

The 29th Port Huron – Mackinac Challenge

by Mike Mahar

The twenty ninth running of the GLSS Port Huron to Mackinac Challenge had a few different twists this year. The Huron group had the privilege of one of their old time members Steve Pettengill bring his Hunter 54, *Hunter's Child II* up to do the race. It has been a few years since Steve has sailed on the Great Lakes but with the help of a few other old time GLSS members, he ferried *Hunter's Child II* all the way from St Augustine, Florida to Port Huron to take on the shifty light airs of Lake Huron and complete his fourth GLSS Solo Challenge. This earned him the honor of becoming the eighteenth recipient of the Peter Fisher Award.

For those of you who are not familiar with the yacht *Hunter's Child II*, it's a composite-built hull, with a carbon fiber mast and water ballasting. Besides these features, the sleek red yacht has a unique tripod to support the mast. The carbon fiber rig has a distinctive pre-bend with three sets of spreaders swept back at fifteen degrees. This boat has a whole list of unique features designed into the interior, hull and rig. The nav table and seat are on pivot so as the boat heels the nav station stays level. One of the unique parts of the rigging is that the main sheet doesn't have a traveler but instead consists of a doubled end on top of a stainless steel arch that spans the back of the boat. The arch also supports solar panels, radar and an array of antennas. These are just a few of the yacht's special features. For a bit more information on *Hunter's Child II*, check out the [Hunter Marine web site](#). Now, on to the puff by puff description of this year's Solo race.

The start of the challenge was delayed by an hour because there wasn't any wind. This created a problem when the Double Handed Society boats started to show up which made for a lot of congestion in the starting area. The race committee finally got the two GLSS starts off and running towards Goderich on a light air beat up Lake Huron. All the way to Goderich the wind would shift back and forth but only filled in to the ten - fifteen knot range for a few hours. This made the first half of this year's Solo Challenge very slow going in the early stages. I rounded the Goderich mark around twelve thirty Sunday morning under spinnaker on a close reach using a DSA boat as my shepherd to help me find the mark.

Rounding the mark more than a couple of hours behind *Tango*, (Bob Van Eck's J-40) I gybed the chute just in time to hear *On Beat* (Harold Beaton's C&C 30) report that he was rounding the Goderich mark close behind me. It was a cool evening with a three-quarter moon providing dim light in mild shifty air for the beginning of the second leg heading northwest towards Thunder Bay. The chute was set, the Gyro pilot was on and it was time for a nap. Waking after a two hour nap the boat was still more or less on course, but the moon had set for the evening and stars were out shining with all the wonders of the universe. That's something I just don't get to see living in the suburbs of a large city. My only other company consisted of pairs of nav lights off in the distance from other DSA or GLSS boats heading for Thunder Bay.

This was the second year that the GLSS was using the Tracker, an online website that gave a graphical depiction of the location of all the boats in the Challenge. To accomplish this, each participant had to radio in their coordinates to one of three boats. Each of these boats had a satellite phone that was used to contact a central person on shore who would input the information into the Tracker system software to generate the graphics for the on-line display. Each yacht had a different color line showing where it had gone and where the yacht position was at the last mandatory six hour call in. Not quite live, real time coverage, but the best you can get and still keep the budget down. Included with the web site, each skipper could have a couple of pictures and few words attached, a little like a "my space" for the skippers.

As I awoke from another nap it was still dark. The wind had gone back a few degrees to put it right on edge of between a head sail and being able to carry my spinnaker again. I decided to wait until dawn before resetting the spinnaker. Dawn came early on Sunday morning since it was the day after the Summer Solstice and the weather was clear. So when dawn broke and the wind direction didn't change it was time to be a yacht racer again. This drill happened a lot during this race - the wind would shift from the point of carrying a spinnaker to a head sail and back too many times to count. After the race, I told every one, "the spinnaker went up, the spinnaker came down!"

Later in the morning after some breakfast and domestic duties it was time for a bath! The bucket went over the side and I took sponge bath with the cold water of Lake Huron. Sure made me feel better! After some food and a bath with the boat doing a fine job of driving itself, I tried to lie down to get some more sleep. But that wasn't going to happen - the Shad flies were out for blood. The worst part, it was my blood! Even covering up with a

sheet the flies would somehow find a way to bite me. Every time I started to fall asleep I would be awakened by a biting fly. This just made me feel more sleep deprived, so after being jolted awake when the flies bit me, I just stayed in the cockpit and took turns steering, trimming sails and swatting flies. This went on most of day, until the temperature started to drop and the flies subsided. It was then that I realized leaving the screens out was a big mistake - the cabin was filled with flies! I found that by pulling all the shades and curtains shut so that the only light coming in came from the companionway, I could chase the flies out. The flies would head for the only light source and I would shoo them outside. What a solo Great Lakes sailor does to keep himself entertained!

Through the whole race I kept wondering how Luke Brockman was doing on *Loan Shark*. The GLSS usually doesn't allow twenty-four foot boats, but since a few of us knew Luke and thought he could safely complete the Challenge, we pulled a few strings and let him race. He has done a bunch of St. Clair Solo Races in all sorts of conditions so we felt he would be all right on Lake Huron. Quickly we discovered one drawback - he didn't have a masthead antenna. This gave his small boat a very short radio range since he was using a hand held radio. I am glad his cell phone worked better than his radio; even though I never heard him, he was able to keep in touch with some of the other competitors.

