

# SAIL AMERICA NEWS

Monthly News for  
Sail America Members



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## WAYPOINTS COVER STORY



With 46 World, North American, and National Championships under his belt in a variety of classes, Ken Read is one of the most accomplished sailors in the world. Read served as strategist and coach with America's Cup entry *Young America* in 1995 and was helmsman onboard Dennis Conner's *Stars & Stripes* America's Cup campaigns in 2000 and 2003. In 2005–2006, he joined the Ericsson Racing Team for the last four legs of the Volvo Ocean Race, was skipper of Puma Ocean Racing Team's *il Mostro* in the 2008-2009 edition of the Volvo Ocean Race, and returned in 2011 to lead PUMA Ocean Racing powered by BERG's entry *Mar Mostro* in the 2011–2012 Edition of the Volvo Ocean Race.

After leading PUMA Ocean Racing to third overall in the 2011–2012 Volvo Ocean Race, Ken Read stepped off the boat and took the helm as president of North Sails in January 2013. Sail America talked with Ken about his stint as a commentator for NBC Sports at the 2013 America's Cup and to find out what life on dry land is like for him.

**Sail America:** What led you to stop racing full-time?

**Ken Read:** Technically I never left. Sure I have no plans to do the next Volvo or America's Cup but I will keep my hand in high-profile programs because it keeps me fresh, knowledgeable, pushing the technology of the products. You see the people in action, the products in action. You meet the owners. There's no drawback to continue sailing. But, you can't be president of North Sails and be a full-time Volvo or America's Cup racer at the same time.

**SA:** What is your history with North Sails?

**KR:** North Sails bought my company in 1996. For three years I worked really hard, and then Dennis Conner called and asked me to skipper his America's Cup boat. Tom Whidden [CEO of North Marine Group] talked to me about it and not only promoted

the idea of me sailing for Dennis but he ended up coming along as tactician. It's cool when your boss supports you like that.

Since then, I've participated in two America's Cup races and two Volvos. Every time, Tom kicked me out the door. He said it's better for North Sails if I kept sailing at the very highest level. It's Tom's mold that he created as Dennis's tactician for many Cup campaigns. I fell into the same mold.

From 1985 through 1996, I tried to be North Sails' biggest pain in the ass by competing with them in the sailmaking world first as Shore Sails then as Sobstad Sails. North Sails purchased our company in '96, and since then I'm a team player. I love this company. It's a great lifestyle. It's a company that has grand aspirations, looking to grow, looking for the next technological breakthrough, amazing people, global...What's not to like?!

This job is a "pinch yourself" job. Is it hard? Of course. But growing up and doing what I've done my whole life and now leading the greatest brand in the sport? You can't beat that. I even get paid for this.

**SA:** How does your background in sailing prepare you to be president of North Sails, from a management perspective? In other words, how does a lifetime of sail racing prepare someone to manage over 1,000 people?

**KR:** Competitive sailing boils down to two things: Having a fast boat and having the best people. Business is exactly the same thing. You want a nimble, quick-moving, technically advanced company and the best people you can get.

Then, you figure out how to put the best people in the best position. My philosophy: I hire the kind of people so I'm always the least qualified person in the room. Hire talent who are way better than you are at the specific jobs they are hired to do.

It sounds obvious, but so many people manage through not wanting to put themselves in a vulnerable position by hiring someone who knows more than they do. I do my job right if I put the right people in the right places. I let them do what they're hired for.

If you micromanage, you don't get the best out of people. Sailing programs deal with adversity, figuring out how to persevere, dealing with high-profile clients, dealing with high-profile companies. I have been dealing with these entities for a long time now and that can only make me better in my current role.

**SA:** You have been working with sails most of your life. What are some of the changes you've seen? What kinds of developments get you excited? Does North Sails have a product that particularly excites you?

**KR:** When I got into sailmaking, it was a different era. There was no “get out of school and be a pro sailor.” You were drafted out of school by a mast maker, sailmaker, boatbuilder....

