

# Royal Victoria YC SWIFTSURE INTERNATIONAL YACHT RACE



## THE PREMIER NORTHWEST SAILING EVENT!

**A**fter just finishing my 47th Swiftsure, it seems right to reflect on this major Northwest sailing event and why, to me, it has remained a renewed challenge each spring.

The race has a long history and tradition. It commenced in 1930 with six entries, starting at Cadboro Bay rounding the lightship on Swiftsure Bank and finishing at Victoria. Only three boats finished. There were only four entries and one finisher in each of the next races, 1931 and 1934. The race became dormant but revived after World War II in 1947 with 15 entries and it grew in popularity attaining as many as 200 or more participants by the late 70's. A few of the races were started at Port Townsend which added about 30 miles to a normal beat to windward and that long course was abandoned in favor of the start at Victoria in 1951 where it has remained ever since. A race for smaller boats to Clallam Bay, measuring about half the distance to the Bank, was begun in 1962. Very light wind and a large ground swell occurred in a couple of the Swiftsure

Races in the early 1980's causing a great deal of sea sickness and a diminished interest in sailing to Swiftsure Bank. Royal Victoria Yacht Club came close to abandoning the Swiftsure Race in 1984. The Cape Flattery Race was introduced in 1985 to allow competitors to avoid the ocean sailing and since has drawn the majority of competitors.

For many years the fleet was composed of custom wood boats. Growing up in Seattle on the edge of Portage Bay, these boats became well known to me. There were schooners like *Swiftsure* and *Red Jacket*, yawls

like *Adios*, *Maruffa* and the famous *Dorada*, sloops like *Alatola* and ketches like *Westward Ho*. Stock boat designs came into the fleet in the 1950's like Phil Smith's *PCC Gossip* and Herb Day's K-38 *Ono*.

Unlike most racing on the East Coast or California, Swiftsure is conducted in a strait bounded by mountains and subject to strong tidal currents. The average wind conditions are as a result of a west to northwest inflow accelerated in the central strait and a thermal wind increasing in the afternoon as the heat rises from the land. Southeast winds are largely blocked by the Olympics.

Navigation could be difficult in the races after 1961 when the Coast Guard retired its lightship, replaced by a Canadian Navy vessel with lights, but no longer 100,000 candle power. In the beginning, we took compass bearings on Tatoosh and Carmanah lights and with a radio direction finder to fix our position. Up until the mid 1980's electronic navigation was banned. Now it is required. In the 1981 race, we got around the mark



*The start line is always a challenge, especially when it involves a Naval Ship as committee boat.*

ahead of most of the fleet when fog swept in with the westerly causing a confusion for the boats astern.

My first Swiftsure was in 1963 on Bush Albiston's K-38, *Excalibur* (so named, because after grounding, it had been withdrawn from the rock.) There were 65 entries that year and we placed 14th overall just behind Bill Buchan Sr.'s *Mara*. I sailed as crew or skipper of a number of boats after that, including my Atkin cutter *African Star*, *Ragtime*, *Merlin*, *Climax*, *Midnight Special*, *Blue Marlin* and my *Night Runner* after she was built in 1980.

Each race has been different but there are some that are memorable. At the 1971 start eight boats were dismasted shortly after the start



Previous page: John Buchan's "Glory" heads out into the Straits past Race Rocks Lighthouse.

Top: The always impressive Owens 102, "HMCS Oriole."

Center: Stephanie Schwenk peeks out while sailing her Santa Cruz 27, "Wild Rumpus."

Below: With about 10 knots of breeze, the Cape Flattery Race Division gets off to a good start.



including Bruce Hedrick's *Six Pack*. In 1976 I was on *Ragtime* and we had a light southeast wind in the strait. The radio was reporting 55 knots southeast at Estevan. Just west of Slip Point a southerly began to spill over the Olympics. *Ragtime* was fast and by the time we were abeam of the Cape we were shortened down to a # 4 jib and three reefs in the main. It was the largest sea I have ever seen at Juan de Fuca's entrance with seas running 15 feet. In the same race *Native Dancer* got too close to shore in the breakers at Bonilla Point and her skipper was washed out of the cockpit and drowned. Jon Tonan was with him in the cockpit and also washed overboard but was wearing a wet suit and managed to swim through the



surf to the beach where he found his boat and the surviving crew.

Another dramatic incident occurred in 1979. I was sailing on Jim Williams' Cal 40 *Blue Marlin*. We were short tacking the American shore just east of Pillar Point when we sighted Bill Hester's *Zuben Ubi IV* close aboard and very low in the water. She was sinking fast and her crew abandoned to their life raft, some without wallets or car keys, in the urgent conditions. Watching *Zuben Ubi* point her stern to the sky and slide into the foam was like the last line of Moby Dick as

the "great shroud of the sea" closed over her. We picked up the crew who were in visible shock and took them to Victoria. *Dorade*, on port tack, had struck and holed her on a crossing situation.

This year's race had no such drama. Only 14 boats had entered for the Swiftsure Race (now called the Swiftsure Lightship Classic), though nearly 200 boats participated in the various other races. On *Night Runner* we were able to get a good start in about 10 knots of a light easterly and set a double head rig

for a tight reach. As the wind got lighter we went outside Race Passage to avoid the rocks as the current was setting us southwest at four knots. The wind was trying to work around the Olympics and was reported 25 knots southeast at Point Wilson and light westerly at the Cape. By the time we got to Pillar Point we hit a convergence zone and what lead we had on our class vanished. From there it was working to windward in light to nonexistent breeze until we rounded at 0552 for a good run home to finish 3rd in class, but well behind *Hana Mari* who took first. One very interesting aspect to the race was the performance of *Longboard*, a Bieker designed 35' ultralight that rounded the mark ahead of *Rage* and *Cassiopia* who each owed *Longboard* about forty minutes. *Longboard* went on to correct overall by more than an hour over the next boat *Medusa*. Boat design has indeed made advances.

There were 18 entries in the Hein Bank race, won by Jason Rhodes, and 69 entries in the Cape Flattery race. Eric Jespersen, who had topped the growing fleet of four TP52s, was first overall and Charles Hill was first in the heavy class of 32 entries. Still the total participation is slightly more than half of the hey days of the 70's and early 80's. The race is somewhat more serious in my observation, with less partying in the fleet, and certainly less ashore than when street dances led to wreckage, riots and arrests. Royal Victoria Yacht Club and its chair Vern Burkhardt have done a splendid job of keeping the event alive to meet the changing times. The introduction of the satellite-based Tracking System has made a spectator sport for those ashore which has increased overall interest.

Sometimes I'm asked which race I have entered of the four now offered on Memorial Day Weekend and my response is "The Swiftsure Race, there's only one of those." Why go to the Bank? In my view, because it is a 25 mile round trip on the ocean, arguably the most difficult and challenging leg. Certainly the race of the longest tradition.

by Doug Fryer  
photos by Jan Anderson  
results: [www.swiftsure.org](http://www.swiftsure.org)




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