



Jibe Ho & Away We Go

By Karen I. Hirsch



I plant my feet squarely for balance, as the small powerboat that I'm on rocks from side to side. My legs bend back and forth, first the left, then the right, swaying with the rhythm of the waves that slap against the vessel. The wind whips my hair around, since my cap has flown off my head. Layers of rolling whitecaps break up the blue-gray field of water. A dark threatening sky forms a dramatic backdrop. Before me, the white sails of the offshore racers are bearing down quickly on the orange triangular mark located a short distance from my boat. I hear yachtsmen yelling, declaring right of way, as they approach. Their boats come dangerously close to one another as they converge at this designated turning point of the course.

Suddenly, my outboard lurches. I grab for the nearest railing. I remind myself, one hand for my camera; one hand for the boat, aiming my Nikon again toward the frenetic scene. Ah, this is the life.

Sailboat racing photography is not for the faint of heart, at least not great sailboat racing photography. The most exciting photos are taken when conditions are somewhat rough—strong wind and hills and valleys of rolling water. Of course, some wonderful photos can be taken even on the stillest of days if you have an artistic eye.

Watching a sailboat race is like viewing a nautical ballet. The sailboats interact with one another to form new combinations of colors, angles and patterns. These forma-

tions are both spontaneous and fleeting (pun intended).

The weather and the water set the stage for the performance. Chicago's skyline (I photograph mostly on Lake Michigan) acts as a stunning background. The photojournalist in me is attracted to this sport. I get a thrill when I capture "the moment"—when the elements come together in a dynamic composition. Knowing that what I am capturing is unique, not to be repeated, gives me an extra bit of pleasure.

I love the sense of freedom experienced on the open water. For a city girl like myself, seeing vast skies and a view to the horizon is a refreshing change from the urban landscape. It's a different world from life on shore. Mundane cares disappear from your thoughts when you are immersed in nature's raw elements. The database that needs updating is far from your mind when you are powering past a fleet of boats with the wind and spray in your face.

A Chance Invitation

So how did I get involved with yacht racing photography? It all started years ago. One of my friends, Carl Krupp, who was president of my camera club, invited me to accompany him on a press boat to view the start of the Chicago Race to Mackinac. Sponsored annually by the Chicago Yacht Club, it's the oldest, long-distance, fresh

water race in the world (333 miles from Chicago to Mackinac Island, MI).

I was immediately smitten by the experience. By the time the race came around the following year, Carl had moved to Oregon. I boldly requested a spot for myself on one of the press boats. The person in charge of public relations at the Chicago Yacht Club accommodated me. She invited me to cover a couple of national championship races later that summer and I jumped at the chance.

She also provided me with names of yachting publications that might be interested in photos. The magazines asked me to write stories about the races and the yachtsmen. I did. I became a regular contributor to such nautical publications as *Soundings*, *Sailing World* and *Sail*. The *Chicago Tribune* featured my images on covers of its *Sunday Magazine*. And the rest is history.

Equipment Galore

When getting ready for photographing on Lake Michigan you have to be prepared for anything. There is a saying in Chicago, if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes. It's amazing how fast a weather front can come in. Besides my camera equipment, I carry a duffel bag with my foul weather gear (waterproof jacket and pants with a bib), a sweatshirt and an extra set of dry clothes. Other items to carry on include sunscreen lotion, water and something to munch on. Somehow, the fresh air always makes me hungry. I also make sure

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that I have Bonine (anti-nausea medication) to take prior to getting on board.

As far as camera gear, I carry a waterproof Pelican case, which keeps my equipment nice and dry. Inside of it are three cameras—one with a 70–300mm telephoto, another with an 18–105mm zoom and a third body for backup. Since the D200 camera

I use has a 1.5X magnification factor, the telephoto distance is effectively longer. Also with me are lens hoods, polarizing filters, extra camera batteries and a cloth to wipe off my cameras when they get wet.

I keep a fanny pack with me, which I can access quickly. Inside the front pocket, I store my memory cards in waterproof con-

tainers—a yellow container for ready-to-go, formatted cards and a gray container for cards to be downloaded. Sometimes I carry a Jobo Giga Vu Pro Evolution to download my cards on board the boat. I do not reformat the cards, however, until the images are stored in at least two places. Back on shore I have my Mac laptop at the ready, so that I

can provide images right away for publication Web sites.

