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► [CEO Forum](#)

► [Employee Recognition](#)

► [Employee Activities](#)

► [Metro Projects](#)

► [Facts at a Glance](#)
(web)

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► [Bazaar](#)

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Sailing the Transpac:

No Piña Coladas for Metro's John Drayton During Yacht Race to Hawaii

The Transpacific Yacht Race is an offshore yacht race starting off Point Fermin in San Pedro and ending off Diamond Head in Honolulu, a distance of around 2,225 nautical miles (4121 km). Started in 1906, it is one of yachting's premier offshore races and attracts entrants from all over the world.



John Drayton is one of nine who will crew "Ragtime," a 65-foot long, 11-foot wide yacht built in New Zealand. Owner Chris Welsh and Drayton have been friends since childhood in Newport Beach. Photo courtesy of John Drayton.

- Rigorous 12 to 13-day race will be constant deck watches, navigation and little sleep; 'It's been a dream of mine to go do this race,' he says.

By JIMMY STROUP

(July 13, 2007) Normally, John Drayton spends his weeks evaluating the bus fleet, planning and approving future purchases of new vehicles, and researching new technologies.

But, the Metro vehicle acquisition manager's next week or so will be spent directing another kind of operation. He'll be the navigator on a 65-foot sloop sailing toward Hawaii in the 2007 Transpacific Yacht Race.

"We don't call it yachting," Drayton said. "People think of

yachting they think of sitting on the deck and drinking piña coladas. That's the last thing we're doing for the next 10 days. We're going for a race. We call it sailing."

As navigator on "Ragtime," a New Zealand-built yacht that has won the Transpac twice in the past under previous ownership, Drayton has eight or nine days of total concentration to look forward to.

The race, against some 50 other boats, is 2,225 nautical miles from a point off San Pedro to Diamond Head, Oahu. For boats the size of Ragtime, which has a crew of nine men, the event begins Sunday morning. The staggered start dates for differing classes had smaller boats departing July 9, so the race is already underway for some.



Vehicle Acquisition Manager John Drayton will navigate a sail boat competing in the Transpacific Yacht Race from San Pedro to Oahu, Hawaii. The 2,225-mile race could take anywhere from eight to 12 days to complete. Photo by Jimmy Stroup.

"It's frankly been a dream of mine to go do this race. It's a big deal to me to get out and be able to do this," he said.

'Competitive from a young age'

Sailing seems to be in Drayton's blood; his family has avidly sailed for three generations. As a Newport Beach native, his backyard was literally a bay, so the sailing culture was something he never even tried to escape.

"I sailed growing up, I raced competitively as a kid. I sailed at Tufts University and we were national champions two of the four years I was there," he said. "I've been a very competitive sailor from a very young age. It's something I've been doing for the better part of 35 years."

Drayton has known the newest owner of "Ragtime," Chris Welsh, since childhood and jumped at the chance to participate in a race he's admired as a youngster.

"I'm kind of his lieutenant – I do all the navigation, I do a lot of the strategy," he said. "I'm coming at it from the point of view of weather forecasting, prediction... it's a pretty elaborate process."

Elaborate is almost too simple a word to describe what Drayton's going to be doing come Sunday. What used to be half figuring out where you were on the ocean and half pointing in the right direction has turned into a completely technical process of weather prediction - up to a week in advance – and minute course adjustments based on real-time conditions.



"Ragtime," a New Zealand-built yacht, that has won the Transpac twice in the past under previous ownership. Photo courtesy of John Drayton.

Looking for 'optimal conditions'

"We're running a computer the whole way that's giving us optimal conditions for what the wind is going to be doing and we're downloading updates a couple times a day," Drayton said.

"We use an Iridium Satellite phone to pull down weather updates, called GRB files," he said. "And then the computer takes that information and it computes an optimal course for us to hold – and this is changing constantly."

It's this search for optimal conditions that will have "Ragtime" pointed south, not west, for the first bit of the race, though this may seem counterintuitive.

Drayton explained that the shortest course between California and Hawaii would take the boat through an area typically devoid of wind, basically ending their chances to win.

"The course is 2,225 miles, but in reality, we'll sail between 2,300 and 2,400 miles, depending on how far south we go - kind of effectively going off course to catch better wind," he said.

The conditions during the race are not what might come to mind when imagining the luxury normally associated with a yacht.

'Keep our fingers crossed'

"It's not like there's any place to park the boat and take a nap. You have to run a watch rotation, you have all the logistics of feeding, housing, people sleeping – everything you can imagine needing to do and you have to be totally autonomous for eight or nine days," Drayton said. "Actually, you really have to plan for 12 to 13 days and keep our fingers crossed that those extra days aren't necessary."

The rigors of this kind of race don't really allow for anything but constant work. Drayton's description of what constitutes time off was simply "sleep."

"There are below-deck bunks on the boat. Not terribly glamorous, very utilitarian. We have seven berths on the boat for nine people, but they're never used all at once, are they?" Drayton joked. "It's funny, literally, as

you come off the watch on deck, you're waking someone up and taking their bunk from them."

Despite the trying conditions, the lack of space or privacy, the constant pitching and rolling, the utter isolation from the world and the possibility of danger, Drayton is visibly excited about the potential "fame and glory" of winning the bi-annual race.

"We're a pretty tight team. We're all friends, we all get together socially," he said. "On so many boats these days, especially with the big boats, the crews are paid professionals and it's a totally different game. They step on the boat at the beginning of the race and step off at the finish to grab their check."

"We're a bunch of guys who are out there competing – and we compete pretty well at that level. It's a different animal for us," he said. "We all go back to professional jobs at the end of the day."