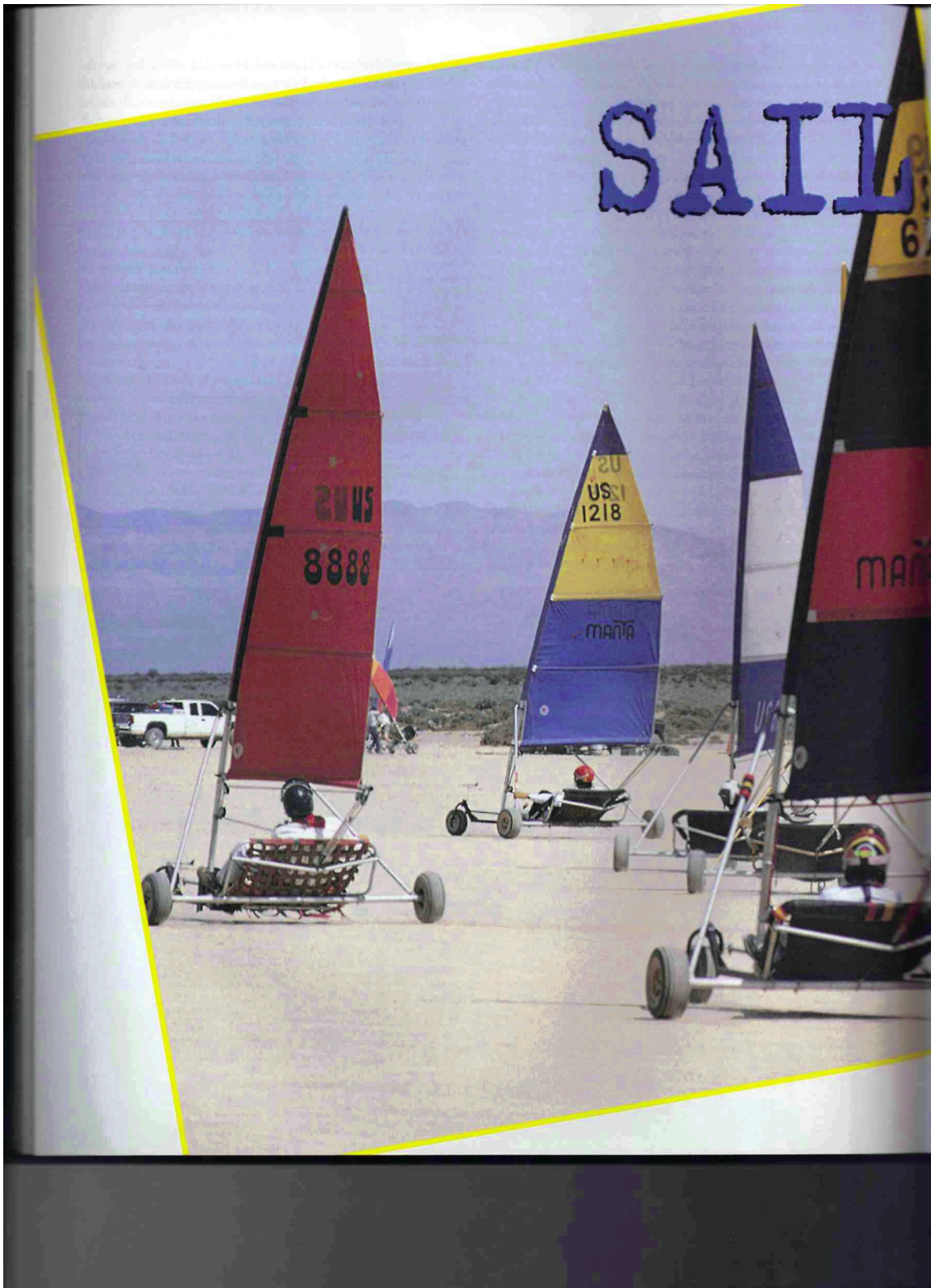


# SAIL



# IT DRY

LITTLE  
ADVENTURES

By Jeff Book

To the endless stream of Vegas-bound drivers on I-15, it looks like a mirage — a heat-rippled vision of sails skimming across the desert. But out on the cracked hardpan of Ivanpah Lake, it's the interstate that seems unreal. Reality is the encampment of land sailors gathered on the moonscape of the Mohave Desert to compete in their annual America's cup. Reality is the three-wheeled land yacht I've just buckled myself into for my pre-race, and maiden, voyage. "Relax," says the boat's owner, Tom Speer, as he pushes me off. "It's as much fun as you can have lying down with your clothes on."

The pace is mild, not wild, until the sail catches a gust and the boat, a cast-aluminum arrow hovering just inches above the ground, takes off like a jet. The rope-and-pulley rigging recalls boats I've sailed on lakes and at sea, but without the drag of water against a hull, the acceleration is spectacular. In no time the bicycle-style speedometer reads 35 miles per hour. Soon I've got the hang of tacking by using foot pedals to turn the front wheel. Crossing paths with other sailors, I zigzag across the table-flat lake bed, giddy with the sensation of silent speed. Accompanied only by the rush of the wind and the tires' rhythmic hum, I feel like a bird on the wing — or a human cannonball.

Suddenly the wind dies, leaving me and everyone in sight becalmed in the middle of the lake bed. It's musical chairs on a grand scale, and the music has stopped. "Don't go farther than you're willing to walk back," Speer had warned. I'm considering the prospect of dragging the boat back to camp (imagine hauling a heavy shopping cart across the world's largest parking lot) when Speer rides up on his bike — another thing you don't find when sailing on water. "You're doing all right," he says. "Just be patient." Sure enough, the wind comes up and everyone takes off again.

The fastest land yachts have a sleek, tapered body, a wide rear axle and a tall, narrow sail with a mast that doubles as an airfoil, like a vertical airplane wing (some have no fabric sail, just a wing mast).

Needle-nose missiles up to 30 feet long, they're designed to achieve maximum forward thrust with minimum drag. These vehicles of pure energy look fast, even when standing still, like dragsters with masts. Although a top land yacht is no

