

Physical Culture

GEAR TEST WITH Capt. Jeffrey Barrows

Keeping Tootsies Shipshape And Dry

IN the 80's, when deck shoes were de rigueur for preppies, they all looked the same: brown leather uppers, rawhide laces and white soles. Today, sailors and even Sunday strollers can choose from countless options that have style but maintain a focus on performance.

"People want to buy the real McCoy even if they're not using it for sailing," said Mike Walls, the national sales manager for Sebago, the marine shoe manufacturer. Soles have become more intricate, with new rubber compounds and innovative grip designs. Myriad ports allow water to escape faster. And leather uppers have often been replaced by quicker drying mesh.

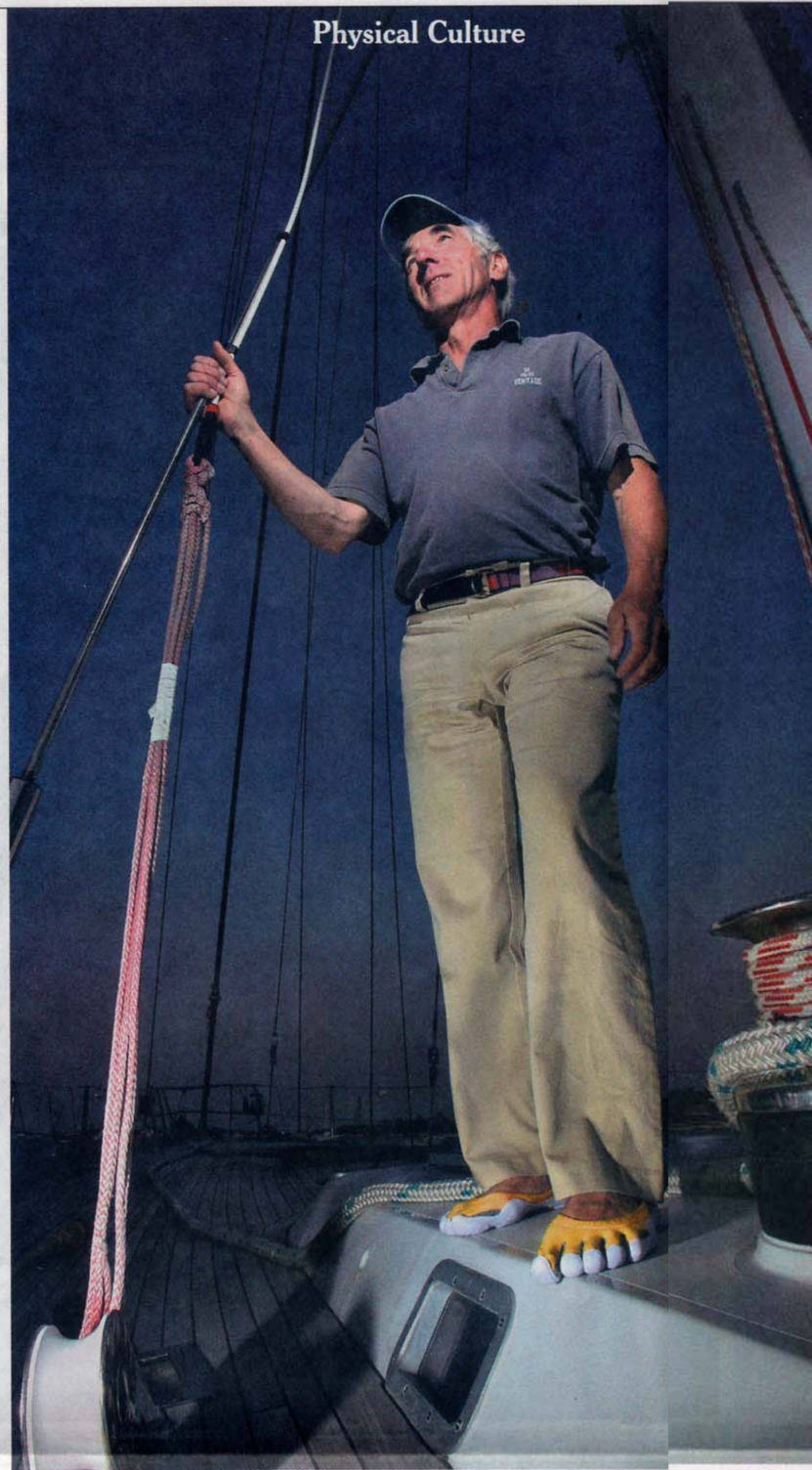
To test the latest deck shoes, Jeffrey Barrows, a competitive sailor who has had a captain's license for 26 years, wore them the day he chartered his classic 1970 America's Cup yacht, Heritage, and the next day while helming a 35-foot sailboat off the coast of New England. Captain Barrows kept the decks wet to check each shoe's grip. He also dunked his feet into the ocean to see how much water the shoes absorbed and how quickly they dried.

SARAH BOWEN SHEA

SALOMON KARMA \$90, www.salomonports.com. Billed as a half-running, half-water shoe, the Karma was comfortable, with a well-supported arch. With a tread that "looked like a running shoe, not a boat shoe," it slipped the most, Captain Barrows said. But he prized the fact that the mesh upper drained water well, and it dried faster than all the other shoes except the Vibrams.



VIBRAM FIVEFINGERS \$70, www.vibramfivefingers.com. This glovelike footwear, with a stretchy fabric upper that hugs each toe, mimics sailing barefoot, which some sailors enjoy. Captain Barrows said rubber soles made the shoes "very good at controlling slippage" but provided no arch support and left toes "vulnerable to injury." Wet feet were no problem as "extra water was squeezed out by lack of room."



HELLY HANSEN HYDRATOR W2 BREATHE \$100, www.hellyhansen.com. Considering Helly Hansen's marine heritage, Captain Barrows was surprised that this shoe didn't perform better in his on-deck grip test — his feet "just totally slipped" if he leaned more than 20 degrees. The "W2" in the shoe's name stands for "water in, water out." Captain Barrows said there was some puddling in the toe area.

SPERRY TOP-SIDER GOLD CUP 2-EYE \$149.95, www.sperrytopsider.com. These classic-looking deck shoes with hand-sewn nubuck uppers kept Captain Barrows from skidding, and he ranked them at the top for traction along with the Vibram and Sebago shoes. He liked their versatility — he wore them to dinner after docking — but they retained water much longer than mesh ones while on deck.



SEBAGO SEAWAY \$90, www.sebago.com. The Seaway's contoured foot beds, of the same firm material as running shoe midsoles, offered comfort and support, Captain Barrows said. Water flowed out drainage screens on the sides of the rubber outsole. After repeated dunkings, "water didn't pool in these shoes," though they remained "squishy." The sole, with countless tiny splices, had excellent traction.