

Episode #44: Single-Handing – The Art of Being Outnumbered by Your Own Boat

The Mental Game

The longest I've gone alone at sea is twenty-one days. Just me, the boat, and every creak, clank, and whisper of canvas amplified into a Greek chorus of paranoia. Your senses become super-charged. You start hearing the difference between a halyard slap and a shackle rattle like a sommelier tasting wine. Every smell, every vibration, every luff of the sail—it all demands attention.

Someone asked me last week: what's the mental difference between sailing with crew and sailing alone? My answer: single-handed sailing requires your brain to be on full alert 24/7, sometimes for weeks on end. With crew aboard, you have the ability to rest. Not to mention—they can help you fix things, hold a flashlight, cook, clean, or simply talk to.

So why do it? Because I like the challenge of being completely self-reliant.

Peace of Mind vs. Insanity

One of the more difficult things for many people is dealing with simply being alone for long periods. To me, solitude at sea is the chosen quiet—the steady rhythm of waves, sails, and sky that gives space for reflection and presence. Loneliness, on the other hand, creeps in when the silence feels heavy, when you wish someone else were there to share the moment or shoulder the watch. Sailing alone can shift between the two daily, sometimes hourly—one minute a gift of freedom, the next a pang of absence. The art is learning to embrace solitude as a companion, rather than letting loneliness take the helm.

Wisdom From the Tribe

The golden rule of sailing is boaters help boaters. It's doubly true in the little niche of single-handed sailors. We're like a support group that forgot the folding chairs.

If you're new to it, don't start with 30 knots of wind and a squall line that looks like Armageddon. Pick a mellow 8–10 knot day. Go out, then inch upward into bigger winds. Or better yet—bring a friend onboard while you practice handling everything yourself. It's like training wheels, except the “bike” weighs 20,000 pounds and carries your living room.

But remember: single-handing is as much mental prep as physical. Know your limits, and know them before you push past them.

Safety First (Or: How Not to Star in a Coast Guard Rescue Video)

Most safety advice is the same whether you've got crew or not—but when you're alone, it's dialed up to eleven.

- PFD always. With crotch strap. Without it, it's basically a foam necklace.
- Whistle and strobe in your PFD.
- Always clipped in—get a real tether, not the Amazon special.
- Jacklines tight and centerline (you shouldn't be able to fall overboard, period).
- Personal locator device or Garmin InReach clipped to vest.
- Set every alarm you own: AIS, radar, and your phone set to ding every 30 minutes to keep you honest. If you are a heavy sleeper, get a Screaming Meanie Alarm. You will not sleep through it. Loud.
- Headlamp, EPIRB, ditch bag, foulies, polarized sunglasses, handheld VHF—all within arm's reach.
- Jug of water and a protein snack on deck. Hunger is just bad decision-making waiting to happen.

Pro Tip: *Keep a second dry bag next to your ditch bag with paperwork, passport, credit cards, cash, phone charger, and spare phone. You may not be able to get to the ship's safe in an emergency. Washing up in a foreign country with no money or ID can cause all sorts of issues.*

Safety first—you don't want to end up explaining to Neptune why you skipped a step.

The Boat Factor

The biggest piece of advice here is “KISS”—Keep it simple, stupid. Don't overcomplicate or over-engineer things. The goal when rigging the boat is to make things as efficient as possible while understanding one universal truth: you've only got two hands, and they can only be in one place at a time. That's it.

- Practice reefing, tacking, and gybing at every angle until it's second nature.
- Add blocks, brakes, and winches where needed—mechanical advantage is your best friend.
- Keep as much as possible controllable from the cockpit.

Pro Tip: *Snatch blocks are your best friend. They can quickly be moved around the boat to give you mechanical advantage.*

I'm a huge believer in furling mains and headsails for single-handed sailing. Purists may clutch their pearls, but for me it's all about infinite reef points. The important factor here is practice, practice, practice reefing.

Important things to remember with in-mast furling:

- If you try to furl the main with the boom out, it's gonna foul.
- If the boom is not level when you furl it, it's gonna foul.
- If there isn't side pressure when you try to furl it, it's gonna foul.

Pro Tip: *Mark the boom where the reef points are. I have four. I also have my reef points for my jib sewn into the furling lines. This way it isn't a guessing game in 30-knot winds. Set it and move on.*

My setup has quirks. B&R Rig. The raked-back spreaders limit my downwind angles, so instead of fighting wing-on-wing at 150° in the trades, I harden up to 120° and throw in a gybe. VMG still in the high 5s, way more comfortable.

Pro Tip: *Get a second whisker pole of the same size. "Sailing Simbo" is the best friend of the single-handed sailor downwind. Simple to reef, balanced boat, autopilot and windvane will thank you.*

Thinking of flying the kite alone? Forget it. Personally, they're more effort than they're worth when solo. Use a snuffer but remember: spinnakers foul. Learn alternative douses: Mexican, envelope, around the headstay. Don't learn them in real time at 2 a.m. in a squall.

