

Inaugural King's Cup Race

August 13, 2010

The King's Cup regatta was great! Many of the participants complimented the event, yacht club, course, and conditions. The regatta had participants in the dual handed (2 boats) and solo (8 boats) divisions. It started Friday, August 13 at 1:00 PM and went from St. Joe to the Wilson Ave pumping station in Chicago, south 6 nm to the 4 mile crib, back to the Wilson Ave crib, and then back to St. Joe. The course distance was 111 NM.

The forecast seemed to be pretty consistent between different sources with light winds predicted for the start out of the SE and then building slowly as the wind clocked to the SW by midnight to 10-15 knots, air temp 90. As it turned out, the winds were light at the start, however out of the SW, then filling in from the NE after dying and rotating to the SE and building to 10 knots by the time the fleet was 15 miles from Chicago. This was where the race became more interesting since a couple of storm fronts were forecasted to come through in a fast and furious way. The chatter on the VHF over the weather was consistent for about an hour before the first front arrived.

Sea Raider was at the head of the fleet and first into the front. The plan was to reef the main when the wind started picking up and then roll up the head sail when the winds got stronger. The wind went from 15 to 30 knots in about 20 seconds, along with a 180 degree wind shift. This was a little too quick for me, a solo sailor; to efficiently reduce sail on a well canvassed 36 foot boat. As you can imagine all heck broke loose in an instant. Off I was in reefing the main which seemed like it took forever but was actually about 1 minute. Both reefing lines needed to be hauled in on winches. The boat spun 180 degrees which didn't really matter because the head sail needed to come in before it was not a sail anymore. The sheets were let loose and the furling line could only be pulled in through the winch. By the time it was in, about 2 minutes, the sheets created a knot never before seen or heard of. They were knotted up about the size of a small duffle bag, just amazing. During all of the sail shortening I think that the boat went through two 360's. A massive downpour of rain came down for about 5 minutes. What a joke. The boat was then put back on course and making 7 knots with reefed main alone. Looking back at other competitors it was obvious that I was not alone with boat direction issues. It was either Geronimo (dual handed) or Renaissance (solo) that was also going in circles. This was a bit comical and humbling to witness all at the same time. After about 30 minutes the winds returned and came out of the SSW at about 14 knots. New sheets were made on the head sail and the old ones tossed into storage.

The next front was forecasted to be moving at 60 knots towards us, very violent, and was about 200 miles long and guaranteed to hit us in about 3 hours. The first front was just a "trainer" for the "real" one coming. My game plan for that one was to simply take all of the sails down and go adrift until it passed. The problem with that plan was that I would be at the first turning mark at the city. Thoughts went through my mind of how difficult/challenging it would be to deploy the anchor if necessary.

The fleet continued on towards the city which was beautiful. We kept a watchful eye out on the approaching front. Rounding the first mark and heading south to the second mark was uneventful. Sea Raider led Renaissance by about 3/8 mile. Geronimo was about another 1/2 mile behind. The air was very warm and the winds were SW at 15 knots. Many of the competitors commented on the radio of how beautiful the city was 3 miles out.

Knowing the competitive nature of Renaissance which also has the same rating of Sea Raider, Sea Raider was in no way going to give Renaissance an opportunity to pass. Geronimo, in another division (dual handed) that started 5 minutes after the solo division, owes Sea Raider 3 sec/mile, which equates to 5 minutes, 33 seconds was essentially making this a scratch race for the front runners. Going upwind on the second leg, Renaissance closed the gap on Sea Raider to about 600 feet. After hearing that the next front was about 100 miles out Sea Raider decided to fly the chute after rounding the 4 mile crib and then gibing over to Starboard when rounding the third mark on the course. We could see the lightening of the next front behind the city. As it turns out, Sea Raider was the only boat making this decision. At 2 AM and about .7 mile from the Wilson Ave crib, the wind shifted 60 degrees knocking Sea Raider off course. The chute came down and by the time all was said and done Renaissance was back to about 600 feet behind Sea Raider. We both rounded and after a quick repacking of the chute, Sea Raider launched the chute again.

Sea Raider added its staysail to the downwind sail deployment after rounding the mark. The winds went from 15 to 20 knots after about an hour heading east. Sea Raider was flying and my hands were becoming numb from grabbing the wheel so hard. The winds built to 23 knots. My spinnaker was only good for 25. I was steadily at 9.3 to 9.8 knots, hit a surf at 12.1 knots, yeehaaa. Sea Raider was ripping along making distance on the competitors (I thought). Sailing in a t-shirt and shorts at 4 AM on Lake Michigan, sailing just can't get much better. I was exhausted, haven't slept or for that matter hardly even sat down in the race. At this point I was 15 hours into the race, my shoulders and feet were aching, but the adrenalin was flowing. Adrenalin is a wonderful, powerful thing.

I was praying and hoping that the winds did not increase past 25 knots since taking down the chute in those conditions and my state was not going to be pretty. With the staysail in the way a circus was sure to be had. I created a game plan that seemed to make sense if a take down was required. The winds dropped to 15 and then back in the 20's for another hour before dropping off for the remainder of the race. At sunrise it was discovered that Renaissance was back about 4 - 6 miles. Geronimo was not seen. Being a sport boat it may have passed me. I had kept an eye out for them throughout the night but never saw them. The second, nasty front dissipated by the time it got to the lake. At the 8 AM call in, my position and estimates were confirmed.

After falling through the foredeck hatch for the final spinnaker take down, a first, Sea Raider finished at 9:55:40 AM Saturday. This resulted in a first place in the Solo Division. The fleet docked in St. Joe either at the yacht club or immediately behind in West Basin Marina. They got cleaned up and enjoyed an evening of camaraderie, island music, and food at the waters edge of St. Joseph River Yacht Club. Flags were awarded to all first, second, and third place finishers.

Cheers,

Dirk