match for a fire-spitting dragster, in a good wind it can sprint ahead of a Porsche. Land yachts have been clocked at speeds of more than 100 miles per hour (the official speed record, held by Frenchman Bertrand Lambert, is 94 miles per hour). And unlike dragsters, land yachts must turn at high speeds — brakes, if any, are never used during a race.

With its fish-out-of-water appeal, land sailing has attracted visionary eccentrics since well before the turn of the century, when it was taken up as a sport on the beaches of Belgium, France and England. The tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Amenemhat III contained a sailing chariot, and the Chinese were using wind-driven wagons by the sixth century A.D. Around 1600, a Belgian engineer built a couple of sail-powered carriages, including a six-seater that went as fast as a galloping horse. In the mid-1800s, the American pioneer "Windwagon" Smith hitched his westbound Conestoga to the wind, making "prairie schooner" more than a metaphor.

"In Europe, it's been more of a wealthy man's sport," observes one land sailing veteran. "In America, you get everyone from engineer types with high-security clearances to garage tinkerers to high-IQ dropouts who live in the desert outback." Like a tribe of sand gypsies, they come from all over the country to race on the dry lakes of the West, towing a wild assortment of land yachts behind RVs and campers. No one's in it for the money, because there isn't any — the prizes are trophies, and there's not a corporate logo in sight.

The North America Land Sailing Association, with about 400 members, is made up of regional clubs. One of the liveliest is the Sunny Acres Sailing, Sipping and Soaring Society (SASSASS). With a motto, "In Wind We Thrust," they're famous for their middle-of-nowhere regattas. One called "In Search of the Holy Gale" takes place around the Fourth of July in the Black Rock desert, two hours north of Reno, Nev. On Memorial Day weekend they run the "Cow-to-Cow 500" in central Nevada. It began as an impromptu race around two



BOB GRIESE  
Gearing up for a day of racing.

dead cows. "Someone ran over one of the cows, and after that it was strictly an upwind marker," recalls one of the original participants.