For me, sailing offshore is not a race—it's a war of attrition. If I'm sailing 500, 1000, or 3000 miles, the pace on passage isn't the issue. That said, I keep it conservative with the sail plan. The goal is to set it and forget it.

Pro Tip: *For long-distance cruising, either use wind steering or windvane mode on the autopilot. It furthers the "set it and forget it" philosophy. Pay attention to the track, but a 5–10 degree wind shift here and there is fine. More than likely, it will wash out in the aggregate.*

Redundancy is king. I've got a full spare autopilot, a Hydrovane, and a tiller drive autopilot for the Hydrovane.

Wind steering is clutch. I highly recommend the Hydrovane for several reasons:

- Backup to the autopilot.
- Backup independent rudder. This is huge, especially offshore.
- Backup steering. Can be steered by hand like using a tiller.
- Requires no electricity. You can cross oceans for weeks on course without using any power.

Sleep (a.k.a. Playing Chicken With Your Own Exhaustion)

The most important thing here is understanding what part of the world you are in and traffic patterns in the area. Is it mainly commercial traffic that you can see on AIS and radar, or recreational boats where you're relying on line of sight? Not to mention, with recreational boats it's best to assume they don't know the rules of the road—especially stand-on and give-way. Are there lots of FADs? Wooden fishing vessels? Logs? Understanding your environment is vital.

Another factor is weather. Are you in an area with lots of squalls or in high winds? Reef

down before sleeping. You don't want to fall asleep in 15 knots of wind with full sails and wake up in 40.

Pro Tip: *You can see squalls on the radar at 15 miles out. They generally move between 15 and 20 knots across the ocean. Unless one forms on top of you, this gives you 30 minutes to maneuver or reef down once you see it on the horizon. Once I get more than 20 miles offshore, I keep the radar range on my MFD set to 20 miles. This gives me a lot of advanced notice. Just remember to zoom back in when you're close to shore again—a 20-mile radar range a mile offshore is useless.*

Best case, your eyes can see about three miles to the horizon. At 6 knots of boat speed, that's 30 minutes of sailing until you reach what you can see. Obviously this varies by conditions, but that math dictates how I sleep.

Less than 20 miles offshore:

- 30-minute phone alarms, nonstop.
- Power naps in the cockpit only.
- Each wake cycle = AIS, radar, 360° horizon scan, then back down.

More than 20 miles offshore:

- Graduate to one-hour naps.
- Out beyond 30 miles, I'll crash below in the salon. My iPad mirrors the Axiom: AIS, radar, charts. Camera on the bow feeds down below.

More than 50 miles offshore? You are pretty much alone at this point. Depending on the part of the world and shipping lanes, you are generally safe to sleep for several hours with the appropriate alarms set.

Pro Tip: *The alarm on my Raymarine Axiom Pro 12S is quiet. Too quiet. I could sleep through it. So I installed a NMEA external alarm. It is loud. You won't sleep through it anywhere on the boat.*

There's no perfect system. If you're asleep, you're taking a risk. But fatigue kills more judgment than a bottle of rum. Choose your poison carefully.

Food: Motivation in a Skillet

Cooking alone in bad weather is like trying to fry an egg on a pogo stick. That's why I prep lunches and dinners ahead of time: taco meat, jambalaya, lasagna, chicken, rice. All easy to grab and eat. Good filling comfort food when you're cold and alone.

Pro Tip: *If you can run an air fryer, it makes life better. Toss a pile of whatever in, push a button, and 15 minutes later you've got a warm meal—regardless of sea state.*

Coffee and energy drinks are your friends. You have to stay awake and alert for long periods. Just don't overdo it. Don't force yourself to stay awake if you don't need to. It's not a race.

Snacks matter. I admit, before a long passage, I shop like a teenager—cookies, chips, candy, and enough energy drinks to power a small island. A little sugar, a little protein is okay. You burn a ton of calories just existing underway.

Entertainment: The Long, Salty Silence

Passages give you nothing but time. A lot of time. Alone.

Before you leave, download everything. Starlink or not.

Must-haves for me:

- Books (paper or digital)
- Laptop or tablet
- Music
- Musical instruments
- Lessons (languages, guitar, origami)
- Sketchbooks, journals, paint
- Bluetooth speaker (headphones are a no-go sailing alone—you need to hear the boat, the wind, and the kraken sneaking up on you)

The sea provides silence. You provide the distraction.

The Bottom Line

Single-handing isn't about bravado. It's about smart choices, preparation, and moving with intent. We never hurry. We never panic. We just keep pushing forward—one watch cycle, one reef, one pot of coffee at a time.

Because at the end of the day, there's nothing quite like knowing you got that boat across an ocean with nobody at the helm but you.