Approaching the wreck of the *Norden* off Thunder Bay it was time for another call in and position swap. I didn't hear *On Beat's* call in, but I also couldn't find his spinnaker with the field glasses. Some of the other yachts heard his position call in so I assumed I had a good lead on my key competitor. The wind was favorable so I cut between the wreck and the shore with spinnaker flying. The hull speed and wind speed were just about the same - a lot on this point of sail, around three to four knots. But if there was enough wind to keep the boat moving I was happy.

Most people think windy races are the hardest. That's not always true! Light shifty winds take constant sail trim and frequent sail changes. Besides all the extra sail handling, you spend a lot more time getting baked by the elements and in this race, getting bitten by flies. When Luke Brockman threw his "hat in the ring", little did he realize what he would be up against. But unknown to us Luke was on his own agenda; besides planning to complete his first GLSS Lake Huron Challenge he was planning to propose to his sweetheart on the Island. He also had a bet going with his dad as to who would have the best corrected time, since they were racing in different divisions. When the cards were played out he won two out of three, but in my book he's a winner! Welcome to the GLSS, Luke and Noel Brockman!!

It was off to the races and heading up into the straights, the wind was still light and variable through most of the night. Since I didn't get my nap on Sunday, I was very tired and easily fell asleep wedged between the cabin and the life lines on the leeward side of the yacht. A couple of times the wind would shift or the spinnaker would collapse waking me up. That would bring on my "call to arms", "I am a yacht racer"; "the spinnaker went up, the spinnaker went down!" There wasn't much reprieve through the night as that routine kept repeating itself. A couple of times the wind was so light I didn't have any hull speed or wind speed but somehow a couple of knots of apparent wind kept the boat barely moving. Occasionally I would go below to check to see that we were actually still moving. If the GPS said I was moving I tended to believe it. (My chart plotter is mounted below over the nav station; I have repeater that only tells me the distance and heading from the GPS.)

Before dawn, the wind filled in a little and went forward. Once again the spinnaker came down. It was a lot easier to sail the boat with just the head sail - most boats balance out better under head sail, versus the spinnakers anyway. As dawn broke I could pick out a boat to the north west of me that I was slowly gaining on. I knew it had to be *RATSO!* (Dave Evans Cayenne 41) If I was up with him and my competition was nowhere in sight, I knew I had a good shot at another first. But as the song says "don't count your money while your sitting at the table, there's time enough for counting when the dealing done!" You can always get becalmed while your competition gets a fresh breeze. Luck of the draw in yacht racing!

The GLSS had seventeen entries this year in the Challenge and four of them were first time entries. Luke Brockman on *Loan Shark* was one new member whom I mentioned earlier. His dad Noel on the yacht *Bluejay* was another, as well as fellow Great Lakes Yacht Club member Jeff Golding on his Jeanneau 37, *Eye'mElectric*. I have a feeling we hooked Jeff on solo yacht racing and he will be a repeater. I can't leave out another Canadian who can add his name to ranks of the GLSS - John Ollila on *Finnair*, his Tartan 28, is another veteran of many St. Clair Solo regattas. I would like to say "welcome to the Great Lake Single-handed Society". We need more first timers! Better yet we need more sailors to **repeat** our Challenges. Over seventy percent of our members only

do one solo challenge. The first time sure is the toughest and it does get easier with every race. After the first Challenge you know what it takes to make it to the "Island".

Closing in on Spectacle Reef, the first of the early Monday morning radio checks crackled in my ear. It was lot quieter now without the Double-Handed guys on the radio. Swapping my location with *Eye 'Em Electric*, Jeff informed me that he had just pasted Harold Beaton and *On Beat*. Hearing that I knew all I had to do is complete the race to get a first in my division. Just keep the bow down and the boat moving! I also heard that *Tango* had finished so I knew overall in the fleet I wasn't doing as well as I would have liked. Luck of the draw and the wind gods!

Gradually the wind backed to the west and about mid-day picked up suddenly into the twenty knot range. First I reefed the main, but before long I had to roll up the head sail to about the one hundred percent range. Now the wind was on the chin and it would be a beat to the finish line. *RATSO* wasn't very far ahead of me at the two o'clock call in; I gave Dave Evans a surprise when I told him to give me the same latitude and longitude that he was using. Later I did go down and trade positions again with *Eye'mElectric*. It only seemed like the sincere thing to do!

RATSO is a forty-foot boat but I knew with some luck I could beat him across the finish line. At times we traded tacks and other times, we were on the same tack. Knowing I couldn't beat him with boat speed, I was hoping to get a lift or major shift that would give me enough advantage to beat him to the island. So I chose to short tack along the shore of Bois Blanc Island, playing my cards close to the shore. *RATSO* chose to stay out in the lake. In the end the cards just didn't play out in my favor. *RATSO* beat me over the finish line by about forth-five minutes.

Even staying close to Bois Blanc Island it was so hazy that it was difficult to see Mackinac Island. The Straights and the islands appeared to be a continuous shore line melting into the horizon. The funny thing was you could smell Mackinac Island five miles away - the unique smell of horse shit! You couldn't see the Island but you could smell it!!

Closing in on the finish line, the last mile was a difficult one - a six-hundred foot "smoker" was also racing me to the finish line. I hoped that I could finish and get out of the freighter's way, before he filled the straights. Beating up towards the green buoy I realized I had to throw in two more tacks to make it across the line. My now sore shoulders would have to crank in the head sail two more times before I could call an end to my 2007 Lake Huron Solo Challenge. The race committee's voice finally did come over the radio with the words I was anxious to hear "Welcome to Mackinac!" The wall of steel shot past me while I fired up the engine and rolled in the head sail. I was ready to take on the Mackinac Island ferries and "hit" the dock.