Kurt Smiley and Dennis Bassano have been land sailing since their fathers helped start SASSASS more than 20 years ago. "Back then, we just set up camp and raced," notes Bassano. "Now we need a BLM permit." Both grew up in Santa Cruz, Calif., building sailboats and racing them on land and on sea. "In most dirtboat classes, the only restriction is sail area," explains Smiley. "You can try whatever you want, even if it's stupid and doesn't work." His boat incorporates fiberglass, carbon fiber, marine hardware and the rear wheels of a Honda Civic.

The next morning before the racing begins, Smiley invites me to join him for a practice run. The wind is strong and steady as we put on helmets and belt ourselves into the cockpit. "If you like speed and you're not into spark plugs, this is a great sport," he tells me. That's it for communication, because suddenly we're hurtling across the lake, slamming and jamming around the course, skidding around the flag markers at kamikaze speed. After each turn, Smiley trims the sail with demonic precision, popping the sheets in and out of spring-loaded cleats. I shout something that can't be heard over the wind and vibration. I remind myself that land sailing injuries are rare, and if we flip, the mast,

rear axle and body will act as a roll cage — if they don't collapse on impact.

Smiley built this rocket, so I figure he knows its limits. As if reading my mind, he throws the boat into a 360 that brakes our speed before we glide back to camp. "How fast were we going?" I ask. "Somewhere between 60 and 70," he says, with a dust-eating grin.

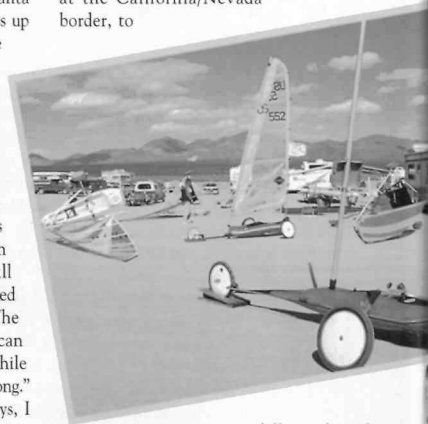
I'm racing a borrowed Manta Twin, a stock design that makes up the largest class at the meet. The VW Bug of dirtboats, the Manta isn't lightening fast, but it's fun. The hot production boat is the Fed 5, a low-slung, international-class speedster with a shiny, windsurfer-type sail. Unlike the open classes, the single-class races factor out design differences, making pilot skill paramount. "But you still need luck," Bassano tells me. "The wind shifts and ebbs. You can stall in a dead-air pocket while boats on all sides are flying along."

Over the next few days, I learn the difference between kiting around at random and sailing point to point in a pack of 23 rabid competitors. I lose ground at the starting line and keep losing it. Because of the speed, any mistake is costly. If you lose momentum you're dead in the, er, water. After a couple of last-place finishes, I'm open to suggestions: "Let the sail out a bit and increase your angle to the wind." "Put more air in your tires." "Watch what the leaders are doing." (Right, assuming I can still see them.)

"Don't feel bad," says Charlie O'Leary, a Marina del Rey sailmaker whose teardrop-shaped

boat has been hard to catch. "Remember, you're up against the Dennis Connors of land sailing."

The big custom yachts chase each other around the lake, throwing roostertails of dust and generally imitating the Roadrunner — contrasting sharply with the desert tortoises that inhabit an adjacent preserve. When the wind dies, the SASSASS guys play bocci ball or drive the few miles to Buffalo Bill's Casino at the California/Nevada border, to



get a different hit of speed on Desperado, the world's second-fastest roller coaster. I talk to "iceboaters" from places like Wisconsin and Vermont who, when their lakes thaw, put wheels on their boats and head West. I listen to the engineer types discuss sail aspect ratios and coefficients of lift and drag. One desert rat, a New Age survivalist, shares his vision: land sailing the interstates in a touring yacht equipped with solar cells for auxiliary power.

