

## Flying the Bull

Their voices woke the old sailor. Milt Kaufman opened his eyes to the half-light of dawn and took in the shadowy interior of his sailboat. He could hear the gurgle of the water along his hull, the gentle slapping of unsecured rigging against a nearby mast, and the rasping call of a blue heron. Above it all, he could hear the voices. Voices of sailors in the early morning preparing for race day. Voices that he now remembered hearing late into the night.

The last evening had been filled with their amiable boasts and laughter, Milt had sat two berths away in the dark cockpit of *Taurus* – once considered the boat to beat – and listened to the toasts and challenges of a new generation of racers.

A good-humored sarcasm had marked an exchange taking place between two men on the foredeck of the nearby boat. “So, is this Milt Kaufman’s spinnaker that Howard’s got in the new bag?”

Milt’s ears had picked up at the mention of his name, and he’d quietly held his breath. “Nah, the chute’s as new as the bag and lighter than any *The Matador* ever flew.”

The first voice chuckled “Yeah, Milt’s bull got a little heavy at times.”

There was more laughter. A broad grin deepened the creases of *The Matador*’s weatherworn face, and he bit back the urge to shout back his own rejoinder. In his opinion the weight of the spinnaker had less bearing on race results than did other factors. His *Taurus* and Howard Flint’s *Raging Bull* were the same class of sloop, but Milt did not believe he and Howard were in the same class as skippers.

In the coolness of the dawn the jocularity of the past night had given way to a businesslike hush, and the genuine care shown by Howard’s crew toward his racing equipment belied their good-natured jabs of the previous evening.

Milt turned onto his back, listening as the sounds of the crew's preparation came through his open portholes. He could hear the swish of water from the hose and the splash of brushes as the decks of Flint's *Raging Bull* were given a final scrubbing. He recognized the faint crackling of the Dacron genoa and pictured the sail being clipped onto the forestay and arranged on the forward deck. In the still morning he could even discern the rustle of canvas as Howard's new red sail cover was folded back and slipped off the boom, leaving the mainsail ready to raise.

The sounds of the crew rigging the sloop took the old sailor back to his own racing days, and he smiled again at the frustration he had often dished out to the upstart, fully 30 years his junior. Flint had won many races in the Sound, but when he moved south, he'd had trouble adapting to the fluky winds on the river. Race after race, the two competitors would jockey for a position, each gaining a temporary advantage, only to be overtaken. But by the time they made the last leg, rounding the buoy for the upriver run to the finish line, the old river rat would best the new kid every time. Sometimes Howard had gotten caught in the current or had run onto a sandbar that Milt had strategically missed. Other times his crew, frequently joined by new sailors from the youth sailing club he led, would react too slowly, and those shifting winds would leave Howard fighting his way out of a knockdown as the *Matador* slipped on toward the finish line.

Nor did it soothe Howard's bruised pride any that the bull on his competitor's spinnaker – to Milt always *Taurus* the bull – was so often mistaken for a symbol of Howard's vessel. The local newspaper, in covering one regatta, had run a full-page color photo of the fleet sailing upriver toward the finish line with the colorful light-weight spinnakers billowing out from each boat – and then had erroneously cited the one with the big black bull as “belonging to Howard Flint's *Raging Bull*.” The chagrined second-place finisher had spent the rest of that sailing season denying to the other racers that he had in any way led the paper to believe it was his boat leading that race.

Milt was startled out of his reverie by the confident slap, slap, slap, of deck shoes on the concrete float, and he heard Howard Flint cheerfully greet his crew: “The Barista is here! Who’s ready for coffee?”

Flint's well-known dependence on caffeine and his high energy personality were a frequent target of jest among the racers. It now drew a derisive snort from his old competitor as Milt rolled out of his bunk. Clad only in boxer shorts, Milt rubbed at the two-day growth of silvery stubble on his chin and poking a finger between the galley curtains he peered out at the group on the dock. Flint, a small, powerfully built man in his early 40’s, stood proudly among the younger men and women who gathered around him.

Milt let the curtains fall back and ran one hand through his untidy mass of gray curls. *Barista*, he mumbled. In his day they had made their coffee aboard: instant coffee and boiling water. He flipped the propane switch on the electrical panel and lit the stove burner beneath the tea kettle, already anticipating his favorite flavor crystals. Pulling on a T-shirt, he recalled those cold spring mornings before races, and how that first cup of coffee tasted like heaven. It was even better when rising from a rough night at sea. He shook his head at the new religion that had taken in so many people. Coffee had become the icon of a new cult, its devotees holding services at the corner café. Howard Flint's local chain of coffee houses were so popular they had easily bankrolled his sailing. How far did Flint take it, Milt wondered. Did he grind fresh coffee for his crew every morning during ocean races? Was there an espresso machine on board? Did he take their orders at the beginning or end of their watches?

