



The Mike Harker Story



PART 1

SKIING, SERIOUS INJURY AND SINGLE-HANDED SAILING

Over the next few months we feature the inspiring story of one man who survived an horrific hang-gliding accident in April 1977, defying all the odds of survival. Mike Harker has just completed a circumnavigation in a Hunter 49 in 11 months. This is, in itself, an outstanding accomplishment made more amazing in the knowledge that he is paralysed from the knees down and unable to support himself, although he is able to walk. It is a testament to a man with a will of steel, to achieve what he has – here we pick up on his remarkable story.

Early Years

Mike was born in 1947 on the West coast of the USA in Torrance, California and spent his early days on his local beach where he developed a real interest and passion for watersports and in particular water-skiing. He had a natural talent for skiing, and cycled daily, 20 miles each way to the Long Beach Marine Stadium where he pursued a personal goal to win the Grand National Catalina skiing competition – a notorious 70-mile race in rough and choppy waters from the mainland to Catalina and back again. Although he did not win, at the age of ten, he achieved the spectacular result of nineteenth place overall and subsequently went on to take first place seven years later. This cemented his future and watersports from then on dominated his life, even though as a student he achieved good grades across his academic portfolio. He earned money and reputation by teaching water-skiing, before moving to rowing, with similar results. His first sailing experience, at the age of seventeen was on a Lido 14, and then he sailed Hobie 16's. During this period of his life he discovered flat kite flying behind speed boats, and the newly emerging sport of hang-



gliding. Although this sport was in its infancy, Mike built his first hang-glider out of bamboo tubes, plastic sheeting and duct tape and managed to get it off the ground for a short distance on some sand dunes near Los Angeles.

This interest continued to develop. Mike's entrepreneurial spirit pioneered the manufacturing of hang-gliders, owning six hang-gliding schools and three Delta Glider factories. Back in 1974 hang gliders were not very sophisticated, which make the three world records that Mike set even more of an achievement – and also the amazing accomplishment of flying from Zugspitze, the highest mountain in Germany, Mt Fuji in Japan and Kilimanjaro in Africa.



A gifted water skier, Mike won the Grand National Catalina race at the age of seventeen, having first competed at the age of ten



Tragedy Strikes

At the peak of his career Mike's life nearly came to an abrupt end. Following a miraculous rescue, he survived disaster while kite flying during an Independence Day Festival in Grenada. He was catapulted from an altitude of some 400 feet into the sea and spent more than three life-threatening minutes under water while being cut free from his harness. Severely injured and unconscious he was kept alive while being shifted from Grenada to Trinidad and then to Barbados, before he was finally airlifted to a medical unit in Florida. For eleven months Mike was in a coma and eventually came round only to discover the full extent of his injuries; his parents had been told that he would more than likely be in a vegetative state for the rest of his life, and his life support machine had nearly been turned off. Shattered ankles, broken femurs, hips broken in four places, and the worst injury of smashed third and fourth lumbar, paralysed him from the waist down. Told that he would have to come to terms with never being able to walk again, Mike proceeded to defy the medics after receiving treatment in a private clinic in Germany which specialised in severe back and spine rehabilitation. He learnt to walk again. When he entered the clinic three years after his accident he could not even sit up in a wheelchair but,

some fourteen months later, having undergone nine hours a day of physiotherapy, he could stand and push his wheelchair in front of him. To this day, he still has to be touching something when he stands.

For the next few years Mike pursued his other passion for photography and film-making, which he managed by mounting a tripod on his wheelchair, and this career and interest sustained him financially, ultimately taking him to the next chapter of his life – sailing. In 2000 he was given a Balboa 26 trailer sailer by his uncle and launched this at Marina del Rey one weekend in August, having not sailed for all those years since he was a teenager and those idle summer days spent with his Lido and the Hobies. His homing instincts took him back to Catalina Island where the annual Grand National Waterski Championship was taking place that day. This was the day that he discovered that he really liked sailing.

Since then, at the age of 52, there has been no going back for Mike as his exposure to boats continued and he realised that he could embark on a challenging competitive sport with which he could seriously engage in spite of his disabilities.

His next, second sail on the Balboa by chance took him to Oxnard, between Santa Barbara and Santa Monica on the Californian coast, where he moored on the Hunter dealer's dock for the night. There, for sale, was a Hunter 34 which Mike earmarked as a possible yacht to do the Baja Ha-Ha race. He had read an article on this 750-mile cruisers' rally



from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas that had spiked his interest. After some protracted negotiation he struck a deal with Hunter and traded in the Balboa and began to get to know this bigger yacht, named *Wanderlust*, in preparation for the race.

Wanderlust begins

By the start of the Ha-Ha he had only sailed *Wanderlust* twice and, with two German friends that he had met while in the rehabilitation clinic in Germany, Mike began the race with the rest of the fleet from San Diego. He learnt all he could from his friends while sailing the the west coast of Baja – all in German! This unforeseen element in his early sailing days directly caused him to sail single-handed: at the finish of the Ha-Ha he tried to get crew to sail with him south to Puerto Vallarta but his inexperience and German sailing terminology seemed to put people off.

