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RACE TO MACKINAC

IN TOO DEEP

Could two sailors have
been saved from drowning?
We investigate the tragedy.



In too deep

Two tragic deaths during this year's Race to Mackinac leave investigators examining whether the safety equipment designed to save these sailors' lives actually contributed to ending them.
By **Dawn Reiss** Photograph by **Keith King**

ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

At 333 miles, the Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac is the longest annual freshwater sailing race in the world. The grueling two-and-a-half or three-day slog requires crews to sleep in shifts every two or four hours in the beating rain, scorching sun and bitter cold that can cause frostbite even in summer. Starting near Navy Pier and ending close to the quaint vacation destination of Michigan's Mackinac Island, it is man versus nature on the most basic level, even with its reputation as a rich man's sport.

Before the 2011 race, the event had never seen a racing-related death in its 103 years. (There have been a few health-related incidents, including several heart attacks, but nothing directly attributed to sailing.) In some ways, the race's clean record is a wonder, especially considering Lake Michigan's rapidly changing squalls, which can blow in and out much quicker than ocean winds. The squalls make it harder to navigate and anticipate conditions, causing boats to go over one choppy wave and smash right into the next without reprieve.

Experienced sailors Mark Morley, 51, and Suzanne Bickel, 40, both of Saginaw, Michigan, were among the 3,500 competitors placing their sailboats in position on the afternoon of July 16, waiting for the firing cannon to start the race. Soon after the loud report sounded, their boat, a Kiwi-35 named *WingNuts* for its unusual 14-foot-wide winglike extensions to the deck, navigated with Mark at its tiller past 11 other boats in its sportsman class. *WingNuts* followed the Wisconsin shoreline the first night of the race, passing summer festivals as fireworks lit up the sky.

"The first day and first night were awesome," recalls Peter Morley, Mark's younger brother, who was part of the crew. "We were having the time of our lives and everyone was all smiles. This year, the race felt better. We were going fast and passing boats. It was the second night that things went to hell."



LIVES UPENDED
The sailboat *WingNuts* floats upside down in Lake Michigan off the coast of Charlevoix, Michigan, on July 18, after it capsized during the annual Race to Mackinac.

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Several years ago, when a member of Saginaw Bay Yacht Club mentioned he had a 1984 Kiwi-35 for sale, Mark and his brother Peter, along with their cousins John Dent of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Stan Dent of Midland, Michigan, jumped at the chance to buy it. "It was a cool boat [and] fast," says Peter, who lives in Midland. "It needed some work, but that's what we like to do." High-tech for its time, the unconventionally designed 35-foot boat's eight-foot-wide hull and fold-up wings meant the crew could sit farther out over the water than on most traditional boats.

But *WingNuts* needed upgrades to make it competitive. The four co-owners sailed the boat, then tinkered with it for nearly a year: They replaced the original aluminum mast with a carbon version that was 40 percent lighter, extended the boom (the horizontal pole that supports the sail), and added 300 pounds to its original 1,200-pound ballast, according to Meade Gougeon, who runs a marine adhesives and sealants manufacturing business in Bay City, Michigan, and has known the Morleys for three generations. Although these upgrades are known to increase speed, some sailing experts say adding too much ballast could potentially cause a boat to capsize.

The boat passed the required ORR (Offshore Racing Rule) measurement, in which a computerized wand is used to inspect every part of the hull to determine a boat's handicap. The wand electronically collects data points that are then entered into a 3-D computer model that calculates the boat's weight, size, speed, age and other measurements—including a stability index, a rating for how likely the boat is to tip and right itself again.

The Morleys had already raced *WingNuts* in three Macs when, in July of this year, weather reports described ideal conditions for a downward wind—perfect for *WingNuts'* shape and speed. The eight-person crew would consist of Mark and

Peter; Peter's 15-year-old son, Stuart Morley; Peter and Mark's 16-year-old second cousin, Christopher "C.J." Cummings of Grandville, Michigan; cousins John and Stan Dent; Chicago architect Lee Purcell; and Suzanne Bickel.