In their love of wide open spaces, their respect for the lone inventor and their belief that technology can be liberating, land sailors are quintessentially American — part Wright Brothers, part Gyro Gearloose. One guy mixes drinks in a blender powered by a weed eater; another fires potatoes into the sky from a hairspray-fueled mortar made of PVC pipe. The sailors quench their thirst with a cold beer and talk about past meets and the next day's



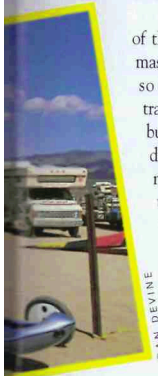
Phil Rothrock & "Bliss."

BOB GRIESER

weather forecast. As night falls, the SASSASS sailors play bocci ball by the light of tiki torches or chase a glow-in-the-dark golf ball across the playa on bicycles — a mutation of polo known as Orb. Somewhere a radio plays oldies from a station in Palm Springs. Under a sky dense with stars, we gather around campfires and gnaw on barbecue — aboriginal hunters whose prey is the wind.

O'Leary snaps an axle and is out of the running. The base of Smiley's mast fails on one of his torture turns, so he improvises another from a trailer hitch. I'm still finishing last, but after each day's races I sail until dusk, testing the Manta and myself. By now, I'm accustomed to the tilt of the horizon as the windward wheel grabs air, and I'm finding the optimum groove.

On the third day the wind is fluky, but I manage to keep my speed up and stay in the race, even finishing ahead of a luckless few. I'm way back in the pack but feel triumphant. For the first time I taste the thrill of jockeying for position with other dust devils as we battle around the turns like horseless charioteers. As one poet of the playa said, "The dust on my face is now in my blood." Eager for the next race, I can finally fathom the dirtboater's rallying cry: "Sail or die, sail it dry." **AW**



DAN DEVINE

### QUICK TIPS

For more information on land sailing and specific race events, contact the North American Land Sailing Association. They have more than 400 members and offer a variety of sailing clubs throughout North America; NALSA, 1680 Manzanita Lane, Reno, NV 89509. (702) 825-1530.

Nord Design in Southern California offers a variety of group or private land sailing lessons. They've been involved with the sport since 1978, have written a "how-to" land sail instruction manual, and are land yacht brokers as well; (619) 868-4484



**Lake Tahoe's Highest Base**  
ELEVATION 8,260'

**Mt. Rose**  
SKI AREA

1-800-SKI-ROSE (702) 849-0704 www.mtrose.com

**MAKES A GREAT HOLIDAY GIFT!**

**ADVENTURE WEST  
EMBROIDERED  
RIVER SHIRT**

QTY.	ITEM#	COLOR	SIZE	EACH	AMOUNT

ORDERS MUST INCLUDE PAYMENT Shipping and handling: Orders up to \$50, send \$4.95; orders over \$50, send \$5.00. Nevada residents please add applicable 6.12%, 6.34% or 7% sales tax. Orders outside USA add an additional \$5 for postage.

SHIPPING/HANDLING  
NV SALES TAX\*  
**TOTAL**

PAYMENT:  Check  VISA  MasterCard  
Credit Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**Mail to: Adventure West Gear  
P. O. Box 3210, Incline Village, NV 89450.  
OR CALL 800-846-8575  
BETWEEN 9 A.M. AND 5 P.M. (PST) MONDAY-FRIDAY**

Our highest-quality, 100% heavyweight cotton shirt with three wood-tone buttons features the Adventure West logo comes in long or short sleeves. Available in M, L and XL, ash, navy, and black. Allow for shrinkage when selecting size.  
#AWRSS (SHORT SLV.): \$21.95  
#AWRSL (LONG SLV.): \$24.95