

The Chicago -Mac Redieux

by Tony Driza

The 29th running of the Port Huron to Mackinac and the simultaneous 11th Chicago - Mackinac are in the books, but not without what has become the norm over the past couple of years – light air on Lake Michigan, accompanied this year by wicked hordes of biting black flies. I now know how they can drive herds of elk to the point of jumping off cliffs to escape their fury!

The Chicago – Mac started well enough, and within a few hours into the Challenge, skippers were putting up chutes and were heading right up the rhumb line for Point Betsie. The sailing was easy, the breezes favorable, and the miles piled up without too much fanfare. One who didn't sail the rhumb line was the perennial Wisconsin shore inhabitant, John Hoskins – a move that would pay off handsomely for him later on in the Challenge when he would wind up with a fair breeze to the north of those struggling in light air from Big Sable Point to the Manitous.

Alas, all good winds eventually peter out, and the first fading for yours truly came off of Big Sable Point, northwest of Ludington. Other boats in the area such as *Black Pearl*, *Moondance*, and *Sovereign* began ghosting about the lake – when the winds quit, the black flies really attacked with a vengeance. I can honestly say that nothing seemed to have much of an effect on them as they bit through everything in search of a meal from my ankles. Jim McLaren and I ghosted to stops within feet of each other, talking easily from our cockpits, and the joke became that we should just raft off and party waiting for the wind to fill in. The usual frustration of seeing a few cat's paws slip by the boat just far enough away to miss them set in, and even if we were fortunate enough to catch a bit of breeze, it didn't last long. Lot's of work, with very little to show for it!

By Sunday evening, the breeze started in again, slowly at first, but at least the fleet started progressing northward again. Jim McDonnell on *Black Pearl* started pulling away from *Whoa Nellie* again, and was in hot pursuit of *Moondance* and *No Worries*. As the evening wore on and morning gave way to afternoon, the breezes really freshened and most enjoyed blasting up through the Manitou Passage at hull speeds. A few carried chutes just a bit too long and the always adventurous take down in heavy air left a few muttering "never again". It looked promising for a great run up to and through Grays Reef Passage, but radio chatter indicated otherwise. Further to the northeast, boats such as *Il Bodacious*, *Loose Shoes* and *Blue Max* began reporting dying winds with following seas that had them rolling back and forth with sails flogging away. As the breeze lightened, the black flies returned with a renewed vigor, making for some grim conditions. Progress was slow for the most part, and boats headed off to the east and west of the rhumb line searching for some favorable breeze, hoping to escape the wrath of the flies as well. In my case, the Grays Reef Light finally came into view as dusk was settling on Monday – *Black Pearl* and *Moondance* making the turn through in front of me. It what was becoming a recurring theme, the winds once again died at the entrance to the passage, and the waiting game began once more.

As seems to be the case, boats coming up from behind carried the breeze with them, and boats began congregating about the entrance to the passage – first a couple, then the bobbing of still more masthead lights came into view. So much for the lead I had put on a few boats as they all ghosted up to within a mile or so of where I sat – it was going to be one of those really frustrating evenings, time perhaps to catch up on some sleep.

Tuesday morning dawned with fluky breezes trying to lift the fleet to the finish. Skippers worked the breezes for all they were worth, trying to find some constant, albeit light air that would carry them down the Straits. Some put up chutes, others opted for jib and main, but no one really pulled away from anyone else. Sailing from one windless hole to the next would be my fate for the next several hours as I worked the northern shore of Waugoshance in search of steady breezes. It finally settled in after quite a few sail changes (really fun in the heat, suffering from some serious sleep deprivation) and the closer the fleet made it to the bridge, the more dependable the wind became. Six boats crossed under the bridge within minutes of each other, and most were able to carry chutes the final six miles to the finish.

There is truly nothing like the "*Welcome to Mackinac Island, Skipper*" after a light air affair, and on the positive side, it wasn't as bad as the '06 Chicago – Mac when skippers were still finishing late Wednesday afternoon. Still for me personally, it was a bit of a grind and the encouragement from fellow skippers meant a great deal when things looked bleak. Now a month or so after the fact, the low points don't seem as cavernous and the fly bites have healed – maybe there's another one of these left somewhere in the future?