

# CLASSIC *Yacht*

ISSUE TWENTY ONE

*for those who love great boats*

*2010 Tahoe Concours d'Elegance*

*St. Barths  
Bucket*

*Video:  
Gary Jobson  
on the 2010  
Newport-  
Bermuda  
Race*

# LIVING LEGENDS

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**Story: Hunter Brumfield**  
**Photos courtesy Saito8.com**

On the fourth day becalmed at the equator in doldrums a thousand miles west of the Galápagos Islands, Minoru Saito declared to his Tokyo shore crew by Iridium satellite phone, "It's BAD. No good!" His wind-starved vessel was being carried by a counter-current at about half a knot in a direction he didn't want to go. Making matters worse, the engine was overheating and couldn't be used.

Almost exactly a year earlier, on the same single-handed voyage around the world he had made another patchy Iridium call. It was the third day of a 50-knot gale off the deadly wreck-strewn coast of Cape Horn. "I have a problem," he said, his voice dulled by exhaustion. "I can't move the wheel." The rudder and prop had become entangled by a trailing line

and there was no hope to remove it in the surging, near-freezing water.

To the 76-year-old sailor both situations were equally vexing.



Being swept along by 27-foot (9-meter) seas in 50-knot winds toward hull-crushing rocks was only slightly less discomfoting

# Minoru Saito's Epic Journey

the 76 year-old survived Cape Horn in his 8th solo sail around the world?

than watching the GPS add miles back due to an east-bound current.

A racing yachtsman by heart, Saito had participated in three BOC/ Around Alone single-handed races – never coming close



aluminum-hulled 50-footer, *Shuten-dohji II*.

Well known in western blue-water sailing circles for his small stature, unapologetically fractured English, and unflagging determination, Saito was inducted in 2006 into the Single-handed Sailors Hall of Fame in Newport, RI, and awarded the Cruising Club of America's Blue Water Medal in 2007. He's seen a range of sea conditions over the years, including once in the Tasman Sea when his yacht was rolled 360 degrees by a storm. Another time in 1999 as he approached Cape Horn he spent "about 15 minutes," he estimates, trapped in a sleeping bag as icy seawater filled the upside-down boat. A subsequent wave righted the vessel. "I thought I was dead," he said.

to winning, yet refusing to quit until being gently eased from the competition by a new rule that said boats must be at least 51 feet – one foot longer than his tired,

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His most recent circumnavigation begun in October 2008 was supposed to be his swan song – the final major solo voyage of his 35-year sailing career, again non-stop, but this time going the “wrong way” (westward) against the spin and tidal forces of the earth. More than 20 eastward non-stop global roundings have been claimed by other solo sailors, including him, but fewer than seven have ever succeeded in going westward without touching land -- and not even one person near Saito’s venerable age.

For Saito, it was a dream not to be realized. At least not “non-stop.”

“Too many problems!” Saito fumed by satellite to his armchair crew back in Tokyo. This time the engine was overheating from a faulty salt water pump, and while he had used the diesel sparingly over the past 22,500 nautical miles, the 56-foot steel-hulled *Nicole BMW Shuten-dohji III*, acquired for Saito’s 8th solo circumnavigation with the help of sponsors, was too slow and heavy in light winds, especially in the grip of counter currents. So the engine’s been there on the trip when he’s needed

it. Until, ironically, he encountered both extremes of sailing.

Saito selected the 25-ton all-steel boat in Hawaii for its beamy size and high freeboard, and then added fortified rigging and a taller mast with large heavy-weather sails in Auckland, NZ. So, too, was a new and powerful 160 hp diesel engine installed to push the boat, if required. All that steel, strength, and horsepower were needed to transit just one spot in particular: Cape Horn, the nemesis and fatal attraction of many a sailor, solo or otherwise.

Saito viewed the rounding of “The Horn” (the name often expressed by sailors in reverent awe) pragmatically, having challenged it from the other direction on four earlier solo voyages. He knew what it would mean to have the waves, wind, and weather in his face this time, and only the toughest and strongest-outfitted yacht would have a chance if the notoriously unpredictable weather at the cape turned threatening.

His careful plans called for him to arrive well before onset of the southern winter when the full fury of Cape Horn

develops. Yet the Indian Ocean took several weeks longer to cross than expected. He reached the cape in time, but just barely.

