

LOWER LAKE HURON SOLO CHALLENGE 9 SEPTEMBER 2006

by Tom Hughes

This year we equaled the record number of entries for this event and had nine first time entrants.

The fleet was split into five divisions, 2 JAM and 3 PHRF.

Overnight rain had just stopped as the boats made their way to the start line. Ominous clouds remained over the US coastline. Wind was blowing around 5 to 7 knots from the NW and was forecast to go to the North and increase to 20 knots during the day. Apart from the slight chance of thunderstorm remaining in the forecast it was shaping up to be a fast and pleasant ride.

24 of the 27 entrants made the start line. Off the start it was a port tack beat towards the first mark, buoy R12. The fleet was slowly being headed as it made it's way up the course and at about the time the first starters were making their tack to lay the mark a cold front hit the fleet and the wind instantly went from about 8 to 15 or more knots with a big shift to the right. It made an "interesting" time for those poor souls caught in the middle of their tack. The wind shift permitted the later starting boats to tack sooner for the mark creating quite a "traffic jam" rounding the mark. The strong wind and rapidly increasing wave height added to the challenge of trying to find a path thought the fleet to find a hole in which to tack.

Reports of the first retirements started to come in as the boats rounded R12. Blown headsails and Auto helm problems. It was a "wild ride" to the Kettle Point buoy. The wind and wave height continued to build. 30 knots of wind and 6 to 9 foot waves was probably a "walk in the park" for our Transatlantic veterans, but for many it was some of the most challenging conditions they had ever experienced. The art of steering down and around the bigger waves, rather than crashing off their crests, was fine-tuned or quickly learned. Going below for food or drink was a "dash and grab" since you were unsure how the auto helm was going to behave while away from the wheel for those few seconds. The call of nature was essentially back to basics and at least one skipper was literally caught with his pants down. He just got his oilskin pants round his knees to "let her rip" in the cockpit when the boat gave a big lurch. Unable to move his feet he finished up on the cockpit floor. He did not report whether he finished what he started before or after he resumed his upright position.

Those boats with excellent pointing ability were able to make the Kettle Point mark in one tack, others had to put in a couple of tacks a mile or so from the mark. Tacking in the conditions being experienced was quite a work out and getting the boat back up to speed took quite a bit longer than normal. These factors contributed to Port/Starboard close encounter of the really scary kind when a port-tack boat had extreme difficulty turning to dip below the starboard boat. To avoid the "brown trouser" experience the lesson here is, when solo sailing in heavy weather tack away don't try to dip.

In the area of Kettle Point more headsails were blown and two boats also retired with shroud problems.

At the ride back to the finish line the wind was blowing over the starboard quarter, still in the high 20's, with the now following 6 to 9 foot waves. It was a great roller coaster ride, surfing down the waves at well over hull speed. One minute, from the top of a wave, you could see all the way to the Bluewater Bridge in the clearing sky. The next minute all you could see was the top half of the sails of a nearby boat from the trough you were in. The big challenge on this leg was to minimize the "twack" from the headsail as spilled and refilled with wind while sledding down the waves.

It was reported that only one boat competing in the PHRF divisions attempted a spinnaker hoist and that didn't last too long.

The consistent strong wind resulted in a very fast race and many boats crossed the finish line within a relatively short period of time and in plenty of time to make the most of the party put on by the folks from Dock 4 at the Sarnia Yacht Club.

17 of the 24 starters completed the challenge. 3 retired due to head-sail problems, 2 due to shrouds/stays, one due to autohelm and one due to fatigue. There were only two finishers in each of the JAM fleets. In hind sight at least one "retirement" in these divisions could have finished (and received an award) since he sailed back all the way on just the main. The lesson...unless there is a safety concern don't be too hasty to declare your retirement, especially if you are making reasonable progress...."it isn't over until the fat lady sings"

While the event lived up to it's name as the Lower Huron CHALLENGE and was quite costly for some (those head-sails needed replacing anyway!), I hear those who are ordering new sails already talking about how the sails will enhance their performance in next year's challenge.

Special thanks go out to:

-Sarnia Yacht Club for the use of their facilities

-Erik Mortenson and the rest of Dock 4 at SYC who organized the food and band.

-John and Joan Chorostecki for the start line committee.

-Barb Nightingale, Jo Buckingham and Marianne Clift for the finish line committee

-Mark Gutteridge for pulling it all together

-All the others who contributed in one-way or another

-And last but no means least all of you who took up the challenge to compete