

BY MARIANNE SCOTT

DISMASTED!

From the initial crisis to the expensive aftermath, hear the exciting tale of **LOSING A RIG** in Puget Sound





PERHAPS WE WERE punished for our hubris. On May 3, we were sailing north from Seattle to Vancouver.

Although the forecast was for 25–30-knot westerlies, the wind was funneling down Saratoga Passage—between Whidbey and Camano Islands—at 35–50 knots. Right on the nose.

“It doesn’t seem that bad, this full gale,” I said to my husband, David, who skips our Hanse 411, *Beyond the Stars*. “Some of our friends would panic in these winds.”

Yes, we were hitting a lot of square waves and, to avoid being overpowered, we’d lowered the big mainsail into its maindrop envelope, but the jib was out a mere 30 percent and we were motor sailing. We had confidence in our boat—it was constructed to cross oceans. And we were dressed for the weather with foulies and lifejackets. It was about 15:30.

Then David motioned to me. “The boom seems really low,” he pointed. In fact, the boom with its sail—about 300 pounds—was resting on the dodger, bending its stainless frame. “Something’s seriously wrong,” I mumbled, and as we looked up, the top half of the mast came

↓ **Below** The author’s well-travelled Hanse 411, *Beyond the Stars*, with mast intact.



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tumbling down to starboard.

Instinctively, we ducked under the dodger and the mast didn't mash our heads—in fact, the inertia of aluminum masts makes them fall comparatively slowly. But the 30-foot top section of the broken spar, still attached by internal halyards and wiring, began pounding against the boat's rubrail. Meanwhile, the mast's still-standing bottom half began to sway. Anticipating its imminent fall David steered the boat to port to put the yacht on starboard tack. Seconds later, the mast's bottom section toppled. It fell to port, lifted the top half out of the water and deposited it across the cockpit. A 25-foot triangle now angled to port; another eight feet stuck out on starboard—our boat's normal 13' 2" beam had swelled to about 35 feet.

If the mast's bottom half had also fallen to starboard, the two pieces, adrift but still connected to the boat with shrouds and stays, might have become a battering ram that could have holed and sunk the yacht. But now the entire mast was aboard, although the portion straddling the cockpit had jammed the steering wheel. After wrapping a line around that mast section, we winched it an inch off the wheel allowing us to steer.

All shrouds, headstay and backstay, as well as halyards, sheets and other lines were tangled on deck or in the water. The jib, still attached to the furler, was dragging in the sea



↑ **Above Top** The top portion of the mast jammed the steering wheel and had to be winched free before they could steer. ↑ **Above Beyond the Stars** before being derigged at the dock at Coupeville.

on starboard. Wind and depth instruments stopped functioning. The radio antenna was disconnected. But the engine continued to work.

We called a pan-pan to the U.S. Coast Guard on our handheld VHF. After taking the standard information—boat name, size, number aboard and whether we were wearing lifejackets—the Coast Guard told us that, if needed, no rescue vessel on Camano or Whidbey was capable of towing our boat in gale conditions. However, they'd pick us up by helicopter if we were willing to abandon our sailboat. We were not.

■ **LIMPING TO SAFETY** We continued powering slowly north with our jib and rigging dragging in the water. Could we anchor somewhere? The phone trilled. The Coast Guard had contacted Central Whidbey Island Fire and Rescue Chief Ed Hartin. Hartin informed us his fire truck was on the beach south of Penn Cove and he'd help us find an anchorage in Whidbey's lee. He warned us not to enter Penn Cove, which offered little protection to winds topping 55 knots. Training our binoculars, we eventually spotted the firetruck's emergency flashers. Forty-five minutes later, we approached the spot. Fortunately, our Nobeltec charts continued to provide us depth indications.

With David steering, I went forward to anchor. Never have 30 feet seemed so long. The wind screeched. I had to scoot under the mast, clamber over the downed main, navigate through a mess of wires and lines—and all my usual handholds had disappeared. Holding on to the bow pulpit with one hand, I tried opening the anchor well to seize the windlass control. The bent furler jammed the well cover. With a few choice words and one foot as a wedge, I managed to wrench it open. Thank heavens the control worked, but the out-of-kilter furler equally hampered the anchor. With all my strength, I kicked and pushed, unjamming the anchor and feeding out 120 feet of chain and rode. We dragged immediately.

