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
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 102 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, making 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 36 named Wing Nuts, 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. Wing Nuts followed the Wisconsin shoreline the first night of the race, passing summer festivals and fireworks, lifting 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."
Several years ago, when a member of Sagamore Bay Yacht Club mentioned he had a 38-foot Mac, for sale, Mark and his brother Peter, along with their cousin John Deetlefs of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Stan Deet of Midland, Michigan, jumped at the chance to buy it. "It was a great boat and it fit," says Peter, who lives in Midland. "It needed some work, but that's what we like to do."

In 1999, the crew wanted to make some changes to the boat. They removed the original electronics and replaced them with new electronics. They also replaced the original mast with a new one. The boat was repainted, and new sails were added. The crew spent about $20,000 on the boat, and it was ready to sail. The crew sailed the boat from Sagamore Bay to Westport, Connecticut, and then to Rhode Island. They sailed to the Marquesas Islands, and then to the Virgin Islands. The crew sailed to the Philippines, and then to Indonesia. They spent about three months in Indonesia, and then sailed to the Philippines again. They spent about three months in the Philippines, and then sailed to the Marquesas Islands. They spent about three months in the Marquesas Islands, and then sailed to the Virgin Islands. They spent about three months in the Virgin Islands, and then sailed to the United States. They sailed to Sagamore Bay, and then sold the boat.

Peter, Peter's 15-year-old son, Stuart Morley, Peter and Mark's 16-year-old second cousin, Christopher C. Lucas, Cummings of Grandville, Michigan, cousin to John and Stan Deet; Chicago, architect, and Peter's former sailboat, "Suzanne," who lives in Midland, Michigan.

The crew returned to Sagamore Bay and decided to keep the boat. They spent about $20,000 on the boat, and it was ready to sail. The crew sailed the boat from Sagamore Bay to Westport, Connecticut, and then to Rhode Island. They sailed to the Marquesas Islands, and then to the Virgin Islands. They sailed to the Philippines, and then to Indonesia. They spent about three months in Indonesia, and then sailed to the Marquesas Islands. They spent about three months in the Marquesas Islands, and then sailed to the Virgin Islands. They spent about three months in the Virgin Islands, and then sailed to the United States. They sailed to Sagamore Bay, and then sold the boat.

On the second morning of the race, a storm struck. Mark, who was in the lead, was hit by a wave and lost his rudder. The crew quickly recovered and continued sailing. They finished second in the race. The crew sailed to Sagamore Bay, and then sold the boat.

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out. Sam and the boat were at the stern of the boat, where they had been secured to the jackstay. His father was clinging enough, however, so that he was able to control. Samwalls back to the cockpit, where he grabbed the rudder and realized his thread. Safely fast, he had become tangled in the bilge. Unable to back off, Sam was dragged underwater before he finally was able to control a self righting boat, with a safety line being run, and later climbed on the boat.

Meanwhile, John saw a man to Peter, who was struggling to keep the boat from the water, Peter's PFD had inflated and the excess water displaced from the boat. The boat eventually sank, leaving Peter to swim in the cold water. The boat eventually capsize, and the two men were left stranded in the water, unable to swim back to shore. The Coast Guard was called, and a rescue operation was initiated. The two men were eventually rescued and taken to shore, where they were treated for hypothermia.

Top: Inside the boat, where the rescuers took control. Middle: Outside the boat, where the rescuers were seen trying to control. Bottom: Sam and Peter, the rescuers, were able to control the boat and rescue the men.
Race to Mackinac

The five dead accounted for members of the Wrigley family, who were in a boat with the 
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"I knew that if anyone knew what to do in that situation, it was my dad and Suzanne."