

# 2008 Super Mac and Back - My Story

By Bill Tucker

## Preamble

The Super Mac and Back, at 1034 nautical miles, is the longest fresh water race in the world and the longest in the Great Lakes. The race is really three singlehanded sailing races in one, all sponsored by the Great Lakes Singlehanded Society. The first race is the Mac Solo Challenge from Port Huron to Mackinac Island. Then continuing on to Chicago, the second is the Super Mac. Finally the Super Mac and Back continues on back past Mackinac Island again to Port Huron. A similar set of races is run concurrently from Chicago. The Super Mac and Super Mac and Back are run every 3 years.

This article is about my experience in the first Super Mac and Back run in June 2008. My boat, GL<sup>3</sup>, is a 1979 Beneteau First 30 which I have owned for 30 years. I have tried to include information that will help others prepare for and undertake this unique race. It is a bit of a long article, but then, it is about a long race.

## A Short History of a Long Race

I am told that the first singlehanded Mac, known as the Port Huron to Mackinac Island Solo Challenge, was the brain child of a bunch of guys sitting around a bar table during the winter in Michigan. The first Solo Mac was held in June of 1979, a race of 230 nautical miles. That wasn't enough sailing for some, and in 1981 the first Super Mac was held in which skippers just waved at Mackinac Island as they sailed by on their way to Chicago for a race of 517 nautical miles. In 1997, the first Chicago Mac was held with the initiation of a race of 287 nautical miles from Chicago to Mackinac Island at the same time as the Port Huron Solo Mac. In 2002, the first Super Mac from Chicago was held along with the Super Mac from Port Huron. If your home port is in Port Huron and you sail to Chicago why not just sail home, and so in June 2008 the first Super Mac and Back was held with starting lines in both Port Huron and Chicago.

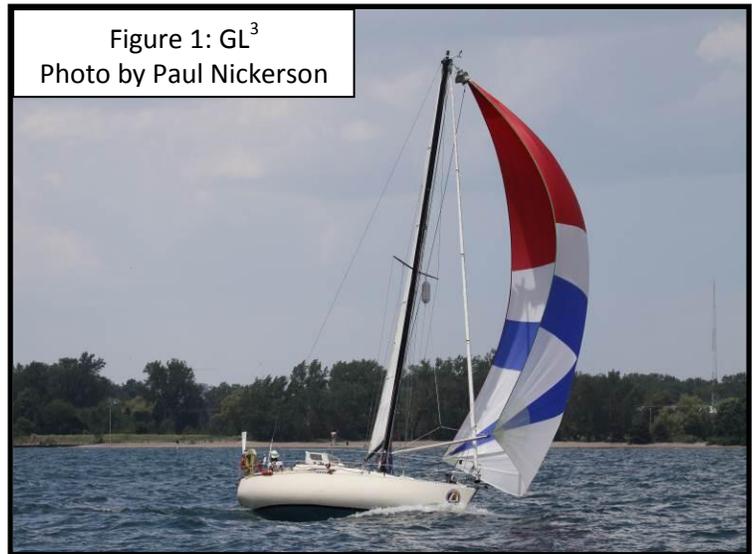


Figure 1: GL<sup>3</sup>  
Photo by Paul Nickerson

## Planning and Preparation and more Planning and Preparation

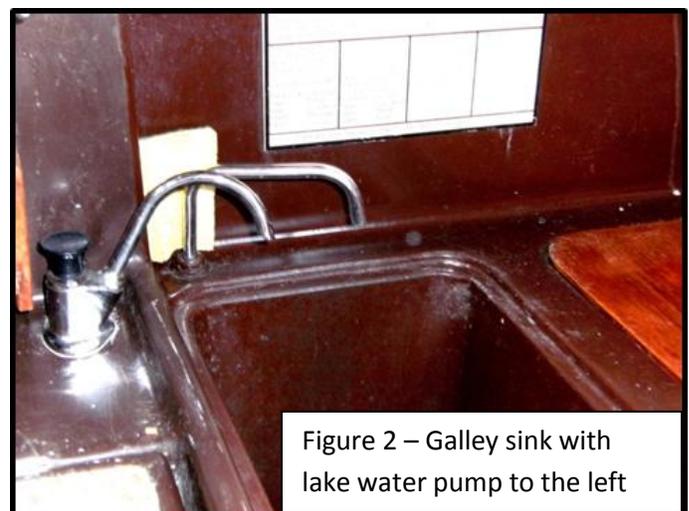
For the Super Mac and Back my emphasis was on planning and preparation. I generally assume that I will cover about 100 NM on average per day. For planning purposes, an error of + and – 20% was assumed over a period of several days. Thus for a race of 1034 NM, an expected race duration of 8 to 12 days was used. That is like doing four Solo Macs in series! I actually completed the race in 11 ½ days.

