

The 2018 Swiftsure International Yacht Race Will Be Its 75th

By Marianne Scott

During the Memorial Day weekend, on Saturday, May 26, the Swiftsure International Yacht Race will launch its 75th competition. Well over 200 sloops, cutters, ketches, yawls, catamarans and trimarans of every age, size and design will participate in eight different races.

Although this Race will celebrate its 75th running, its first race was held 88 years ago. It was born in July 1930, when six sailors from the yacht clubs in Seattle, Vancouver and Victoria gathered at the Royal Victoria Yacht Club after a regatta. Royal Van Commodore Barney Johnson proposed an overnight race out Juan de Fuca Strait into the ocean for yachts over 10 tons. (I've always wondered if the Seattleites came to Canada so they could drink their rum punches legally, as the USA was still under Prohibition.)

We'll never know if the demon rum was a factor, but our gentlemen sailors decided the next day would be perfect to race from Cadboro Bay to the Swiftsure Lightship moored on Swiftsure Bank. Thus, six boats, *Claribel*, *Westward Ho*, *Minerva*, *Andy Laili*, *Cresset* and *White Cloud* took off at 1100h. Ray Cooke's schooner *Claribel*, representing the Seattle Yacht Club, won. And the lightship's name was bestowed on the race.

The competition so delighted the sailors, they scheduled it again the following year. But after that, due to a lingering Depression followed by World War II, Swiftsure was only held once (1934) until in 1947, Royal Victoria's Jack Gann resuscitated the idea of bringing racers from the two countries together for an annual battle. In June that year, with post-war optimism blooming, 15

yachts, using the Cruising Club of America handicap system, lined up near Brotchie Ledge and began an annual tradition that hasn't flagged since.

Working out the details



Port Townsend served as start line from 1948-50, but in 1951, Victoria was chosen to be the Race's permanent start-and-finish line, with the Royal Victoria Yacht Club as organizing host. The race date was changed several times. Finally, in 1960, it was decided to hold Swiftsure during the U.S. Memorial Day weekend to allow boats coming from afar to participate, and to avoid the fluky—oft non-existent—winds common under the summer's Pacific high.

In the early eighties, lower-cost fiberglass production yachts enticed many newbie sailors into the sport. As many as 400 yachts would jostle at the start line to test their courage. Veteran racers calculated how this time, they'd win their division, or least place second or third. During the next several decades, boats grew in size but not in number—in recent years, participation has hovered around 200 boats.

When our first racers sailed out Juan de Fuca Strait in 1930, they looked for the

bright red hull of the Swiftsure Lightship anchored on Swiftsure Bank as its rounding mark. The last lightship retired in 1961, and ever since, an anchored Royal Canadian Navy vessel has marked the Swiftsure Bank turning point. Not every racer has had an eye out for those giant marks: In 1951, *Ono* was the first yacht to miss the lightship and kept going until a Canadian naval ship caught her 20 miles beyond the turning mark. In 1953, *Dragoon* hit the lightship while rounding it.



Other changes that have taken place over the decades Swiftsurers have been racing include material advances, increased safety requirements, ever expanding electronic navigation and instant communications.

Sails and lines have seen tremendous improvements. Heavy hemp or cotton sails, based on plant materials, have been replaced by Dacron and nylon, derived from fossilized plants deposited millions of years ago. Cored, synthetic and stretch-resistant lines have similarly supplanted hemp, manila and jute ropes.

Early racers used lighthouses, beacons and dead reckoning as navigational aids. The first electronic device that helped sailors determine their location was Loran C. In 1980, Bob Bentham learned that one of his fellow sailors had installed

a Loran just before the annual race. “I realized I just had to have one,” he told me. “I went right down to the electronic shop and bought my own. It seemed almost miraculous. Now of course, it’s totally obsolete. We have a GPS showing our exact location on our e-charts, with a radar overlay, and with AIS showing both cargo ships and many competitors.”

Communications have evolved so that Race headquarters know where all boats are located throughout the contest. Each yacht carries a SPOT device, signalling its exact location. That’s a sharp contrast with the earlier methods of finding yacht positions. Bob Smith recalls his voyages on his powerboat, *Scot Free*. “Along with *Shelimar*, we’d roam all night up and down Juan de Fuca and when sighting a few boats, we’d call the Sheringham Coast Guard station on the High Frequency radio and ask them to patch us through by phone to Swiftsure headquarter. In the ‘80s, we used a single-sideband radio to transmit the boats’ progress and later, by VHF. When SPOT transponders became the norm in 2006, our powerboats retired from Swiftsure.”

