

## Swiftsure 2014: May the Force be with You

“Swiftsure”

*An Elizabethan Compound Name Said to Signify “Swift Pursuer.”* (from Swiftsure 2014, Facts and Stats)

### The Launch

At least nine Portland boats stayed after Oregon Offshore this year to race in Swiftsure 2014. There was Kevin Flanigan aboard his Fox 44, Ocelot, racing against the other scary fast boats in the Cape Flattery Unlimited Race (IRC). Tom Kelly was there with his blue beauty, Anam Cara, Doug Schenk aboard the J/105 Free Bowl of Soup, Tom Kefler sailing his J/42, Velocity out of Portland Yacht Club, Jim Calmon’s C & C 34 Katzenjammer (aka ‘Captn. Jammer’ as she was hailed by a commercial ship during Offshore), our Cascade 36, Wy’ East, sailing for CYC Portland, and, of course, Admiral Gary von Brunner’s Shamrock, a Yankee 33, also sailing for CYC Portland.

For all of us, after having sailed what had to be the fastest Oregon Offshore in history, our hopes for an equally exciting Swiftsure were running high.

For those who have not yet had the pleasure of sailing in this event, a little background. The Swiftsure International Yacht Race is the premiere long distance sailing race in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia area. Beginning and ending in Victoria, BC, Canada, the Swiftsure is international because some of the rounding marks are in U.S. waters and because entrants hail from the U.S., Canada and many other countries.

The race is the child of Royal Victoria Yacht Club. The first Swiftsure race took place in 1930 when six RVYC vessels raced out the Strait of Juan de Fuca, rounded the Swiftsure bank light ship and returned to Victoria. With the exception of the World War II years, the race has continued ever since.

Having sailed over twenty Swiftsures, I know the weather conditions from year to year can vary enormously. In some years, light winds lead to what we call the “Driftsure;” on the other hand, during Swiftsure 2012 we saw winds gusting up to 35 knots.

There are three distance courses and one shoreter one, and all start off the waterfront in Victoria. The Swiftsure Light Ship Classic for PHRF and IRC handicapped yachts races out to Swiftsure Bank and back for a total of 138 nautical miles, and the Cape Flattery races for PHRF handicapped monohull and multihull yachts (and an IRC handicapped Race in the Cape Flattery Unlimited) spanning 102 nautical miles, from Victoria to Neah Bay on the Washington side of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and back. In the Juan de Fuca Race, a distance of 79 nautical miles, racers round Clallam Bay off the Washington coast. There is also a one-day Swiftsure Inshore Classic course ending with a barbecue at the Royal Victoria Yacht Club, and it attracts racers who don’t want to experience the challenges of an overnight race.

Swiftsure is ably manned by a large crew of volunteers from Victoria led by race chair, Vern Burkhardt. Vern succeeded Bill Conconi who, from 1994 to 2010, was the Face of the Race. As always, everything proceeded like clockwork thanks to Vern and company, including the pre-race weather briefing which was held Friday afternoon.

The weather weenies held out great hope for at least the first hours of the race, promising westerly winds in the 10 to 20 knot range. The current weenies, on the other hand, had bad news. We would be starting the race against a major incoming tidal current and finishing against an equally strong ebb. Therefore, the words of wisdom from the science guys was to hug the shore, ideally on the Canadian side, all the way out to Neah Bay, cross the strait and round the mark, then hug the shore again, either shore, all the way back to the finish to avoid the ebb.

### **The Start**

Saturday morning came bright and early, as if an army of angels had scrubbed the sky to a perfect blue just for us. The sun was out and the wind was blowing, as nearly 200 yachts scurried out of the Victoria Inner Harbour to congregate in the starting area. This is a big race. The race committee boat was the Royal Canadian Navy's HMCS Nanaimo, named for a flower-class corvette that served with the great distinction throughout the Second World War.