My basic philosophy was to be sure that everything onboard worked properly and to have backup systems, plans, or equipment whenever possible. The need for backups for even simple items was demonstrated to me several years ago when my one and only can opener broke and for a couple of days I opened cans with a not so

safe procedure using a hammer and screwdriver. I now carry two very sturdy can openers! I made up a “To Do List” of things to fix and upgrade and gradually work off the items on the list. The following is a list of things that I considered as part of my planning and preparation:

- ❖ **Navigation:** I used a chart plotter as my primary means of navigation. Before the trip, I obtained an updated chart module that covered Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. I also carried chart books for both lakes in case the chart plotter failed and for information on ports of refuge in both lakes should the need arise. I loaded way points for the race course prescribed in the Race Sailing Instructions. I also studied the charts carefully and plotted added way points to allow me to avoid any obstacles along the way.
- ❖ **Steering:** I carried three auto pilots. My primary autopilots were two Simrad TP32 tiller pilots. I also have a Plastimo Navik wind vane. These auto pilots were in good working condition and were capable of steering the boat under moderate conditions with a spinnaker up. The rudder gain and course error can be adjusted while these autopilots are in service. I have worked with these settings before to be sure their performance would be optimum.
- ❖ **Electric Power:** My goal was to only run the engine once per day to charge the battery. There was no real practical reason for this, except that I really do not like to listen to the engine when I am sailing. To reduce the electrical load, I changed out all possible lights that I would normally use while sailing with LEDs. I changed out my mast head tricolor light, chart table light, and several area lights in the cabin. The mast head light in particular significantly reduced my battery use. For fuel planning, I had planned on running the engine for about 3 hours per day at 2000 rpm. At this speed the 13.5 HP Beta Marine diesel uses about .2 gallons per hour. With a 25 gallon fuel tank, this would give me plenty of fuel including some for an emergency run to port if necessary. During the race engine charging, use averaged about 1.9 hours per day and used about 4.4 gallons of diesel. In practice, I found it more efficient to charge the battery more frequently than every 24 hours. I used a Xentrex Link 20 to monitor my house battery and usually started a charge when the battery was depleted to between 30 and 40%. A second battery was only used to start the engine.

- ❖ **Water:** The normal water supply includes a 30 gallon bladder tank and a 4 gallon insulated jug. The jug is filled with ice and provides drinking water only. A pump was installed to pump lake water to the galley sink as shown in Figure 2. I also carried a couple dozen plastic bottles of water. Under normal use this will last about 4 or 5 days. To make the water last, I used lake water whenever possible for washing dishes, washing hands, and making coffee.



- ❖ **Holding Tank:** The holding tank was a challenge as it was barely adequate for such a long trip. No flush water was used unless absolutely necessary. A can of Lysol spray helped make a smelly situation somewhat more bearable.

