racing is an "endurance event," more about staying sharp through days of monotony than about the occasional burst of drama.

"It's kind of like a chess game where you're trying to think three, four, five decisions out," Harris said.

That can be tough when you've hardly slept in two weeks. Harris gets only a few hours of sleep when he is racing and never sleeps for more than 20 or 30 minutes at a stretch. Instead, he takes a series of short naps, waking up from each one to check on the sails and the weather, then going back to sleep if all is well.

"You have to be aware of how sharp you are or how sharp you aren't," he said. "You've got to remember that when you are really tired your judgment might be impaired."

Of course, without modern technology, even those 20-minute naps wouldn't be possible. Built

specifically for solo racing, the Gryphon Solo has an advanced auto-pilot to keep the boat on course while Harris sleeps, eats or sets the sails. The boat also has radar and communications equipment, and an on-board computer lets Harris plot courses, run weather simulations and keep tabs on competitors.

The technology also lets him keep in touch with the rest of the world. Harris spoke daily to his wife and sons and also to a writer who posted updates to Harris' Web site. Those conversations kept Harris updated, too — when former President Reagan died,

Harris learned about it in one of his daily phone calls.

Harris said he doesn't know what will come after the 5 Oceans Race, but it will certainly involve sailing. He said he hopes to sail around the world with his family when his sons are older.

"I think everyone needs to challenge themselves in whatever way they feel comfortable," he said. "I think it's easy for us all to fall into our daily patterns."

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