Swiftsure’s allure

Why has Swiftsure continued to attract competitors? Seattle-based Bruce Hedrick, a long time racer, told me, “I think it’s a combination of things. Victoria is a great destination and not just for the racers but for their families as well. Next, Royal Vic has done an amazing job of really understanding the demographics of their participants. It’s doable for smaller boats. As the Long Course attendance dropped off and the Sooke race increased, they changed rating limits on the shorter races and created events that fit the desires of the racers.”

Swiftsure is also the only international race that can be completed in under three-to-four days. And because it's international—Oregon Offshore racers sometimes “double up” by joining Swiftsure and in 1988, Russian members of the Antares Yacht Club near Vladivostok signed up—the race is more prestigious and competitive than, say, the Wednesday night races against your usual sailing buddies.

Why Swiftsure Is Challenging

One reason Port Townsend was chosen as the start line in the late 1940s was so that sailors could avoid the dangers of Race Passage, the notorious channel between Race Rocks and Vancouver Island, whose wild currents have rammed many a boat and ship into stony shores. At full flood or ebb, the passage can sustain currents of six knots. Add high winds, fog and the dark of night, and racers agree Race Passage always tests the best of sailors.

The winds can be fluky and unpredictable. The 1958 race was the first to be dubbed “Driftsure.” Lacking wind and confronted by a strong flood, yachts were pushed east well behind Trial Island. In 2002, that pattern was repeated and boats unable to anchor in the deep Strait were carried as far as San Juan Island. Few boats were able to complete that contest.

And just so you know, the 2018 Swiftsure won't be an exception—a strong flood will run until 3:48 pm on Saturday. Sailors are hoping for good winds to defeat the currents pushing back.

Bruce Hedrick, the Race weather forecaster, explains the likely weather and wind patterns at the annual skipper briefing. He's well aware, of course, of the wind's fickleness. “Perhaps the reason Swiftsure is so popular is that no two

races are ever the same,” he said. “They claim in fact, that NOAA sends its weather forecasters to the Pacific Northwest to teach them humility.”

Sailor/racer Richard Dewey generates the tidal maps for each Swiftsure, which are also presented at the skippers' meeting. “I appreciate the challenges created by strong tides and currents and trying to navigate successfully through these,” he said. Dewey, who's associate director of Sciences Services at Ocean Networks Canada, said that even better current predictions will be available in 2019. “We're installing high-frequency



radar antennas in Juan de Fuca. These will measure actual rather than general currents in specific locations. The information will be useful to both scientists and sailors.”

Ron McKenzie, who sails a J-37, *Future Primitive*, reflected on the 2017 race. “We didn't have the best results,” he said. “But we gave it our all. Of my 43 Swiftsures, that was the only one with fog and wind all night all the way back. We gybed in the dark fog through Race Passage in 25 knots, never seeing Race Rocks or land on the left, with crewmember David Lloyd calling the minutes for each gybe. And then, as has happened many times before, we spent almost three hours completing

the last one-half mile to the finish line. A 'Driftsure' ending."

Werner Kurz, who has sailed aboard Ron McKenzie's yacht as the "right hand," told me his view of that 2017 race. "This was the most fog we've seen in a Swiftsure. It was a race in which old-fashioned seamanship and the desire to keep the crew safe prevailed over the desire to perform well. When the fog was getting really thick at night and we were making 10-plus knots under spinnaker with virtually no visibility, we decided to switch to a jib to reduce speed somewhat but greatly increase our ability to respond instantly to any object that might emerge out of the fog. Having to cross the outbound shipping lane added further motivation."

Despite—or because of—these challenges, many racers appear year after year. The Race has now existed long enough that some sailors have sailed for more than four decades: the 2018 race will include Ron McKenzie (44th - *Future Primitive*), Doug Fryer (48th - *Night Runner*), Douglas Stewart (46th - *Madrugador*), Peter Salusbury (43rd - *Longboard*), and John Buchan, who sailed his first Swiftsure in 1959 and believes he's competed about 45 times since.

The 2018 Race Courses

This year's courses include the traditional Swiftsure Lightship Classic (138.2 NM), the Juan de Fuca Race (78.7 NM); the Cape Flattery Race (101.9 NM); the Hein Bank Race (118.1 NM); and the Swiftsure Inshore Classic, whose course will be determined after reviewing weather and tidal current predictions.

To celebrate the **75th Anniversary of Swiftsure**, this year's race introduces several new competitions. The new "Legends of Swiftsure" race is an inshore

day-race for boats built in 1967 or earlier. Boats that haven't raced any of the Swiftsure long courses since 2010 may also enter this contest. In addition, a one-design **Six Meter** race is planned for the Inshore course. And, as so many **multihulls** are now entering Swiftsure, a Juan de Fuca Multihull race has been added.

So look at your schedule, ready your crew, hoist those sails and join the celebration.