- ❖ **Food:** I carried food for 15 days. I admit I am not much of a cook and mostly eat canned food. I carried a moderate amount of rough weather or “I’m too busy to fool with cooking food”. This consisted of granola bars, apples, bananas, and cup of soup packets that could be easily be made even in rough weather. Cold stuff such as salad material, milk, juice, and cheese were kept in a heavily insulated, permanently installed ice box and a small ice box on the floor of the cabin. After a couple of days, everything was consolidated in the permanently installed ice box. The ice would be gone after 4 to 6 days depending on the temperature and on how often I went into the ice box. This required that I eat up all the food requiring refrigeration before the ice was gone. After that, all the food was warm. I kept some drinks and juice in a locker under one of the cabin seats to keep it cool, actually less warm.
- ❖ **Communications and Safety:** Of course the full list of safety equipment required by the Sailing Instructions was carried. In addition, a 406 Mhz. personal EPRIB was carried. This is not required but is a good safety precaution. I also carried an Iridium satellite phone. The Iridium system is an excellent communications tool that can be used any were in the world. I called in every evening at 2300 to my wife. The GLSS race instructions require a VHF radio call in and position exchange between boats every six hours. This worked well during the Solo Mac part of the race on the way to Mackinac Island, however after passing Mackinac Island and getting past Grays Reef in Lake Michigan the other boats in the race were generally out of range. For this race, the iBoat tracking system was used. This required each boat to carry a transponder securely attached to the deck and allowed people at home to track the boats progress on the internet.

### **First Leg – Port Huron to Mackinac Island – The Solo Mac**

It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Figure 4 provided a picture of the chart plotter track GL3 made for the race. The mostly red course, it turns black in the lower part of Lake Michigan, is the outbound course from Port Huron to Chicago. The black course is the return course back from Chicago to Port Huron.

The start of the Solo Mac saw 23 boats start with 7 in my class, the Ontario Division. We had nice wind across Lake Huron to Goderich and half way up the lake. The wind then moved around on the nose and so we had to tack the rest of the way up the lake. I passed the Solo Mac finish line adjacent to Mackinac Island after 3 days 3 hours and 21 minutes. I realized that this was just the first quarter of the Super Mac and Back so took it a bit easier than I might otherwise have done. After I passed Mackinac Island, I did not expect to get any sleep until I had passed under the Mackinac Bridge, turned at Grays Reef, and had gotten some distance into the Manitou Islands and out of the freighter lane that runs between these islands and the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Even so, I placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in my Division for the Solo Mac.

### **Second Leg – Mackinac Island to Chicago**

After passing Mackinac Island, it was neat to see several of the boats that had started from the