With trepidation he undertook the voyage solo but found it easy with the autopilot to do the steering, and he utilised his knowledge of hang-gliding for the sail trimming – the only difference being the vertical rig as supposed to horizontal. He spent four months

sailing round Mexico without charts, and then took off north, back to California. He comments that “it was kind of rough, but a great learning experience that would serve me very well during later bouts of rough weather in future ocean passages”.

As soon as Mike returned home he bought a Hunter 46 in Miami to continue his voyages and sailed *Wanderlust II* single-handed across the Atlantic, cruised the Med for the summer and returned across the Atlantic, this time with crew to Antigua, then solo again, through Panama and via the Galapagos to French Polynesia. Rudder problems on the way to Hawaii meant a stop and a wait for Hunter to get a replacement for *Wanderlust II*, and then continue the plan to sail around the world. Hunter, by this time, were very interested in Mike Harker and his accomplishments. They invited him to Miami Boat show and suggested a trade-in for one of their new range of yachts, a Hunter 49. It was in design stage, but the offer was too good to refuse and Mike was invited to visit the factory where he had some input into the final stages. A year later he took delivery of *Wanderlust III*.

Mike had researched in detail the possibility of circumnavigating the world within the short time frame of only eleven months. By avoiding the hurricane and cyclone seasons there was an option for Mike to circumnavigate the 26,000 miles, averaging 1,000 miles a week while cruising and spending the other half of the time exploring the coastlines. Unbelievably Mike kept to this schedule and, when he finished earlier this year, was only a week behind.

ABOVE
Wanderlust II

BELOW
Mike's unexpected solo trip prepared him for the treacherous seas he would encounter later





About the boat ...

Wanderlust III is a 2007 Hunter 49. The builder, Hunter Marine Corporation, has provided Harker with some support during the trip. In recognition of his accomplishment, Hunter's Director of Sales and Marketing, John Peterson, presented Harker with an engraved plate. "We are thrilled to welcome Mike back to Miami and congratulate him on this achievement. We are proud to be a part of Mike's story, and extend our sincere thanks for demonstrating the potential of our new product line," he said.

Having been very pleased with his first two Hunter yachts, *Wanderlust III* is Harker's third and largest Hunter. We spoke to Mike about his choice.

"Hunter has always provided me with a lot of boat for the money. At the same time they've all been great performers that were easy to sail and exceptionally comfortable both above and below

decks. *Wanderlust III* has exceeded my expectations in a number of ways; she's an amazing boat!

"I was able to sail at an average of 7.5-8.5 knots, and I had more than a dozen 200-mile days and moved quickly across the oceans. It allowed me more time than planned to spend in the locations I enjoy.

"I was so happy with my former two Hunters, the H-34 and then four years of the H-46 with over 32,000 miles that it was a simple choice to make. I went on ALL the other boats at the various boat shows and saw not one that offered what the Hunter 49 has for a lot less. This is truly value for money. I also visited the Hunter factory and watched the H-49 hulls being laid up and knew how well they were built.

"I ordered the boat as a 'Blue Water', with options from the manufacturer's list including the 7-ft taller mast, deep keel, bow thruster, and water maker.

BELOW
Wanderlust III





I opted for the reserve 80-gallon fuel tank to replace one of the three water tanks. Two hundred gallons of fresh water capacity should be enough with the water maker. The standard fuel capacity is 150 gallons, plus the 80 I have under the floor boards along the keel also acts as ballast.

"The interior of the new Hunters are absolutely magnificent. The woodwork and joinery are very well designed and the wood workers at the factory are all professional cabinet makers and otherwise wood professionals. The three double berths are so well designed that I enjoy inviting guests aboard and everyone has his or her space. The cockpit and deck layout are perfect. Steve Pettengill has put all his experience into making the line runs, winches and seating arrangements ideal.

"I don't race and I am what is called a 'Comfort Sailor'. I don't like to heel in windy conditions so I will reef early and let out the boom and foresail sheets when the boat heels over 15 degrees. With the deep keel she really holds her track and doesn't need to heel to keep her speed. I averaged over 8 knots with many 24-hour days of over 200 miles, all in comfort.

"I am always wearing a harness and when moving outside of the cockpit I will always have two leashes; one is 6 feet long, and the second is with elastic so that I will always have at least one safety webbing attached to something solid before releasing the other. I have slipped about half a dozen times and my leash has saved me from going overboard at least twice. I would still be out there in the ocean with my boat continuing on until she hit something without my harness and leash."

Mike also appreciated that Hunter designers welcomed his input to accommodate his special needs, such as additional handholds, easy-to-climb stairs and wider gangways. He added a special stainless steel Bimini/Dodger/Davit system that he designed himself and the Hunter factory stainless specialist constructed it for him. With this system he has protection from the elements, a place for his three solar panels above the bimini and a perfect



place to hang his dinghy without being in the way. He just lowers two ropes on blocks and steps into his dinghy to drive away.

When we asked Mike if he would choose the same boat again, "Of course!" he replied.

Next month we pick up Mike's story from the start of his voyage around the world.

Hunter Marine Corp is the premier sailboat manufacturer in North America, and part of the Luhrs Marine Group, an employee ownership company. Hunter distributes sailboats from 14 to 49 feet in 46 countries throughout the world. In the UK, Hunter is marketed under the name Hunter (Legend).