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Around the World in as Long as It Takes



Thomas Bregardis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Rich Wilson, left, with a competitor, Arnaud Boissières, before the start of the Vendée Globe around-the-world race. The finish remains far off for both.

By [CHARLES MCGRATH](#)
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Michel Desjoyeaux won the Vendée Globe, the solo around-the-world sailing race on Sunday, crossing the finish line at Les Sables d'Olonne, France, after more than 84 days at sea. He broke the previous record by three days and also became the first sailor to win the Vendée twice. The only American in the race, Rich Wilson, who at 58 is also the oldest sailor in the Vendée, is in ninth place, still working his way north along the coast of South America. Barring any problems like an accidental jibe that almost capsized him in 60-knot winds over the weekend, he will finish in about a month. On a gray, misty morning last week he had just rounded Cape Horn, which in theory at least meant that the rest was all downhill. "Once you get around the cape, you usually hope for a bit of a breather," he said by satellite phone from his boat, Great American III. "But it looks like there's a storm coming up, which I'm not very happy about. I'm pretty tired."



Jacques Brinon/Associated Press

Rich Wilson with the Spanish sailor Unai Basurko in November. Basurko dropped out of the Vendée Globe race in December; Wilson, in ninth place, may need another month to finish.

The wind indicator at the top of his mast was not functioning properly, he explained, which meant that he could not set the autopilot properly and had to keep popping on deck to check the wind direction. The wind, which was blowing at about 35 knots, gusted through his phone and whistled halfway around the world to a cubicle in New York.

To judge from photos of Wilson, one would never guess he was a singlehanded sailor; he looks more like the guy who does the singlehanded sailor's taxes. He is tall and slender, with deep-set eyes and a graying professorial mustache.

"If you put a robe on him, you'd think he was a monk," said Larry Collins, a former journalist with The Boston Globe, whose wife used to work for Sites Alive, an education company and Web site founded by Wilson to create interactive learning material for schoolchildren. "There's not an ounce of spare flesh on him, and he's quiet to the point of being diffident. But he has the great adventurous spirit."

Wilson, who is divorced and has no children, has an egghead résumé: he was a math major at [Harvard](#) and earned graduate degrees from Harvard Business School and [M.I.T.](#), and he has been a math teacher, an analyst for the Defense Department and an investor.

He also has acute asthma, which gets worse with stress. But he has nevertheless acquired some serious blue-water credentials. He has twice raced across the Atlantic, and he holds world records for the fastest sail journeys from Hong Kong to New York, from New York to Melbourne and from San Francisco to Boston. The San Francisco-Boston record took him two tries. On the first attempt, on

Thanksgiving Day 1990, he capsized off Cape Horn and was rescued 17 hours later by a container ship.

Winning the Vendée was never Wilson's goal, according to Brian Harris, the general manager of the Maine Yacht Center, in Portland, who supervised the refitting of Great American III. The boat, which was built a decade ago and was in two previous Vendée campaigns before Wilson bought it, is practically obsolete compared with newer ones, and Wilson does not drive it as hard as some of the other sailors push their boats. "What Rich wants is to be sure to finish," he said. "In the Vendée, finishing is winning."

Only the French, lovers of endless bicycle races and solo mountain climbing, could have thought up this race, and only Frenchmen have won it.

The course, which takes three months to complete, starts at Les Sables d'Olonne, a port in the Vendée (a department in the west of France), heads south and around the Cape of Good Hope, then east across the Indian Ocean, skirting Antarctica, around Cape Horn, and back up to Les Sables.

It is a route that exposes sailors to icebergs, the doldrums and some of the windiest stretches of ocean in the world. The boats, which must fit the specifications of a class called the Open 60, are wide-sterned, carbon-fiber sleds designed for downwind sailing. Surfing down the back of a wave, they can reach speeds of 30 knots or more, if they don't capsize or become dismasted. Two sailors have died competing in the Vendée; many more have had to be rescued.

The attrition rate has been unusually high in this Vendée. Of the 30 boats that started, only 11 are still racing. Four dropped out in the first few days, after a vicious storm ripped across the Bay of Biscay, and along the way there have been several dismastings and a capsize. One boat dropped the bulb off its keel, and another washed ashore when its skipper anchored to make emergency repairs. Yann Eliès, a French sailor, broke his femur, and, unable to move from the cockpit, had to be rescued by the Australian navy.

"The Open 60s are very light and very powerful," Harris said. "You just bounce around inside them. And there are no creature comforts, not even a toilet."

“Just a bucket. And it’s one thing to chuck a bucket overboard when you’re doing 4 or 5 knots, and something else when you’re doing 15. You could catch a wave and get pulled overboard.”

He added: “You have to be a little bit crazy to sail one of these boats. They’re very powerful machines.”

Rich du Moulin, a veteran sailor who accompanied Wilson on his record-setting voyage from Hong Kong to New York, said: “There’s a way of doing nutty things in a very sane fashion. That’s Rich. He’s very disciplined and just a consummate mariner. He has an almost religious fixation about doing things right and in exactly the same way.

“If you put down the winch handle, you don’t just put it down in the same place, you have the handle facing the same way. His style is to minimize and control risk as much as possible, and for him I think this race is a question of doing it right and making it to the finish.”

When Wilson does finish, he will be only the second American to complete the Vendée. Bruce Schwab was the first, in February 2005. But finishing is important to him mostly because from the beginning he has defined his voyage as a learning opportunity. He has been posting log entries, photos and podcasts [on the Web site www.sitesalive.com](http://www.sitesalive.com), which also includes a question-and-answer feature and essays written by a team of experts he has assembled.

The log recounts, among other things, his many setbacks. On the first day out he became violently seasick. Two days later he was hurled across the cabin and broke a rib. The pain was so intense that he could not even reach for the satellite phone to ask for medical advice. In December he was pitched from his bunk while sleeping and landed on his left eyebrow, spraying blood in the cabin. There were mechanical failures and a rigging problem that required him to climb the mast. He did this by rigging up a kind of mountain-climbing harness and ascending, Spider-Man fashion, between two fixed ropes.

By the time he got around the Horn, he said in a recent podcast, he was feeling pretty weary and banged up. He had not been getting much sleep, he added over the phone, because of all the crashing around and because the southern ocean was very cold and climbing into his sleeping bag seemed like too much work. He

had lost body mass, he said, and while he was supposed to be taking in 6,000 calories a day, he said he thought he was getting more like 5,000 — mostly freeze-dried food and a nutrition drink.

“It’s very stressful,” he said. “And there’s no letup. You can’t go home at the end of the day and put your feet up. You’re always holding onto something and you have to stay focused. You could get hurt just in the three steps from the cockpit to the cabin.”

He added: “There’s a difference between solitude and loneliness. I’m not lonely. I’ve got e-mail and I can talk to anyone in the world on this phone. But I am solitary. There’s no one else — I’m responsible for everything. I had to get myself up the mast — an easy thing if there’s someone to hoist you.

“And if I want to put in a reef, that’s 180 grinds on the winch, or 360 if I use the lower gear. It would be nice if there was someone to take half of those.”

Would he have done this if he had known what it was going to be like?

“Ask me that when I’ve finished,” he said. “I’m serious. While I’m doing this now, there are some things it’s just better not to think about.”

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