The *Raging Bull* skipper handed around each crew member’s standing order for latte or mocha or cappuccino and began to brief them. “I just talked to the race committee and the forecast downriver calls for a light but steady northwesterly by late morning.”

*Downriver?* Milt squinted at his calendar watch in the dimness. It had to be the Long-Distance Race. It surprised him to realize that in the four years since his heart surgery, he had gotten so far out of touch with the racing community. Never would he have missed the buildup to the most contentious race of the season.

As Howard finished outlining his strategies, his voice became more serious, catching Milt's attention once again. "Make sure that spinnaker is ready to pop," he told them. "We want to do old Milt 'The Matador' proud when we round the mark and start upriver."

One of the voices from the night before piped up. "Too bad he quit racing. We could show him a thing or two about flying the bull today."

The bushy gray eyebrows rose abruptly at the challenge. Did they realize the Matador was aboard the *Taurus* two berths away, listening to this faint praise? Did Howard really care about his opinion? Milt thought back to the longhaired, short-tempered young man whom he had once seen pound the deck in frustration when a tangled sheet had let his competition slip by him once again. Perhaps it was time to remind that youngster who it was who had always held the upper hand on the river.

A few minutes later he heard Howard's engine reverse, and Milt slid back his hatch and stood in the companionway. His pale blue eyes scanned the crew as the *Raging Bull* motored by. Her skipper glanced his way and raised a hand in acknowledgement, leaving Milt a willing audience to his passage. *Raging Bull* was a sleek racing craft, that much he acknowledged. His own boat, though a sister ship, was older and much heavier now that he had outfitted her for cruising. But he knew the *Taurus* was still capable of winning some contests given the right circumstances.

Circumstances could be perfect today, he thought, to show everyone he still had the right stuff. He sipped his coffee and stared thoughtfully out over the forest of masts in the moorage, picturing

himself beginning a leisurely downriver cruise. As the race boats assembled for the start he would slip through the fleet unnoticed. The array of gas cans and water jugs along each rail, the outboard motor and BBQ secured to the aft pulpit, and the inflatable dinghy bouncing along behind would render *Taurus* virtually invisible to the racers.

Intent on their competitors' vessels, the skippers would not see a bare-masted motoring vessel as anything more than an obstruction that would have to give way to them, and he doubted anyone would take the time to notice who it was.

Somewhere downriver Milt would clip the spinnaker bag to the forward pulpit and run the lines back to the cockpit. He would need no other sail to make way upriver in the light winds. Then, as the leaders came around the bend, they would see the *Taurus*, and the big black bull that graced her flaming red spinnaker would inspire their awe as it bore down upon them.

If Howard had learned any of the lessons that the Matador had modeled for him, *Raging Bull* would be leading the fleet. Grinning as he anticipated Flint's reaction, Milt pulled a flannel shirt over his T-shirt and slipped into faded blue jeans. It had been four years since he'd had the pleasure of seeing the cocky sailor vent his frustration, and he looked forward to showing him up one more time.

His grin broadened and he began to whistle as he readied the boat for departure. By the time he cleared the moorage, Milt could barely see the *Raging Bull* on its downriver course, now little more than a white speck topped with a glimmering sliver of mast.

Maintaining a discreet distance until the race boats reached Sand Island, Milt slowed to an idle as they gathered for the start. Then timing his approach by the five-minute warning gun, he took to the right bank of the river, returned to his usual six-knot cruising speed, and slipped past the fleet. Just as he had imagined, his cruising rig garnered little attention from the assembled racers.

Milt motored on past Goat Island until the curve of the river obscured him from the fleet. Heading now toward the other shore, he found the wind was just as Howard had forecast, light and steady from the northwest. It was perfect for his purpose. He turned the boat upriver and set the autopilot. Sighting in on a tall cottonwood on shore, he adjusted his engine speed until it equaled the river current and the boat hung even with that landmark. Then he went forward to rig the spinnaker and pole. Returning to the cockpit, he wrapped each sheet around its winch and double-checked his heading. Seeing it was already past noon, he opened a beer to facilitate the wait.

