# The Dhow of Racing

*Written and photographed by Jeff Harris*


What a sight! The racing dhow *Sirdal* outpaces four running mates as they all head for the finish line. The *Sirdal*'s mainsail is almost perfectly trimmed, with barely a ripple. Look closely at the topmost planking on the side facing the wind (the windward gunwale). It is just barely above the water line.

As the orange smoke from twin flares rises in the afternoon sky, the coastal waters off Dubai's Port Rashid become a blaze of activity. Five-hundred men begin hauling ropes in time to urgent, rhythmic chanting. Fifty white sails, each nearly as big as a tennis court, rise majestically and begin to billow, like a flock of giant swans spreading their wings to fly. As the soft curves of sailcloth fill with wind and the rope lines guiding them tighten, sleek wooden hulls head toward the starting line. The annual dhow-racing season in the United Arab Emirates has begun.

Unlike sailors in yacht races at ports elsewhere around the globe, Dubai racers care little about pre-start maneuvering. Their vessels sit quietly, sails dropped, until the smoke appears. Then, each boat's 12-man crew works as a team to hoist up to the masthead the nearly 30-meter (90-foot) boom that carries the sail. Motorized winches are not allowed: just blocks, tackle and muscle-power.

With the orange flares still smoking, three dhows angle for the best start. The one at right has the advantage as its crew has raised two sails, allowing it to catch more wind and sail faster. The crews of the other dhows are still working to raise a second sail.

Today's event, called al-Shandagha, is the first in a three-race series for 18-meter (60-foot) boats, which carry at most two sails. The competing vessels are built in the traditional style of the dhows that, for centuries, traded along the coasts of Arabia, India and East Africa. To this day, Dubai remains the most active dhow port on the Arabian Peninsula. Vessels tie up three and four abreast at dockside in the heart of the business district—a striking contrast to the Dubai's marble-and-glass office towers. Although the masts have long been removed and engines built into these vessels, the designs are otherwise unchanged.


"Pull!" Raising a lateen sail quickly and evenly is no easy task. Fore and aft crews often sing and chant in rhythm as they pull on the lines.

In the days preceding a race, activity is intense. One evening, close to sunset, I was taken to a little harbor. The sand on the beach was covered with a vast white sheet—a new mainsail—and men were squatting around it sewing. Many of these men had probably spent the day in modern offices; now they were singing sea chanteys as they worked. As I watched, I thought about how little the scene had changed over the last few hundred years.

"Good job! We're ready!" skipper Mustabbeh al-Marri says to himself as he checks the edge of his new mainsail the evening before the race.

"Racing is a family affair," said skipper Mustabbeh al-Marri. "Grandfathers, fathers, sons, uncles and cousins can often be found on the same team."

The day before the race was a time for warm-ups and I was invited to sail on the two-masted *Arhab*. Once aboard, I was impressed by the teamwork. As soon as the spar had been fixed at the top of the main mast, the crew trimmed the sail to produce that ideal, tightly pulled curve that would power us up to maximum speed. The crew then set another sail on the second, smaller mast. Instructions were shouted from man to man until they were happy with the sails' finely tuned trim. By now, we were skimming along at an exhilarating pace—probably around 10 knots, or 11.5 miles per hour.

Today, just as in centuries past, you can find just about everything on the cargo boats docked at Dubai. What's changed is that almost all the vessels are now motorized.

Built without a weighted keel, large dhows are actually as unstable as a racing dinghy. The keel is an underwater fin that counterbalances the pressure of the wind on the sail, and a modern yacht of similar size would boast one carrying 2000 to 4500 kilograms (4400-5500 pounds) of lead or iron. Traditionally, dhows stored their heavy cargo low in the hold to assist with balance. Today's racers use around 50 sandbags of a few dozen kilograms each to perform the same task. As the wind changes, crewmen must shift the sandbags about to keep the boat properly trimmed. Fine-tuning this balance is accomplished by shifting the weight of the crew members.

The position of the starting line depends on the wind direction just before the race and is set so that the boats can easily complete the course. As any sailor knows, however, the wind may change direction and speed many times during a race. This makes dhow racing particularly tricky. Unlike modern racing yachts, the dhow cannot easily turn across the wind. Each maneuver requires swinging the mainsail to the other side of the mast. This means that the heavy mainsail spar must be freed from the mast and

lowered slightly. In addition, the spar's front end must be dipped almost to vertical and swung around the base of the mast to the other side. At the same time, the four lines supporting the mast as well as the line to the parrel—the sliding rope collar that attaches the spar to the mast—must be moved to the other side. On a good day, this takes five to 10 minutes.

For today's race, by the time the orange smoke has cleared and the rhythmic chanting has died down, the competitors are well past the starting line. With the wind at 12 to 15 knots and waves cresting at nearly a meter (around three feet), conditions are ideal and the pace is impressive.


"No place I'd rather be!" is a thought that dhow racers must have as their boats glide across the water and the fresh breeze laps their faces

Choice of the exact course is everything, and skippers crouch down with the breeze in their faces, aiming for the best passage across the shimmering sea. Local knowledge and a keen ability to read ripples on waves for subtle wind shifts are crucial to success. There are no speed logs, wind gauges, depth sounders, weather computers or satellite positioning systems here.

Almost an hour later, with the end in sight, the vessel *al-Raed* takes a small but convincing lead. An exuberant cheer rolls across the water from her crew as she crosses the line, completing the 24-kilometer (15-mile) course. Soon after, the captain accepts the first-place trophy cup and the government-sponsored prize money at an official ceremony. Throughout

the evening, captains, crews and their families debate the tactics they'll use in next year's races. Times have changed, but the Dubai dhow races ensure a lasting place for the region's unique sailing traditions.

Sport sailing never paid **Jeff Harris's** bills, so he became a film director. He worked for Saudi Aramco's Media Production Division in Dhahran.