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Subject: A "Whale of a Tale"  
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This is really a true story – I think you'll enjoy it!

Dave Tanis <dave@taniscomm.com> wrote:

April 22, 2006

Lightship Race, San Francisco, CA.

J/105 – JUPITER – 34.5' Sailing Vessel

Crew: Paul Farr (Helmsman), Tomi Tiainen (Main), Jeanne Lyons (Pit), Liz Kerr (Trim), Dave Tanis (Foredeck)

Winds started light in the 10knt range. The race was from Treasure Island to about 5 nautical miles off shore around a buoy then back.

While on the way back when we were still 3-4 miles west of the Golden Gate on the south side of the shipping channel we were flying along in 20 knts of breeze with the spinnaker up. We were surfing waves and hitting speeds of 15 knts. There was a strong ebb maybe 3-4 knts and the seas were piling up outside the Gate, which is a typical condition.

All of the sudden it felt like we hit bottom. Immediately Paul, our skipper, asked for the depth gauge to be punched up on the instruments. We were in 80 feet of water. I thought we may have caught a loose line or rope got wound around the rudder. We quickly realized that we had hit a humpback gray whale! It was caught between the keel and the rudder, as we were still moving quite fast. I was standing on the deck holding onto the shrouds and trimming the spinnaker so had a great view. I saw its tail on one side of the boat and the mass of it's body on the other side. It rolled over several times trying to free itself. This was a pretty scary time on JUPITER. The boat was being pounded by the waves, the whale and the wind. It moved at odd angles to each force making for quite a ride. It seemed to be stuck for about 5 minutes. It looked like the whale was a little smaller than our boat, which is about 34'. It's hard to say as I didn't get a chance to see the whole whale all at once.

We had no steerage and quickly lost control of the spinnaker and main. We were unable to douse the spinnaker because of the high loads. The boat threatened to broach several times. While this was happening Paul issued a MAYDAY to the coast guard. "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY; this is the vessel JUPITER; a whale is attacking us." The coast guard responded and asked if the whale was hurt, Paul replied that it was not, but that it was REALLY PISSED. At one point its body was right next to the boat and its blowhole, which was the size of a basketball, was just under the rail and the whale spouted. Luckily I was upwind, as the spew smelled bad and did not hit me. Some of my shipmates were not so lucky.

The whale finally broke free and we were floundering in the heavy seas. The whale then came back and rammed the boat. It picked up the stern and slewed us sideways. It then backed off and rammed us in the stern 2 or 3 more times over a period of 10-15 minutes. We were dumbfounded. We were able to get the boat back under control and sail on a starboard tack with the spinnaker. The Coast Guard showed up about 15 minutes after our Mayday. We assured them that we again had control of the vessel and did not need their assistance. Paul had the crew inspect the boat for leaks and determined that there appeared to be no apparent damage and we proceeded to resume the race. They followed us for about 10 minutes to make sure everything was OK. We carried the tack for another 20 minutes and then jibed. Again, we had

lost our steering; as the rudder or steering gear must have gotten bent and didn't just work on this tack. We could not control the boat. Again the spinnaker and main flapped out of control in the heavy wind. At one point the boat rounded into the wind and we were able to successfully douse the spinnaker.

The boat was still floundering. We were in the middle of the shipping channel 3 miles west of the Golden Gate with a 3-4 knot current taking us back out to sea. The next problem was an inbound freighter. Luckily we were able to hold a tack long enough to cross in front of the freighter with a mile to spare. The boat then headed up and we lost control again. At this point we started the engine and tried motoring, but it was useless as we had no steerage. We secured the main in the heavy wind and floundered in the waves. The motor was no help. We issued a second MAYDAY and requested a tow in.

The Coast Guard answered call. They came in a 44' surf rescue boat, so I'm told. While on approach to our position I was able to see most of the hull of their boat lifted out of the water because of the heavy seas and their speed. Quite a sight! As they came on station they made several passes trying to get into position to toss us a line. On the 3rd or 4th attempt, they made a shot and the wind took the line past the boat. Again they circled. We could see two more freighters lined up to enter the bay, but knew that the Coast Guard had notified them of our situation. It is still unnerving to be in the path of a freighter that you know has limited maneuverability and takes two miles to stop. They made another pass and successfully threw us a line. It was attached to a heavy tow rope with a bridle for our front cleats. Once secured they started towing us back to the bay. By this time we had drifted about another 2 miles out to sea. During the ride back, JUPITER would surf down the waves slewing back and forth as we had no steerage. At one point we hit 14.6 knots surfing a wave. This made it challenging for the Coast Guard to keep the tow line taught. They would accelerate as we surfed then slow to avoid too much slack in the rope. It took about 45 minutes to tow us to the Bay.

The coast guard towed us to the entrance of the St. Frances Yacht club; we were met by a Protector from the Club. The Protector towed us the rest of the way into the harbor.

Lessons learned:

We are very lucky to have the Coast Guard to protect us. It's very reassuring to know that they are there when you need them.

Trying to sail the boat, steering with just the sails sounds like it is something you should be able to do. It's hard. In 20 knots of wind in big waves the boat reacts to many different forces making it difficult to trim the sails so the boat will actually sail. This might have been hindered by the rudder changing position and throwing off whatever balance we could have achieved. I don't want to make it sound like we really gave this much of a try, but it is something that was tried.

Have a hand held VHF radio at the helm. Had we been forced to go below to communicate we would not have issued the mayday so quickly. As there was a chance that the boat could broach at any time, and the prospect of being below was not good.

We had rigged jack lines and the crew was wearing life vests and harnesses clipped onto the lines. This was a good thing as I personally would not want to have been in the water with the angry whale.

We heard that whale strikes are not uncommon. Back at the Club, two different people told us that they had been on sailboats that had struck whales. In both cases it was a hit then the whale ran, but both boats were hauled and surveyed for damage.

Save your strength. After trying to retrieve the spinnaker in heavy winds with no luck, realize that it is impossible and stop trying. By the time the boat rounded into the wind and we could go for a douse, my

arms felt like lead. It would have been wiser to save the strength and use it when it could do some good.

GREAT STORY DAVE!!!!!!

Paul's impressions: (different from Dave's above)

Our speed -- 10 to 12 knots with bursts to 15

Wind speed --- 12 - 15 knots

Our location -- 1 to 2 miles west of Golden Gate (not far from mile rock)

Location of "hits" - not necessarily the transom, but the hull bottom (rear quadrant of the bottom)

Paul V. Farr

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