Camera Life

To capture the action I find it best to shoot at a relatively high shutter speed, especially when using a long lens. Typically, I shoot around $1/500$ of a second up to $1/1000$. I change my ISO depending on the lighting condition—usually 200 or 400 sensitivity. I

have two cameras around my neck—one with the telephoto zoom and the other with the wide angle zoom to use as the nearer boats go by. When I am on board a racing boat, I use my wide-angle zoom to capture the crew in action.

An experienced shooter anticipates the moment of optimum composition to press the shutter. This moment can happen in a fraction of a second when you are on a

moving power boat running through the fleet. For me, this is the most exhilarating time to shoot. You are close to the racers and can get dynamic, one-of-a-kind images. Often during a race, you are in a static, yet strategic position on the course and must wait patiently for the boats to form a dynamic arrangement. Timing and the right angle make all the difference between a ho-hum and a “wow” image.

When the colorful spinnakers are being flown (this happens when the wind comes from behind the boats), I look to capture a series of sails that display a repetition of color.

As in all photography, lighting is a key factor. It's great to have the sailors' faces in the light, but it is not always possible. Look around for other options. Backlit sails with silhouetted sailors and sparkling water make beautiful photos.

Color is another essential component. In cooler weather, the yachtsmen don their colorful foul weather gear. The “Kodak” red and yellow outfits really punch up your photos.

It is not often that conditions are ideal—good wind, great light, a sky



with interesting clouds. When this does happen, shoot away. If the weather is not cooperative, you have to make the most of it. When the sky is bland, I concentrate on close-ups of the sailors in action. When there is no wind, I look for interesting abstracts of reflections in the water. When there is fog, I document mood.

Know the Subject

Understanding the sport certainly helps in getting great shots. I learned sailing by taking a class on dinghy sailing through the Chicago Park District. Later, I took the Skipjacks program at Columbia Yacht Club in Chicago, where I got firsthand experience working different positions on larger, offshore racing boats. I also took a Coast Guard course to learn navigation. Over the years, I have spent much time on race committee boats and pitch in when they need help checking off the boat participants, raising flags and placing marks in the water for the racecourse. Knowing your way around boats, and being familiar with sailing's distinctive vocabulary helps when an urgent situation pops up. It also lets you understand

what the sailors are talking about back at the clubhouse.

Marketing

Although there are relatively few specialists in photographing sailboat racing, the field is quite competitive. I am constantly looking for new ways to be distinctive in presenting my work. Last year I began offering canvas-wraps. I have also incorporated my images in different products including jewelry boxes, cards and self-designed collages. I create multimedia presentations to show at race events.

Other Days

The sailing season is relatively short where I live. Although I market my nautical imagery throughout the year, much of what I do is in other areas of photography. "My repertoire" includes portraits, events, travel, architecture, still lifes and abstracts. Capturing the moment, essential to sports photography, translates well to other types of photojournalism and even studio portraits.

My images are used in advertising, corporate communications, editorial publications and interior decor. The State of Illinois

and the Chinese government have given me travel photography assignments, allowing me freedom in documenting lifestyle, architecture and landscapes. Some celebrities whom I have photographed during my career include Muhammad Ali, President Clinton, Donald Trump and Julie Andrews. The images in my large archive are used for licensing and prints.

When creating images just for "the fun of it," I experiment with digital painting and enjoy combining images together. Before going digital, I used to sandwich some of my transparencies. Now I accomplish the same effects using Photoshop. One of my esteemed teachers, Ernst Haas, introduced me to the idea of blending images together. Other instructors who have influenced me include Arnold Newman, Jay Maisel and Jeremy Sutton.

To see more of my imagery, visit www.karenihirsch.com.

Karen I. Hirsch is an award-winning commercial and fine art photographer based in Chicago, IL. Her photos have been published internationally in books, magazines, newspapers and calendars. She is a general member of the American Society of Media Photographers and immediate past president of the Fort Dearborn-Chicago Photo Forum.