Months earlier, Mark had met Suzanne, a fellow divorcee, at the Bay City Yacht Club in Bay City, Michigan. Ten years her senior, Mark was taken by the independent spirit of this woman who, in 2009, took time off from her job as a pharmaceutical rep to sail across the Atlantic, making port in the Azores, the Canary Islands and Portugal, among other exotic locales. Like Mark, her zest for life guided her toward skiing, sailing and more adventurous activities such as scuba diving, hang-gliding in the Swiss Alps and cliff diving in Greece.

Although he had a reputation as a ladies' man, Mark seemed different around this girlfriend, says his 20-year-old daughter, Sage Morley, who lives in Wicker Park and is a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "Suzanne made my dad younger—she kept him in check and they had fun together," she says. "They really complemented each other well." Over their eight-month courtship, Suzanne had told her father, James Makowski, and stepmother, Mary, that Mark was good for her. Together they sailed, cooked and skied. "I think they would have gotten married," says Mark Morley's ex-wife, Kathi Spence. Mark, a trade-show manager and designer with Morley Companies—a business started by his great-grandfather that specializes in travel, marketing, exhibit displays and customer service centers for Fortune 500 companies—spent less time tinkering with refurbishing projects and became more active. "[Suzanne] seemed so easy-going and game for anything," Spence says. "If I had to pick a stepmom for my daughter, she would have been it."

A fantastic cook, Suzanne upgraded Mark's sailing food of choice, Dinty Moore beef stew, to meals of beef Wellington, lobster and steak with tarragon butter. Although she worked as a pharmaceutical rep for Great Lakes Medical, she'd been making plans to relocate to the U.S.

Virgin Islands, where she wanted to start a tourist sailing business serving gourmet food.

Suzanne often sailed on *Cheap Thrill*, a much older, slower San Juan 30 sailboat. But, according to Saginaw's Dave Scott, who owns *Cheap Thrill*, when Mark asked her to join *WingNuts* for the 2011 Mac, Suzanne jumped at the chance. "She wanted to do the Mac again," Scott says. "Getting a chance to sail on *WingNuts* was like going from driving your grandma's Buick to a Corvette."

Three nights before the Race to Mackinac, Suzanne went to dinner with her father and stepmother in Saginaw. "I told her to be careful and that we loved her," James recalls. "She said, 'Don't worry, Dad, I'm an old salt.'" By all accounts, Suzanne was an excellent sailor, better, many Morley family members say, than Mark with his 44 years of sailing experience, including 20 years racing the Mac. "She was seasoned; she knew what she was doing. She was never afraid of anything," her father continues, fighting back tears. "I never had one disagreement with her and that's the God's truth. That is why it is so hard."

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On the second morning of the race, a Sunday, Mark remarked to the crew that the dawn sky had a reddish cast, a well-known warning to sailors that storms are coming. As day turned to night, the *WingNuts* crew monitored the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecast, as well as their Garmin GPS system and XM radar. Summer storms are fairly common, and the crew had plenty of sailing experience; as the squall line slowly approached, they felt prepared, Peter Morley says.

After 11:50pm EST, Mark advised the crew the storm was coming. The crew dropped *WingNuts'* sails and, while wearing their life preservers, clipped into safety harnesses that were tethered to the boat. Soon, heavy gusts blew in six- to eight-foot waves with sheets of rain,

PHOTO: JOHN L. RUSSELL/AP

Race to Mackinac

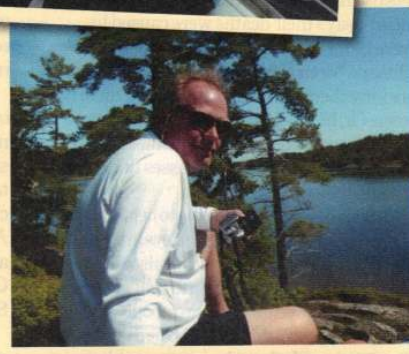
according to reports from sailors in the race. Mark steered the boat, with Suzanne beside him in the stern. Flashes of lightning lit up the sky like strobe lights. A first blast of high wind, followed by a second, more intense blast, rated at 60 knots or higher, violently tossed the boat from side to side as the crew struggled to hear each other over the roar of the storm.

