

For 'Mack' racers, getting there is half the fun

By SUSAN SAITER

Evanston architect Mel Hemmer climbed aboard his handsome 40-foot yacht, the Aurora, and placed a case of Lite beer on top of the other six. "It looks like we're a bunch of drunkards," he said, laughing, "But you sweat a lot and you're working hard when you're sailing. It averages out to only 5½ beers per person, per day."

It was Friday afternoon, the day before the Chicago to Mackinac race, at the Monroe St. Harbor. Hemmer, fellow architect and co-owner of the Aurora, Frank Gagarin, along with some of their crew of seven others were loading their yacht with food, beverages and other necessities for this four-day adventure, the world's largest freshwater sailboat race.

More than 300 yachts, from 27 to 70 feet, bobbed in the harbor around them, while the hundreds of crew members loaded their provisions, dragging them across the gleaming wooden decks, stepping around the lumpy, rolled-up sails that would take them 333 miles to a tiny island between Michigan's two peninsulas. All had been through inspections, and were found to have the lifeboats, fog horns, radar reflectors and other life-saving equipment necessary for sudden eruptions of rough weather, which Lake Michigan is known for.

THAT NIGHT, some would don evening clothes for the yacht club dinner. Others, dressed in standard casual preppy of designer polo shirt, khaki shorts and Sperry Top Siders (for the women, take away the polo shirt and substitute one-piece, Danskin bathing suit, then put on the khaki shorts and Top Siders) would join the party in the Mackinac Room or on the terrace of the Monroe St. Clubhouse and down gin and tonics to chase away the pre-race jitters.

Others would just sit in their yachts and drink, then get a good night's sleep on board or in a hotel. Dress for this was usually the crew uniform. Those on one yacht wore "Mack Attack" T-shirts; others wore shirts bearing the name of their 44-foot yacht, the FUJIMO (not a Japanese word but an unprintable acronym which ends with "Jean, I'm Moving Out," expressing the owner's sentiments immediately before he bought the vessel).

One boat from Detroit had two loudspeakers blaring out a gravelly version of

the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's "Messiah." Someone from a neighboring yacht glared for a while, then picked up his foghorn, walked to the bow of his boat, leaned over and blew it with all his might at the noisy group. They promptly switched to rock music. Nearby, a man tried to nap in the hammock he had strung from the masts.

THIS WAS the Aurora's sixth "Mack." One year she made it in a speedy 52 hours; another year it took 70. She is Gagarin's third sailboat, and this was his 13th Mackinac race. He traced the map of Lake Michigan with his finger, pointing out where they would first see land, at Point Betsie, Mich., near Charlevoix.

With his finger, he circled an area called "The Manitous," near the island, where the water is shallow, nine feet in some places, and to the X's showing where ships had been wrecked. "The X's are there mostly to frighten you," he said, but admitted they would have to be extremely careful there, especially if there were a storm.

Downstairs, Peggy Olson, one of the few female crew members of this race, was packing up food and drinks. She and Hemmer's wife had cooked and frozen roast beef, turkey and a ham for the trip, but she said that was the end of their domestic responsibilities. From then on, they were part of the crew. If it's inch by inch all the way to equality, especially on that last bastion of male territory — aboard ship — she didn't seem to mind. Maybe she remembered when it was considered bad luck to have women aboard.

AMONG MOST crew members that day was some talk about the weather and the course, and quite a bit about what they would do when they got to Mackinac Island.

On almost everybody's agenda were drinks at the Pink Pony and whooping it up at street parties. Some would go to dinner at the Grand Hotel and take a quiet horse or bike ride. Some would fly back to Chicago; some would sail at a leisurely pace.

Despite the elaborate preparations, no one seemed too fearful of a disappointing finish. It is a gentleman's sport all the way, and everyone seemed prepared to win or lose gracefully, as long as the parties and refreshments held out.



Crew members put equipment away following the Coast Guard inspection. (Staff photo by Jon Langham)



Mike Munholland, crew member of the Aurora, smooths the deck in preparation for the "Mack." At left, Evanston resident Frank Gagarin, Aurora co-owner, said the Chicago to Mackinac race is his only vacation from his work as an architect.