In time, a sail came into view upriver, tacking toward the opposite shore. Milt raised his binoculars and watched as the boat came about, then disappeared again behind the distant bend. His trademark grin lit up his face in anticipation: the sail number had confirmed that the first boat to approach him would be the *Raging Bull*.

Milt's doctor had warned him away from the stresses of racing after his bypass surgery, but he had not forbidden sailing altogether, and the avid racer had rerigged his boat for leisurely single-handed control. Now from among the multicolored array of lines running through blocks on the cabin top he selected the rope halyard for the spinnaker and wrapped it around a winch.

A few more boats appeared along the right bank of the river ahead of him, then turned and disappeared behind the island. Guessing that *Raging Bull* would soon reappear, he cranked the line in. The spinnaker flowed smoothly from its bag on the forward pulpit. As perfectly as it had in his imagination, the flame-red spinnaker filled. Its rounded triangular shape billowed upward, held only by the halyard that secured it to the top of the mast and by the lines from the two lower corners. It was these sheets that Milt now controlled from his cockpit.

Killing the engine, he reveled in the welcome silence and gentle motion of the boat as the chute rocked lazily back and forth in concert with the wind. The landmark tree soon fell behind, and the

familiar excitement he felt as he looked up at the huge sail was heightened by the anticipation of the racers' reactions. From Milt's vantage point, the angry black bull looked sufficiently menacing. But for the best effect it needed to be viewed from ahead, a perspective that accentuated its size and gave an ominous fiery glow to the bold red eyes.

The *Taurus* was approaching the top of the island when the full fleet came into view on their downriver tacks. Milt stood serenely in the cockpit, the spinnaker sheet on the port side winch and the line to the pole on the starboard winch, his hands gripping each of the lines. Idly making adjustments, he felt assured by the light wind of both a longer exposure to his audience and achieving the desired effect.

As the lead boat approached, Milt caught sight of Howard Flint leaning out across his starboard rail, a tight grip on the tiller. From across the water, he could see Howard's posture register his surprise at the imposing red sail. Howard brought the boat about, and the *Raging Bull* tacked in front of the *Taurus*. As the boat approached on its port tack, Milt watched a growing number of ripples interrupt the smooth line of her sails. Howard's attention was diverted, and The Matador raised his can of beer in a mock toast.

At the far side of the river, Flint neatly brought the boat about and tacked back. This time as the *Raging Bull* crossed close behind the *Taurus*, the captain and crew were hidden from Milt's view behind the other boat's broad genoa.

Milt grinned, returning his attention to his spinnaker. A wave of elation rushed over him at having pulled off the ultimate coup at the expense of his old adversary's shaky self-esteem. Although their rivalry had kept them from becoming close, he had always seen the younger man as a protégé, albeit an antagonistic one. Now he thought that the lessons may have been lost on Howard, for if he let such a cowardly challenge ruffle his sails, he would never gain the respect of the other competitors. With an appreciative perusal of the huge bull that had so frequently taken him first across the finish line, Milt

felt a sudden pang of regret that this was the closest he would ever again come to racing, and he raised his beer can to the sail, toasting the ease with which he had just dismissed his onetime challenger.

Then he heard the ring of working winches and the splash of bow wake behind him. Howard Flint, abandoning his lead, had come about and was following him upriver, main and genoa flying wing-and-wing. Milt's eyes measured the narrowing expanse of water between them: The *Taurus* was being overtaken. He tossed away his can, mindless of the beer that spurted across the cockpit. Returning his attention to the spinnaker sheets, he nervously trimmed that often cantankerous sail to its best advantage. The other sloop was still gaining.

Milt watched helplessly as his old nemesis gained advantage. His eyes strayed momentarily to the cabin top, the main and jib halyards trailing neatly over its edge, and for a moment he regretted the vanity of not having readied these sails as well. But the mainsail still rested beneath its canvas cover, and the jib sheets were trapped beneath gas cans and water jugs.

Then the *Raging Bull* was beside him. Standing at the helm, Howard raised his coffee mug. His crew, having taken positions along the starboard deck, held a solemn and silent salute as the *Taurus* fell slowly behind.

With his only available sail working its hardest, The Matador saw only one option. He cleated the spinnaker sheets, pulled his six-foot frame to attention, and returned the salute.

As Raging Bull pulled ahead, a hearty "Ole!" erupted from her crew and Howard jibed the main. Milt held his salute, pivoting with them as they tacked away from him then turned to race downriver once more. As the old sailor caught sight of his one-time rival's face, he cupped his hands around his mouth. "You've got the right stuff Barista! Now go win the damned race!"