Then, just east of Fox Island, Michigan, *WingNuts* suddenly flipped to one side and then righted itself, as it had many times before. But then it tipped back over. This time, the mast dipped deep in the water, flipping and "turtling" the boat upside down. The bottom of *WingNuts* floated above water like an island as the crew, tossed overboard into the churning, 66-degree lake, scrambled to cut or unclip the lines that tethered them to the boat.

What happened next is documented in police reports collected the following day, according to Charlevoix, Michigan, sheriff Don Schneider. "I saw the mast go underwater," Stuart said in his report, "and I realized we weren't going to pop back up." Cummings, unable to unclip his safety harness, was dragged underwater as waves crested over his head. He gulped mouthfuls of water as the boat rocked back and forth. He clutched the hull as Purcell tried to keep him calm, assuring him that everything would be okay. Eventually, Stuart was able to unclip Cummings from his harness as Purcell climbed on top of the boat. "I was relieved to know that I was untethered from the boat and wouldn't die," Cummings "later recalled.

Before *WingNuts* rolled over, John, who was resting below in the cabin, had decided to hold his personal flotation device rather than wear it. "I knew my PFD was the self-inflating kind and I knew I didn't want to have it on if I was under the cockpit," he said in his police report. As the boat tipped, John left his PFD behind and, untethered beneath the boat, tried to make his way through floating clothes and other items in the cabin, which was filling with water, using the lights of the cockpit's navigational equipment to guide him. He spotted the lifelines (fencing made of wire or cable that runs along the edge of the deck) and dove under them, through the water, to escape. When he reached the surface, he grabbed hold of the boat as it started to drift, bracing himself against a lifeline.

At the same time, Stan Dent was trapped under the boat. "Fortunately, the PFD was not a self-inflating type," he said in his police report. Gulping air while inside a 4- to 18-inch air pocket created by the upside-down boat's cockpit, Stan tried to swim



TOP *WingNuts* and its crew during this year's Race to Mackinac.

MIDDLE Suzanne Bickel (pictured, center photos) was an experienced sailor who once sailed across the Atlantic.

BOTTOM Mark Morley (pictured) and Suzanne shared a love of outdoor adventures. Suzanne took this photo during a sailing trip weeks before the Race to Mackinac.

out from under the boat on the starboard side, where he had been tethered to the jackline. His tether wasn't long enough, however, so he was unable to make it. Stan swam back to the cockpit, where he gulped more air, and realized his tethered safety line had become tangled in the lifeline. Unable to unhook himself, Stan was dragged underwater before he finally was able to cut himself free with the safety knife he carried, and later climbed on the boat.

Meanwhile, John swam over to Peter, who was struggling as he clung to the back of the boat. Peter's PFD had inflated and constricted his arms due to his large frame, which, along with the tether and tightness of the harness, made it difficult for him to keep his head above water. Too exhausted to climb on top of the boat, Peter clung to *WingNuts*' stern as John held onto him from the boat. Cummings and Stuart, the first two to climb on top of the boat, activated their emergency locator beacons—the only two beacons on *WingNuts*—to notify the Coast Guard. Joined by Purcell, the trio also made

sweeping arcs with flashlights and blew their rescue whistles in hopes that someone would see or hear them through the storm.

Thankfully, somebody did. Bob Arzbaeher, skipper of the *Sociable*, a Beneteau 40.7 from the Milwaukee Yacht Club, and his crew heard a faint whistle in the distance at around 12:15am, followed by a couple of flashes of light. Realizing it was a distress call, they turned their motor on to power over to *WingNuts*, about a quarter-mile away, while *Sociable* crew member Brian Adams radioed the Coast Guard. As they reached *WingNuts*, Stan shouted, "Six accounted for, two missing!" referring to Mark and Suzanne. The *Sociable* team saw five crew members on top of the overturned boat and Peter still in the water clinging to *WingNuts*' side.

