



Anatomy of an Avoidable Fatality

Unlike its ocean racing counterparts—the Fastnet and Sydney-Hobart races—the Newport to Bermuda Race (NBR) enjoyed a stellar safety record in its first hundred years—only one sailor



drowned. The 2022 NBR, with its unusually violent weather and rough seas early in the race, was an exception to that record when a massive wave turned a routine watch into a tragedy two days into the race.

On June 19, 2022, the owner and skipper of SV *Morgan* of Marietta was swept overboard and, despite the crew executing a quick return to recover the skipper, drowned in the vessel's Lifesling. US Sailing, at the request of the Cruising Club of America and the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, empaneled six highly experienced sailors to investigate the incident. The sobering report is now available on the US Sailing web site, [here](#).

Wind and sea state were challenging at noon on the day of the accident: wind speeds were consistently in the low-to mid-20 knot range with higher gusts with a wind angle of 90-135 degrees. Seas were ten feet with higher waves of 12-18 feet. Heel angles were around 15 degrees, with the boat well-balanced. These conditions warranted personal flotation devices (PFDs), harnesses, and tethers — crew “clipped-in” or attached to the vessel. The skipper and three other crew were on-watch, the helmsman to leeward and the others to windward, everyone wearing PFDs and clipped-in — except the skipper, who wore neither and was not clipped-in.

At approximately 12:25 PM, a “large wave” engulfed the vessel, increasing the heel angle to nearly 50 degrees and the boat speed to almost 19 knots, submersing the helmsman and propelling the skipper overboard — without a PFD in 10-18 ft seas. The report indicated that the crew executed a near-perfect quick stop maneuver and returned to the Person Overboard (POB) in approximately 5 minutes, approaching to windward of the skipper and deploying the Lifesling. The skipper swam to and entered the Lifesling. However, during the recovery process — face-first—the skipper lost consciousness and, without a PFD, turned face-down in the water. Despite a valiant recovery effort, the unconscious skipper slipped from the Lifesling, resulting in an hours-long effort to recover his body. Afterward, the vessel returned to its home port, where the police, coroner, Coast Guard, and Customs officials awaited their arrival.

The panel's recommendations are wide-ranging, covering onboard safety protocols and improvements to the Safety at Sea program (e.g., stress a “skipper overboard” situation and develop chain of command procedures). The recommendations also address crew preparedness. In particular, they highlight that the crew failed to deploy the MOM-8 containing flotation and a tall pylon; several crew members were unfamiliar with the operation of the vessel's engine, and the chain of command was unspecified.

Several practical lessons from this report are relevant for BYC members. First, wearing a harness and tether clipped into the boat likely would have prevented a POB situation. Second, if the tether or the attach-point had failed, an offshore PFD likely would have prevented the skipper from drowning in a face-first Lifesling recovery. Wearing both in such conditions is not a “personal decision.” Failing to do so endangers the entire crew, as the downstream implications described in the report demonstrate.

- Brian Fitzgerald, Member (with editorial assistance from John Bell)