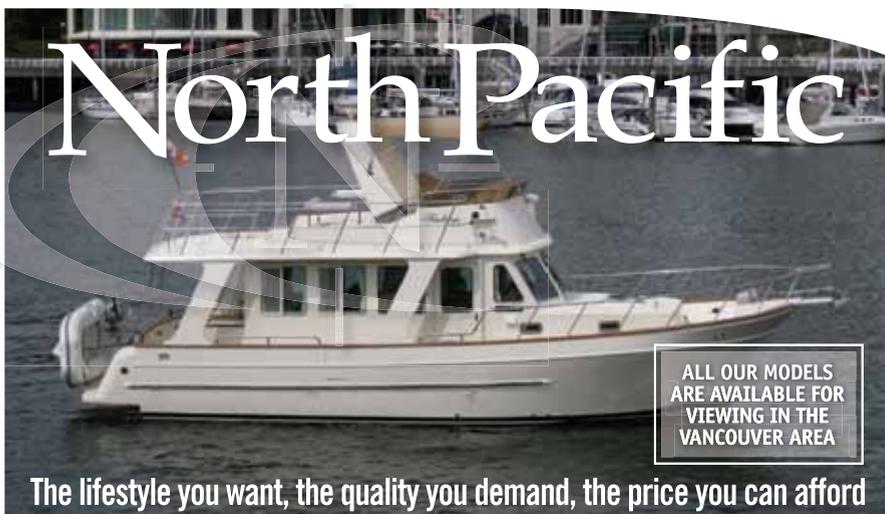
Chief Hartin called again, offering a mooring buoy, but it looked iffy and too close to shore. "It doesn't look very strong," I said. "It's OK," he replied. "No problem." David and I conferred. Do we go on gut feeling or rely on local knowledge? We opted to count on the chief's assurances and David clambered forward to try to catch the buoy—a tricky manoeuvre in gale-force winds. He couldn't reach it in the heaving waves, but our hanging shrouds caught around its floating ball.

The fire department launched an inflatable with two sturdy men aboard. They bounced through the waves and tried to sever the shrouds with heavy bolt cutters. All they did was dent the wire. With difficulty, the firemen untangled the wires from the buoy and I hung them on the life ring hook. Our two rescuers then tied a line from our boat to the floating ball. We thought we were secure but instead, the floating ball snapped off and we went hard aground on the shoaling beach. Eventually David was able to back up, mercifully without catching any rigging in the prop. The firemen returned to shore, hauled in

their inflatable and skedaddled. After motoring a short way south, we dropped anchor again—it held despite continuing high winds. It had taken 3.5 hours from the time our mast fell.

■ **NEXT STEPS** We went below and caught our breath. David had remained fairly calm, but I felt dehydrated and shaky from the adrenaline that had sustained me. Fortunately, water and food quickly restored me and we began debriefing. We'd been lucky: we weren't injured; we hadn't holed the boat; we hadn't panicked; we were insured.

Returning to Victoria through Juan de Fuca Strait with the rig down would be unwise. We telephoned Carol Hasse of ▶



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Port Townsend Sails and asked her to find us a rigger in the Anacortes area. Within the hour, Andy Schwenk of Northwest Rigging called and promised to meet us in Whidbey's Coupeville the next morning.

We checked to ensure we weren't dragging anchor and fell into our bunk, exhausted.

Remarkably, the next morning was windless and we slowly motored to the empty Coupeville dock. Schwenk caught our mooring lines and pulled us in, fitting our huge "beam" between the dock's pilings. His and his assistant's knowledge and muscle efficiently pulled the rigging's rings and pins and in three hours, the entire rig and sails had been carted away. We motored back to Victoria without further incident.