"I moved to survival mode," Arzbaeher says. "You stop thinking about racing and start thinking, 'How do you get six people out of the water?'" The *Sociable* threw out its Lifesling, a yellow harness inflated with compressed gas that has 40 feet of line, and began circling Peter, careful not to approach too close and tangle its own sailboat with *WingNuts*' submerged rigging lines. On the first attempt, the sling was thrown five feet away from Peter. He attempted to swim to it, but with the *Sociable*'s drift he couldn't reach the sling. The second attempt was successful. "After all the water he drank, he didn't have any strength," Arzbaeher says. "It was a challenge getting him up on the boat." Once safely on board, he fell to his knees to catch his breath, shaking from the cold. He vomited water and showed signs of hypothermia, Adams says.

Race to Mackinac

The five other accounted-for members of *WingNuts* were brought in more quickly. Wrapped in blankets, “they were shivering and somber,” Adams says. “It was hard to get them to talk about the two who were missing... Twenty-plus boats from the race began searching the area for people in the water, hoping the other two were alive.” As Cummings explained in his report, “I think we all kind of knew where my cousin Mark and Suzanne were. We just didn’t really process it until we were on the *Sociable*.”

After they overcame their initial shock, the *WingNuts* crew managed to tell the *Sociable* team that Suzanne and Mark likely were still underneath the capsized boat, possibly attached by their tethers. According to a report written by the *Sociable* crew, one member of their team asked if they should go underneath *WingNuts* to find them, but the *WingNuts* crew said the rough water, submerged lines and loose rigging underneath the boat created too much of a risk. The *Sociable* launched parachute flares and, about 45 minutes after the original Mayday call, a Coast Guard helicopter arrived, with a spotlight, followed by a Coast Guard boat. “We get comfortable that fire and police respond so quickly when you’re on land,” Adams says of the response time. “It was a real wake-up call, that when you’re offshore racing, you have to learn to be more self-sufficient.”

The *Sociable* continued to circle the area but knew they needed to get the *WingNuts* crew to shore before they ran out of fuel. At around 2:15am, as the rescuers and Mac crews who had left the race continued to search for the two missing sailors, the *Sociable* broke away to make the two-and-a-half-hour trip to the Charlevoix Coast Guard station. At 3:33am, sheriff Schneider says he received a call from a 911 dispatch with a request for help from the Coast Guard, and he sent out two search and rescue divers.

At 7:40am, the Coast Guard called James and Mary Makowski. “[They said] there’s been a boating accident,” James recounts. “They’ve rescued six people and two are missing, and one is your daughter.” The Makowskis immediately began driving three-and-a-half hours north to Charlevoix.

“I always thought there was hope, because there is an air pocket under the boat if it tips over,” James says. He knew his daughter always carried two titanium knives, one she wore on a lanyard around her neck in case she needed to cut through the safety harness. “[When the Coast Guard recovered her body,] the lanyard around her neck was torn, and the knife was gone, so we don’t know what happened,” he says.

Around the same time the Coast Guard called the Makowskis, Spence awoke her and Mark’s daughter, Sage, who was staying with her in Saginaw for the summer, to tell her that her father and Suzanne were missing. “We were upset, but we weren’t really worried,” Sage says. Instead, she joked about how sunburned her father’s balding head would be once he was found. Hours passed. “My dad had told me so many stories



Mark Morley's daughter, Sage Morley, holds an urn with some of her father's ashes at her Wicker Park home.

“I knew that if anyone knew what to do in that situation, it was my dad and Suzanne.”

about boats capsizing, and I knew that if anyone knew what to do in that situation, it was my dad and Suzanne,” Sage says. “It never crossed my mind that this could be dangerous. I literally never thought this could ever happen.”