I was drafted to Newport working for Shore Sails, the owners Bill and Doug Shore. I had a cool senior year at Boston University. I was one of the only ones who knew what I was going to do when I graduated. Shore Sails gave me a few one design boats and told me to go win races and sell sails. Didn't get much better than that. I worked for Shore for a number of years.

In 1986, I met with the owners of the company about purchasing the Newport operation along with friend Dan Neri. We went out and begged and borrowed every dime we could get and bought it. We ran that company for 10 years. I was on the selling and marketing side and Dan was on the design and manufacturing side. One day about 10 years later I bumped into Tom Whidden who says to me, “You've become a major pain in the ass. Would you ever consider working with North?” And this all coincided with North Sails coming out with a revolutionary product called 3DL, and we were terrified that North's product was going to make it hard for us to continue to do well in the racing market. Within two months we sold our company and went to work for North Sails.

Today, North Sails' next revolutionary breakthrough is “3Di,” another huge step forward in performance sails. If I were a competitor I'd be pretty depressed if I saw it.

**SA:** You went behind the scenes this past summer to become a commentator for the America's Cup and NBC Sports. Was this your first stint in that kind of a role? Were there any moments that brought you to your feet?

**KR:** Like most things for me, I tripped over it and came into an amazing experience. I had never done any commentating before. It was a blast, first of all. It was an absolute blast.

As far as how it worked with my North Sails job, Tom Whidden and I debated whether I should do it and whether it was good for North Sails. It's kind of the same theory as doing races. Staying in front of the sport, knowing the guys, getting the feel for the pulse, a lot of our clients were out there. We decided to have me do it.

I was the color commentator for professional sportscaster Todd Harris. He and I hit it off right away and it made life easy for both of us. I got up at 4am worked on North Sails issues until 9:30, worked the America's Cup, then worked at North Sails at night. It made for long days but it was a great experience.

The event was epic. The way it was done, the people behind the production. It was beyond imagination. We could show the world sailing through a lens and talk about it as it had never been talked about before. All made possible because of the

technology that went into the broadcast. It had some of the best images the sport as ever seen.

Post AC, I believe in the America's Cup bounce. An economic shot in the arm for all of sailing thanks to the publicity of the America's Cup. It's a shame for our industry that it isn't every couple of years at a minimum. When the America's Cup is up and going and talked about, more boats, more sails, more blocks, more clothing—sailing itself—get sold. People have sailing on the mind.

[Editor's Note: After receiving five Emmy Award nominations, media production for [the 34th America's Cup received the Sports Emmy Award](#) for its mobile app on May 6 in New York City.]

**SA:** You went sailing aboard *Emirates Team New Zealand* in August and wrote about it for ACTV. For most people, cruising at high speeds aboard one of the new America's Cup boats would be thrilling and scary, but it's very clear from your post that, even with your extensive experience in sailing, you were in quite a bit of awe when you hit 46.5 knots. Can you comment on your sail around San Francisco Bay with the New Zealand team? Do you have any moments from your personal racing background that brought you that same thrill?

**KR:** The AC crewmembers became kind of blasé on the boat, running around at what feels like 1,000 miles an hour. It was quite an eye opener for me.

We're turning a corner at 46 knots. I'm thinking, "Is this for real?!" I'm looking for my escape plan. Where will I fly when we crash? And they're yawning. You've lost the plot if this is your new normal. I kept telling the boys "this isn't normal."

When I was sailing in the Volvo Race, we'd be in the middle of the ocean and the photos really toned down the waves and the conditions, which is a shame—it's the same thing in Cup boats—it looks like they are in control but it's nuts. You don't get the sense on the TV camera how on the edge they were and they are.

God bless these guys. That's what makes these boats so exciting. Some people went out for pony rides and got pretty terrified. I have a friend—and she's pretty tough—who was invited on the New Zealand boat for a bit. She asked off after 10 minutes. She was like, I've seen enough. Her asking off says something to me.

**SA:** You mentioned in an interview with Sail World that one of your goals is to grow the sport of sailing. What are some of the ways you're doing that?

**KR:** I've gone actively on the public speaking circuit, gotten in front of people as much as I can. I want to get some of the sailing back into grassroots.

