

There and Back Again

An unlikely American finished the toughest sailboat race in the world at age 58.

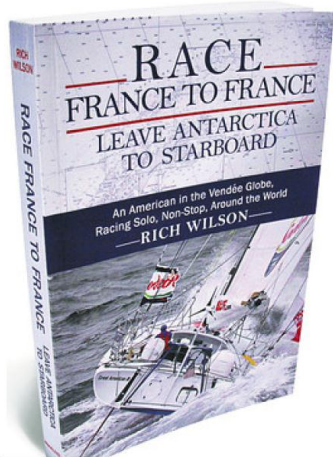
By AN G U S P H I L L I P S

As you read this from the comfort of your easy chair, a dozen or so madmen are hunkered down in the Southern Ocean, weary and far from land, hurrying as fast as ever they can to get back to where they started last November and complete a circumnavigation in whatever is left of their battered boats.

This is the Vendée Globe, the most challenging sailboat race on earth: 28,000 miles around the world, nonstop, single-handed in 60-foot-long, overpowered seagoing survival capsules, crossing three oceans, north to south and east to west, slashing past Antarctic icebergs at speeds more suitable to thrill sports like windsurfing or kiteboarding—20 knots, 25 knots, 30 and even more, uninterrupted for days on end.

When conditions are right, the best of the lonesome racers reel off 500 miles in a day, a feat that would leave many of us fatigued if we tried it in a Buick on the Interstate. The Vendée Globe racers stay at it, alone on hostile seas, for over three months.

Who are these hardy folks? Mostly they are French—the Vendée Globe was founded by the French ocean racer Philippe Jeantot in 1989—but from time to time an interloper pops up in the quadrennial race. Such a fellow is Rich Wilson, whose background makes him a curious contender in an extreme sailing race. When he finished the 2008 Vendée—9th of 30 competitors, and one of only 11 to make it all the way 'round—he was 58, the oldest skipper and only American in the fleet.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Race France to France

By Rich Wilson
(sitesALIVE!, 321 pages, \$15)

which, I know, sounds more like secret British orders from the Napoleonic wars than a real-life adventure tale. The title is reflective of the book in whole, which was published through the educational foundation Mr. Wilson heads, Sites Alive!, and lacks the sophisticated editing and graphics a big publishing house would have provided. What it doesn't lack is action, excitement or enthusiasm. "Race France to France" is full of the jargon of the ocean-racing game, with references to keel hinge pins and baby stays and PBO rigging, but there is enough mayhem and side-story-telling to keep even the uninitiated engaged.

If age set him apart, so did his background. He is a graying academic, having studied math at Harvard and then done postgraduate work at MIT in oceanography. He started his career teaching high school in a tough Boston neighborhood in 1974, the year cops busted heads at the beginning of one of the most contentious busing programs in the land. Nearsighted, modestly built and hampered by severe asthma, this bookish young man developed a penchant for dangerous ocean adventures that has scarcely abated over 30 years and includes successful efforts to break long-standing sailing speed records from New York to Melbourne, Hong Kong to New York and San Francisco to Boston.

Mr. Wilson gives this background concisely in his book, "Race France to France, Leave Antarctica to Starboard,"

When Mr. Wilson sailed out of Les Sables d'Olonne, an Atlantic port in France's Vendée region, on Nov. 9, 2008, his goal wasn't to win. His low-budget effort in an eight-year-old boat had a higher purpose—to help promote science and learning. From the cockpit of Great American III, Mr. Wilson fed a network of educational outlets around the globe with real-time information on geography, math, oceanography and other disciplines to 25 participating newspapers and 200,000 school kids following his exploits. That is what Sites Alive!, his nonprofit, is about.

Mr. Wilson has been promoting it with modest success for two decades, linking it to his string of seagoing adventures, the most notable of which was his first, unsuccessful, attempt in 1990 to set a record for fastest passage from San Francisco to Boston via Cape Horn. He and partner Steve Pettengill were wrecked in 85-knot winds and 65-foot seas off the Horn and were miraculously rescued from the swamped remains of their 60-foot trimaran by a passing freighter, an experience he relates concisely and terrifyingly in the book.

His Vendée Globe wasn't that exciting, but it had its moments. In the first days out on the Bay of Biscay, the fleet hit a horrendous November gale that knocked several top-rated boats out and sent Mr. Wilson skittering across the cabin hard enough to break two ribs. The next four weeks were agony. He struggled to raise and lower sails as the breeze came and went, to cook and clean and make the repairs that are the day's work of the ocean sailor.

He was mostly healed when he sailed into the really scary waters south off Africa, Australia and South America—the so-called Southern Ocean where storms circle the globe unimpeded by land and where, as the late ocean racer Mike Plant put it ominously, "everything is 30. The wind blows 30 knots, the waves are 30 feet high, the air and water are 30 degrees." He saw all of that and more—including seven gales of 40 knots or more between the Cape of Good Hope and Australia, by which half his competitors were knocked from the running.

Mr. Wilson takes us there and back again with openness and honesty, displaying the ocean sailor's requisites—modesty, humor, vigor and a willingness to admit fear, exhaustion, depression and even sheer terror. "How to explain this violence to those ashore?" he writes. "Take your house. Sit or stand in it. Get a crane and lift it 10 feet off a solid concrete slab. Then drop it, with you in it. . . . Now lift it up again and hover it over a concrete slab tilted to 45 degrees. Drop the house again from 10 feet. Now when it crashes it also bounces violently sideways, out from under you. . . . OK, now do that another thousand times."

Welcome to the Vendée Globe.

And, by the way, "Don't forget to eat, sleep, write, make sail changes, analyze the weather, charge the batteries, bail the forepeak, drain the cockpit compartment and, oh, be really careful brushing your teeth, so you don't stab yourself in the throat."

Mr. Phillips was the outdoors editor of the Washington Post for 30 years.