The Makowskis were almost in Charlevoix when the Coast Guard called again at around 10am and told them to pull over. “We immediately knew what that meant,” James says. “They told us she was gone.”

According to a Coast Guard report, divers had discovered Suzanne and Mark’s bodies at 8:30am, under the hull. Sheriff Schneider, who is investigating the accident for Michigan state officials, says their deaths were caused by severe blunt-force trauma, likely from the sailboat’s boom hitting their heads and knocking them unconscious, causing them to drown. Or, he says, the boom had hit them so hard they were unable to free themselves from being tethered by safety harnesses under the boat and then drowned.

Suzanne had suffered trauma to her forehead, the bridge of her nose and her left eye, the Coast Guard told the Makowskis. (Mark also suffered severe head trauma, according to Schneider.) Sage and her mother eventually heard about Mark’s death from Spence’s brother, who had been following the ordeal on television news (the Coast Guard hadn’t called because they hadn’t yet been able to reach Mark’s emergency contact, his father).

Ever since the accident, the Midwest sailing community has been speculating about how this tragedy could have happened. *WingNuts* had passed the ORR tip-over measurement, after all.

Gougeon, the Morley family friend who runs the Bay City epoxy business, calls the accident “a freak of nature.”

“I’ve done the math based on the [boat’s] exposure surface area, and this is just bizarre,” Gougeon says. “It should have stayed upright or it should have done a complete 360. There must have been just enough wind to [lift] it up there and not enough to get it to roll [back over and right itself].” According to Schneider, the insurance company BoatUS, which insured *WingNuts*, is investigating the boat’s unusual design, the enhancements the Morleys and their cousins made, and other factors that may have contributed to the accident.

Though the Coast Guard originally attributed Mark and Suzanne’s deaths to the impact of the boom—Schneider says he found it disconnected from the mast and is unsure why—some people, including *Sociable* crew members and sheriff Schneider, have speculated that the very tools that were supposed to save Suzanne and Mark’s lives—the tethers and PFDs—possibly could have contributed to their drowning. “That had to be terrifying, to be in pitch dark in winds at hurricane force, to be upside down in the water and tethered in,” Schneider says. “If the boat capsizes and you have an automatically [inflating] PFD... [there’s a risk that] you can’t get out and could be trapped under there and drown. Can you imagine the fear going through you if you can’t get loose? That’s where I’ve been focusing the investigation, on the type of PFDs and tethering that was used [on *WingNuts*].” Both PFDs and tethering are standard sailing safety gear, and some form of PFD and tethering is required by the race’s Mackinac Safety Regulations.

As a result of the deadly accident, some members of the Midwest sailing community are reassessing safety protocols. Joseph Haas, commodore of the Chicago Yacht Club, which sponsors the race, asked U.S. Sailing to choose an independent review panel, which has been researching the accident for three months. He anticipates the panel will make recommendations on race procedure, which may include notes on equipment and safety, when the results are released at the end of this month.

As for *WingNuts*’ fate, the Coast Guard left the overturned boat adrift and it ended up offshore near Gray’s Reef, Michigan, where sailors claimed salvage rights and ransacked it, Schneider says, taking everything from the *WingNuts* crew’s clothes to the new Mercury 9.9 outboard motor. Although the sailboat was eventually recovered and towed to the backyard of the sheriff’s office in Charlevoix on July 27, the looting has complicated Schneider’s investigation.

Mark Morley and Suzanne Bickel’s funerals were held a week apart in late July. Some of Mark’s ashes were placed in the family crypt in Saginaw and some were spread over Higgins Lake, in Roscommon, Michigan, where he learned to sail. Suzanne’s were spread near the Bay City Yacht Club, where the two met. “My dad and Suzanne would have gone sailing every night and day if they could,” Sage says. “Honestly, if he had chosen a way to go out, he would have chosen this. He would have loved the glory.”

PHOTO: GREG RUFFING