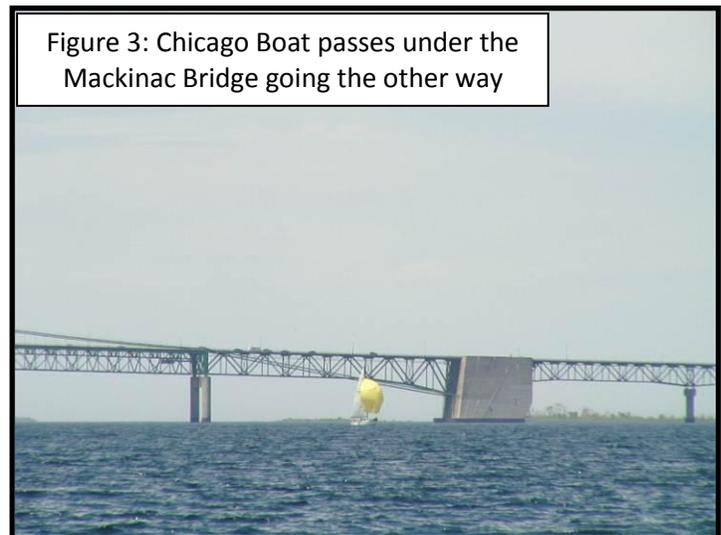
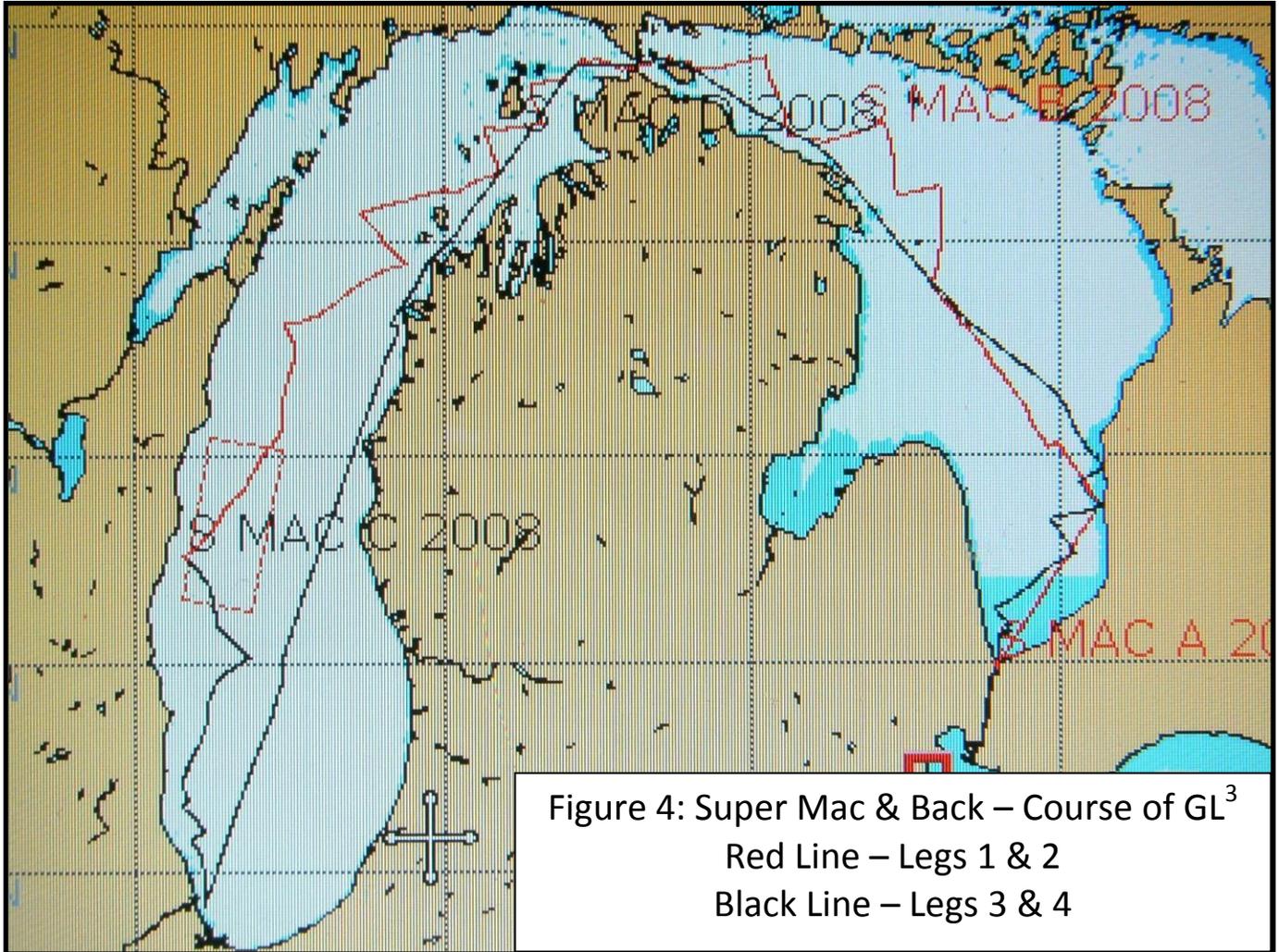


Figure 3: Chicago Boat passes under the Mackinac Bridge going the other way



Chicago side as I passed under the Mackinac Bridge and rounded Grays Reef.

At this point, I had thought that there would be a total of five boats continuing on to do the Super Mac and Back. In talking to other skippers as I entered the Manitou Island area it was learned that only one other boat was continuing on and that was YUK FU 2 sailed by Walt Norris. The other boats had been lured by the party on the Island or the skippers had just run out of steam doing the Mac Solo. It may be possible to use the white knuckle approach and stay awake for all or most of the Solo Mac, though this is certainly not advised but it just won't work for the Super Mac and Back. After passing Mackinac Island, my attitude changed. I now felt that I was on more of a cruise than a race. This was reinforced when I learned that the other boats that I saw as my primary competition had dropped out of the race. I relaxed to enjoy the sail.