In mid-April, as the fall of 2009 moved into the southern hemisphere and the first sleet began to spatter the deck of *Nicole BMW Shuten-dohji III*, Saito found



himself within eyesight – a nighttime flashing beacon – of the Diego Ramirez Group, three small uninhabited islands 42 nm south-southwest of the false cape at the bottom of Chile.

This was the area, these storm-lashed



waters considered the most challenging on the planet, that was the focus of all Saito's preparation. Everything -- the steel hull, the state-of-the-art heavy weather mainsail, the new engine, the power train, the hydraulic steering -- all were part of the arsenal he had assembled to conquer Cape Horn.

Yet when the misty dawn came, it revealed perhaps the meekest waters in all of Saito's long experience in transiting the infamous cape. The waves barely lapped the hull while light, favorable winds caressed the sails and rigging. It turned out to be a daysail, not a major life challenge.

A relieved Saito, never one to take chances, gave thanks to both Christian

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and Buddhist deities, and offered up a toast of Japanese sake to the apparently slumbering King Neptune, the other god of mariners.

And then Neptune awoke.

Within a day, a massive low-pressure system blasted in from the west, bringing 50-knot sustained winds and crashing waves onto the vessel. On the third night of the gale Saito started the engine and put the prop into gear.

The new 160hp diesel engine had worked perfectly earlier, when there was still light. Things changed in the dark of night. A neatly coiled halyard had been washed off the base of the mast by boarding waves and was now trailing. It was a blue line color-coded for easy recognition among the ship's many other lines, but in the midnight dark it would have become blackly invisible as it led over the side into the icy, turbulent water. Saito, exhausted from three nearly sleepless days and nights, didn't notice.

That's when he called Tokyo to report his "problem." The halyard, as thick as a man's index finger, was now tightly wrapped

around the propeller and had ensnarled the rudder. *Nicole BMW Shuten-dohji III*, rendered both powerless and rudderless, was being swept by gale-force winds in the direction of those three small islands he had passed three days earlier.

The Chilean Coast Guard was alerted and dispatched a rescue vessel, a 120-foot commercial fishing factory ship, to take Saito off. But Tokyo had been forewarned: "Tell him to get his personal items together because we can't save both the skipper and the boat." A Chilean naval officer stresses that the seas are "just too dangerous."

Saito refused.

"I couldn't believe it. The boat was fine, no leaking," he recalled later. "I didn't need the propeller, just the rudder. There was no need to let the boat sink, and I was not hurt." He said they yelled at each other across the water, Saito in English, and the captain in Spanish. "I told him I would NOT leave the boat!" (The previous year another yacht, an 80-year-old restored wooden ketch, was scuttled under similar conditions not far away. Drifting boats become shipping hazards, and either have their seacocks opened, or become



target practice for Chilean or Argentine naval gun crews.)

With evening fast approaching, the factory ship captain relented, and a towline was deployed. *Nicole BMW Shuten-Dohji III* was towed 400 miles to the factory ship's homeport of Punta Arenas on the Strait of Magellan. Days later it took a professional diver in a cold-water dry suit an entire morning to cut the tightly wrapped line away from the propeller, one piece at a time.

One thousand miles and a year later in the doldrums, a much warmer and now one year older Minoru Saito was again fuming about his latest predicament in the flat waters of the Equator, with both the winds and his engine dead. "Too many problems!" he repeated, on this, his last major voyage.

So even the legendary Saito, wrapped up as he is in the often mundane, day-to-day tasks of sailing, seems to occasionally need reminding that this time he's gone the "wrong way," and it's made a huge difference to be bashing upwind against waves and weather rather than coasting along with them. (Though the weather,

for boats going in either direction, can play havoc on the unwary as young Abby Sunderland, 16, learned when she had to be rescued last month from her dismantled sailboat in the vast Indian Ocean.)

Eventually the doldrums did relent, and the East Trade winds came so Saito could finally return to the job of sailing toward Japan and home.

It has all taken a large toll on the boat. Pictures show the once-gleaming white vessel now rusted and streaked, solid-steel railings bent, antenna dome smashed.

He will be 76 and 7 months old when he finishes, completing an epic voyage that will secure his standing as the world's oldest and most-accomplished single-handed circumnavigator. He'll be able to claim circumnavigation records for most (8), oldest (76), and oldest single-hander to complete a "contrary" rounding.

He already holds the Guinness Book world record as the oldest person to complete a non-stop, unassisted solo circumnavigation at age 71.

The "right" way.

[Saito8.com](http://Saito8.com)