

12/11/2006

Branford adventurer headed for race of his life

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-BRANFORD — Dennis Perkins has made a career out of showing others how to succeed in business through teamwork, team-building and strong leadership.

When he goes back to the well for some research or a refresher course, he really goes back — far beyond where any book or library might take him.

In 2003, Perkins' personal exploration took him to Antarctica to trace the route from explorer Ernest Shackleton's 1914 expedition to the then-unexplored Antarctic continent, which turned into a two-year survival odyssey that many say has never been matched.

Perkins, a former Yale School of Management faculty member who is a management consultant, wrote a 2000 book on Shackleton's expedition, "Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition." Now Perkins, an ex-Marine who served a year in Vietnam, is at it again, only this time he's off to Australia to take part in the grueling 723-mile Sydney-to-Hobart open ocean yacht race off Australia's east coast.



Dennis Perkins of Branford is ready for the grueling 723-mile yacht race from Sydney to Hobart, Australia. Peter Casolino/Register. ([Buy Register photos](#))

It's considered by many to be the Mount Everest of sailing. The 628-nautical-mile race, which a quarter of the competitors don't finish — and a daunting 60 percent of competitors had to drop out of in 2004 — has grown legendary over the years. A 1998 race encountered a freak storm in the Bass Strait, which turned the race into a fight for survival for those involved. Six died, 24 boats were abandoned and just 71 of the 115 yachts that began the race finished. Fifty-five crew members from 12 yachts were rescued at sea.

The story of the vessel that won, the AFR Midnight Rambler, inspired Perkins and is something he has used in his consulting business as CEO of The Syncretics Group, based in Branford, he said. So, knowing all that — and given the fact that Perkins, 64, just got married to Susan O'Malley last Sunday after six years of dating — why go? "It's the adventure of a lifetime" for one thing, said Perkins, an experienced sailor and yacht racer of 40 years — as is videographer Edgar Smith of New Haven, who will be going to record the odyssey. The two leave this week to train for the race, which begins Dec. 26.

The fact that Perkins is leaving for such a big adventure, in fact, was one of the reasons Perkins and O'Malley decided to tie the knot when they did — largely at her urging, he said. They joke about the nature of his solo "honeymoon," however, as one of 13 or 14 crew members half a world away aboard the 60-foot Getaway Sailing, a Volvo Ocean Race 60 yacht. But the trip itself, which Perkins expects to be a life-changing experience, is no joke. "I feel like the whole experience is part of my sense of personal development," Perkins said. "I guess it really reinforces the idea that you can think big and make it happen."

Such ideas also are powerful illustrations he will use in his consulting business, which works with companies to achieve more effective leadership and team-building skills. And another book may well come out of it, said Perkins, whose complement of electronics equipment will include a smart phone and roll-up keyboard he will use to file Web logs, or blogs, for Sailing World magazine at www.sailingworld.com. Among other things, "I hope to confirm the many parallels between effective teamwork in ocean racing and business success," he said. "In addition to constant, complex change and stressful situations, I believe that racing, like business, can test the endurance, tenacity and effectiveness of a leader and a team. ... Extreme conditions demand exceptional teamwork, and they provide great examples to learn from."

For the crew of the Midnight Rambler, which helped hook up Perkins with the owner of the boat on which he'll be a crew member, "teamwork was what made it happen," Perkins said. He said he expects about 85 yachts to compete. A record 371 boats started the 50th annual Sydney-to-Hobart race in 1994. Perkins is paying about \$15,000 for the privilege of going on the trip, on a boat that is totally built for speed "with virtually no amenities," he said. Down below, crew members sleep in nets, he said.

Smith, 48, of Geomatrix Productions, admits to being nervous about the expedition — even though he has been sailing since he was 5 and races every summer Wednesday evening on Long Island Sound with the "Around the Buoys" group out of Branford, where he keeps his 29-foot yacht, Wasabi. "Something like this has really got me excited," said Smith, who has been working with Perkins for seven or eight years. Smith has crewed previously in the Newport-to-Bermuda yacht race, which is the same length as Sydney to Hobart. But that race traverses the comparatively placid Gulf Stream. "This one is almost guaranteed to be stormy," he said. However this year's race unfolds, "It exceeds anything that I've ever done, to be sure," he said.