Walt sails a fast boat very well and I usually only see him for a short time at the start of the race. I had hoped to see or talk to him in YUK FU 2 as I headed south on Lake Michigan and he headed north on the return trip. I tried to contact him several times using VHF radio but with no success.

The wind was on the nose for almost all of this leg. I dodged in and out of the Manitou Islands in the northern part of the lake. It seemed that when I tried to anticipate the wind movement based on weather forecasts the wind did just the opposite to frustrate my planning efforts. The approach to Chicago was at night, the sky was almost clear and the city of Chicago was a beautiful sight with all its lights. At 0412 in the morning, I rounded the mark for Chicago which is a concrete and brick water intake structure just outside the harbor entrance. After 3 days 15 hours and 2 minutes, this mark which represented the half-way point of the race. I had covered the first 517 miles of the race, as the crow flies, but certainly not as I had sailed.

### **Leg 3 – Chicago to Mackinac Island**

As I headed north and put the beautiful lights of Chicago behind me, I put up my spinnaker. The spinnaker would stay up for much of the trip north on Lake Michigan. It was a real sleigh ride, especially when compared with the first two legs of the race.

I did have a passenger for part of this leg. A pigeon landed on deck and stayed there for several hours. I tried to give him some bread and crackers, but he wasn't interested, and eventually flew away.

For a while, I thought I would get out of Lake Michigan without having to tack but that was not to be and in order to get into the Manitou Passage it was necessary to make one small tack just before the entrance. From Chicago back to Mackinac Island, the trip had taken 2 days 11 hours and 41 minutes. It had been the most pleasant and fastest sail of the race so far.



Figure 5: GL3 in Lake Michigan  
note pigeon and spinnaker

### **Leg 4 – Mackinac Island to Port Huron – The Final Leg**

The trip south in Lake Huron started as a fast sail.

In the northern part of the lake, I heard two boats ANTARES and KISMET talking to each other on their VHF radios. They were the two remaining boats doing the Super Mac and Back from the Chicago side. They had rounded the mark at Port Huron and were now on their way north toward home in Chicago. I was briefly able to exchange greetings with both of them as was passed in opposite directions. For me, this exchange was one of the high points of the race.

The trip south was fairly fast until I rounded the mark at Goderich. From there to Port Huron, it was a rough slog into the wind, with fairly rough seas and a bit of rain and fog thrown in. I finished this leg in a fairly fast time of 2

days 4 hours and 49 minutes. I had completed the race as the second and last boat to finish from the Port Huron side. The total time to complete the race was 11 days 11 hours and 32 minutes.

**Summary**

Of the 5 boats that started the race from the Port Huron side, only 2 finished. Of the 4 boats that had started the race from the Chicago side, only two finished. The first Super Mac and Back had, for the most part, been a fun and even relaxing race. I believe that the planning and preparation had helped to make the race successful for me. I was disappointed that the other boats in my size range had dropped out, but that had probably contributed to my more relaxed approach to the race.

One of the keys to completing this race is to pace oneself. This includes taking it easy and sailing less aggressively than one might during a shorter race. It also means getting lots of cat naps, and eating regular meals. All this will help insure that this long race is a fun and positive experience.

The following tables summarize my times and speed made good for the various legs of the race:

It is my hope that this discussion of my experience doing the Super Mack and Back will help inform others about what is involved in preparing for and executing this race and will ultimately encourage them to participate.

GL3 - 2008 Super Mac & Back - Time Summary			
Port Huron Start			
Mac Island	3d 3h 21m	6d 19h 2m	11d 11h 32m
Chicago 4 Mile Crib	3d 15h 2m		
Mac Island	2d 11h 41m	4d 16h 30m	
Port Huron Finish	2d 4h 49m		

GL3 - 2008 Super Mac & Back - Speed Summary			
Port Huron Start			
Mac Island	3.1 Kt	3.2 Kt	3.8 Kt
Chicago 4 Mile Crib	3.3 Kt		
Mac Island	4.8 Kt	4.6 Kt	
Port Huron Finish	4.4 Kt		