

MAX EBB

I'm about the last person in the world who would spend upward of \$500 for a ticket to watch a sporting event. Especially a sailing event. No matter how much they hype it up, it's still a sailboat race and, for a spectator sport, the action is still pretty slow — like watching grass grow or paint dry. Sailing is something we do, not something we watch.

But one of our company's biggest clients had something to do with a major America's Cup sponsor, and my boss ended up with a handful of VIP tickets. Thanks to conflicting schedules and a lot of luck, one of the tickets eventually landed on my desk. For free!

This was not just a prime seat in the viewing stands, or a window table in the St. Francis YC dining room. This was a ride on a mark boat, an actual mark of the course. Grass would grow and paint would dry unobserved that day.

The boat itself was worthy of some interest: a 46-ft cat designed to give 12 passengers a 360° view. Even though it was a course mark, it didn't anchor — it didn't need to. Instead, it relies on computer-controlled, 360° rotatable thrusters to hold station, so all the crew has to do is key in the GPS coordinates, and that's where the boat stays, exactly. I lusted for one of these rigs for my club's race committee in a bad way.

The hospitality began with the valet parking and went up from there. The first course of lunch was an artisan cheese platter with names almost as pretentious as those of Napa Valley wines: Pt Reyes Homestead Blue, Bellwether Farms Carmody, Cypress Grove Bermuda Triangle and Fiscalini San Joaquin Gold.

And of course there was a complimentary wine bar. The champagne flowed freely, served up by a young woman who apparently was selected more for her physical specifications than her bartending skills. Was I ever wrong on that one.

"Welcome aboard, Max!"

She was no ordinary eye-candy-for-hire; it was Lee Helm working the bar. A naval architecture student at the University, she usually finds consulting work in computational fluid dynamics between semesters.

"Champagne?" she asked as she handed me a glass. "Moët et Chandon Dom Pérignon Rosé, 2000."

"Lee!" I stammered, still having trouble reconciling the image of the hottie before me with the grad student and sailor I normally only see in foulies or a wetsuit.



The new 46-ft VIP mark boats are a race committee's dream come true.

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She'd been poured into a black party dress and touched up with makeup. I had no idea she even owned makeup. Even her height threw me off track, enhanced as it was by totally unseaworthy high heels. "Uh, Lee, did your college loans run out?" I managed to ask. "Since when do you moonlight as a bartender?"

"A gig's a gig, Max. I get to see the race close-up. And a totally awesome free lunch," she whispered.

"I would have thought you'd be helping debug the tracking software," I said, still grappling with the facts on the ground, "or at least working with the judges to call right-of-way fouls."

"Nah, they don't get to see the race like

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we do from the mark boat. The umps are all down in a dungeon with the telemetry — they don't see a thing."

I declined the Champagne but accepted a glass of America's Cup label Napa Valley Chablis, then introduced myself to some other guests who came over to the bar.

One was a software developer who I later determined was CEO of a successful start-up. There was an older couple, both surgeons. Also a stockbroker or commodities trader of some sort.

We made small talk as Lee served another tray of snacks, this course featuring Cuban yellowfin tuna ceviche, strawberry fufu in sesame cones, and Thai basil caprese with balsamic reduction.

More guests came aboard, including a couple of young men in football jerseys who appeared to be professional sports fans but didn't know much about sailing, as far as I could tell. All their conversations were about pro sports in one form or another. We chatted about how best to cover a sailboat race for a TV and internet audience, and I complained that the camera never seems to stay on one scene long enough to follow the tactics of a play, putting it in terms they could understand.

"It's like watching a football play with the camera always switching to a close-up of some player's face every two seconds," I complained. "Extra screens are cheap these days, and there's enough internet bandwidth to have one screen dedicated to an uninterrupted helicopter view, or even an animation, while the