■ **WHAT HAPPENED** We believe our mast "pumped" fore and aft in the square waves. A combination of wind and waves creates a "frequency response" in the mast as it vibrates and oscillates. When the mast whips back and forth enough times, metal stress can cause it to fail. Why did this happen to a five-

[1] The dodger leans heavily to starboard after supporting the weight of the mast.

[2] The mast collar was broken and blocks chafed and crushed.

[3] The stainless dodger mount was ripped out of the fiberglass.

[4] The shredded failure point.

[5] Skipper David Scott at the Coupeville dock after the derigging.

year-old mast? *Beyond the Stars* carries a standard modern rig: double swept-back spreaders and no forward lower shrouds. In addition, our boat has a self-tacking jib with the jib sheet's sheave exiting the mast between the upper and lower spreaders, which could have been a focus point for the stress. The mast's aluminum literally shredded.

Allan Betton, of Total Boat Marine Surveyors (who helped us through the process with the insurance company), explained that a mast usually fails through a combination of factors. "It's a domino effect," he said. "Modern rig designs are geared to racing and weight saving. In this case, the jib sheet exiting in the mast's middle may have pulled the mast's bottom forward, while the top part bent aft. Constant repetition will weaken the structure."

■ **WHAT WE LEARNED** To reduce the likelihood of a future mast failure, our new spar, which took about six weeks to arrive from Sparcraft in North Carolina, is stepped with

more “prebend” to reduce pumping in square waves. To decrease rig stretching, the new shrouds are rod instead of wire. And we’re experimenting with our rigger, Brent Jacobi of Blackline Marine, on jib sheeting configurations that minimize the chances of weakening the mast’s structural integrity.

Dealing with broken rigging depends on one’s circumstances. Our decision tree in this situation differed from, say, a mid-ocean mast failure, or one during a race with a group of brawny guys. There were only two of us aboard but we were close to a harbour, so we didn’t release any of the downed rig. Hauling up downed, wet sails and wires in a storm is tough. We learned cutting the rig requires more than strong bolt cutters—even when sturdy firemen are handling the cutters. To sever the twisted wire properly, a heavy-duty grinder with a cutting wheel is best. But it’s hard to imagine hanging over the side in heaving waves with a grinder attached to an electrical cord. Batteries will only last a short while—and it means you must always have charged batteries handy. The best way to loosen one’s rig is to pull pins when conditions are calm enough. In our case, we were able to engage professional help.

Our insurance company treated us well when it came time to repair the boat. Our surveyor, Betton, agreed immediately to our request to have Blackline (a trusted repair shop) perform the boat repairs. We had purchased “replacement insurance,” and it worked out well for us. Replacement insurance is supposed to restore the boat to the way it was before the accident. I’d even read our policy—an absolute must, according to our BC Yacht Insurance broker, Bob Raymond.

“Know what and how you are insuring,” Raymond cautions. “Your boat is likely a significant investment. Highlight sections of your policy and, if you have questions, ask them. Buy insurance not only on cost, but on value.” He added that insurance is like any business relationship. “Be forthcoming and cooperative. There’s give and take. Be respectful.”

Betton also provided advice on dealing with an accident’s aftermath. “Our goal is to make your vessel whole again,” he said. “But the boater must explain what happened. Make a comprehensive list of damages and make the boat available for inspection. Showing up after repairs are completed and asking for reimbursement isn’t on.”

He says the insurance company is likely to pay for things you would pay for yourself if you were uninsured. “Would you fly an electrician from Vancouver to Port Hardy to repair some wiring?” he said. “If you wouldn’t, don’t expect

insurance to pay either. It has to make sense.”

It’s amazing how many items become “throwaways” after an accident. The new wind transducer could no longer communicate with the existing wind instrument so it had to be replaced. Repairing the deep gouges on the anodized boom and jib traveler would be more costly than replacing them. Chafe had ruined blocks.

■ **IN THE END**, despite good insurance, dismasting is still a costly accident. There’s the deductible, of course, and then there are further temptations. “While the boat’s out of the water and under repair anyway, why don’t we take advantage and do...and improve...?” We’ve certainly fallen into that trap! 🚩

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