I travel the world; I see the sport changing and it may not be for the better. Yacht club sailing, beer can racing, it's in decline in a lot of places. It's expensive, hard to find crew, even at local levels. It's become so professional.

We are promoting fun again. At North Sails, we set up North U Regatta Services. A few guys coach people, and they have fun after sailing sessions with video and entertainment, trying to help people get better while having a blast

We're really promoting point-to-point races too. Around the buoys windward-leeward racing—it can be intimidating. We want people to sail and have fun, maybe not have your hand slapped when you reach for a coca cola on the rail. Let's get the fun back into the sport. You should wake up and want to go sailing. As a company, we think we're doing something about it. Hopefully we can make a difference.

*Scuttlebutt* has helped us promote [these point-to-point races]. *Sailing World* and the NOOD regattas—they're picking up on the short point-to-point races too.

[Editor's Note: Ken Read will be presenting "[Invest in Sailing](#)" at the [Sail America Industry Conference](#) in Charleston, South Carolina, on Wednesday, June 11, 2014, at 11:00am.]

**SA:** Is sailing perceived differently in other countries and in what ways? How are you using your experience and perspective from other countries to drive your goal of growing sailing in the US?

**KR:** Sailing is treated in other countries very differently at all kinds of levels. Sailing in Europe is a bigger sport. All the countries in Europe, for the most part, are waterbound, so much coastline, so many nooks to sail a boat around.

In Europe, at its highest level, it's far more commercial. In France I did a speech once on how to get sponsors. I was talking about how I kept Puma interested. It's the biggest sailing commercial sponsorship ever in North America. I was proud of that. At the end of the talk, I was asked, did you call them or did they call you?

I was like...what do you mean? In France, *sponsors call sailors*. That told me everything I need to know.

It's so mainstream, in the newspaper, on television. It's the same in Australia and New Zealand, England, the Nordic countries. It's all over the TV and on the sports networks. Sailors are Tom Brady and Peyton Manning in Europe.

Here in this country, sailors are minor players. It's still considered an elitist, wealthy sport. We need to continue breaking down that barrier. It's something we have to work at in this country. It's very hard.

**SA:** What can the industry do as a whole to get more people involved and enthusiastic about sailing? What are some ways you see incentive for parents to get their kids on the water?

**KR:** Access to water, first of all.

My brother is the executive director for [Sail Newport](#). Something like 1,000 kids go through their program in the summer. The bigger boats they rent out. You take a five-minute test and go out yourself or have someone go with you.

We need sailing teams at high schools, the ability to go sailing without being part of a yacht club. [Providence Community Boating](#) is doing nice work. Yachts clubs have opened up their junior sailing clubs to nonmembers.

We should look into actively marketing to high schools and grammar schools, make it part of the sports curriculum. That can happen.

[In Rhode Island] Portsmouth High School, Rogers High School, Middletown High School use Sail Newport boats, yacht clubs boats. The opportunity is there, but without widening access, the opportunity is too small.

Places like Sail Newport have to expand and catch on around the country.

**SA:** You must be pretty happy to see Volvo Ocean Race coming to Newport in May 2015. Do you think you'll ever go back to it?

**KR:** [He laughs] One edition too late. The last Volvo when we sailed the leg from Brazil, it finished in Miami. It was a phenomenal leg. It was the best leg a Puma boat ever sailed. And as we sailed into Miami, I thought, how cool would it be to be sailing into my home port. Miami was great, but Newport would have been amazing.

So, I'm sad since I'm one race too late, but I'm thrilled to see it coming. The pride they'll get out of this.

Charlie Enright [skipper for *Alvimedica* in the Volvo Race and an employee at North Sails] grew up here on the bay. I'm proud of him for getting this program together, taking it on. He's setting himself up to be competitive. There's a big learning curve. It'll be great to see him sail into his home state. I'll be the first guy out there cheering him on...but if he happens to get sick or hurt prior to the leg and they need someone to step in at the last second—I'm their guy...not that I am rooting for that to happen or anything [he says laughing].