A warship using a signaling cannon for the racing sequence sounds is both appropriate and necessary, since seeing race pennants raised and lowered from a field of nearly 200 yachts, at least one of them well over a 100 feet long, is a daunting challenge.

We all were off and running on schedule in a 10 to 15 knot breeze that, predictably, built into the 20+ knot range as we approached the ever-treacherous Race Passage.

### **Race Passage**

That place has a curse on it. It is a small channel between a solid rock island and a solid rock shore. There is no such thing as a soft grounding in Race Passage. Anything you hit sinks you. Just as we entered the hole, the clevis attaching our main sheet to the boat broke, sending the main sail flying out of control. Imagine that. A \$12 piece of hardware that has been on the boat maybe 15 years picks that exact spot at that exact moment to kill us.

Fortunately, one of our crew, Pete "Casey Jones" Cozzi, regional manager for Amtrak and former train engineer, a true McGyver, dashes below deck, rummages through parts bins, and magically returns with replacement parts.

Meanwhile, our two newest crew members, Jim and Kate, are sweating profusely in their brand new foulies as they wrestle with the thrashing main sheet. It gets repaired and we punch through Race Passage.

“We’re too hot!” say Jim and Kate, scurrying below to remove layers of clothing after all of their exertions. Soon they are back on deck. A short time later, they are cold again. Back below they scuttle, once more layering up in order to face the 15 to 20 knot winds in relative comfort.

By then, we have transitioned from the Eastern Strait microclimate to the microclimate of the Central Strait. It is almost always windier just outside Victoria than in the Central Strait, and that day followed the rule. Pretty much all of the boats short tacked up the Canadian shore to stay out of the current, but not us. The idea of playing bumper boats with some 200 yachts as we throw in about 500 tacks to work our way up to Neah Bay is distinctly unappealing. We take our chances with the incoming current and go straight up the middle.

Day turns to evening turns to night. Most of the other racers slowly but steadily pass us by. The only thing we have going is that we are somewhat closer to the turning mark, a Royal Canadian Navy vessel anchored just outside of Neah Bay on the Washington coast. We round it in light air in the wee hours of Sunday morning, behind about three quarters of the other racers, and head back for Race Passage. We now are in the third microclimate, the entrance area to the strait, and the wind is light. Once again, everybody heads for shore, this time equally splitting the fleet between Washington and Canada.

Except us. Miraculously, we find our own little panel of wind blowing straight toward Race Passage. On the black water, it looks only about as wide as a four lane highway, but we are the lucky ones who find it. Once again, we are facing adverse current, but this time it is Wy’East doing the passing. As the darkness turns to the dull grey of dawn, we slowly but steadily pass one yacht after another on our own magical conveyor belt which is ferrying us exactly where we want to go. This works fine until we reach...

## **The Hole**

A vast area of absolutely no wind had formed about 4 miles from Race Passage, reaching from shore to shore. In this vast hole, no one moved, not a single boat. How does the old poem go? “...as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean?” Hundreds of pairs of eyes helplessly watched the sun rise brightly in the eastern sky as we all sat. As the day progressed, the radio became increasingly active as one yacht after another dropped out of the race. Truly, there is little more frustrating than being 80+ percent of the way to the finish of this magnificent event, only to have to quit with a mere 10 to 15 miles to go. About 60 yachts reluctantly called it quits.

It is not exactly accurate to say that we were not moving. Since we once again failed to heed the advice to hug the shore and stay out of the current, we had been moving slowly backwards, while the shore-bound yachts appeared to be standing still.

### **The Force**

We eventually stopped at slack tide. Then, a most amazing thing happened. The incoming current caught us first. The Force was with us once again, we were on our own private conveyor belt which was sucking us through Race Passage. Once again, we were proof positive of the truth in the old saying, "I'd rather be lucky than smart." The current carried us out of the hole, through Race Passage, and into the wind blowing in the east entrance microclimate.

### **The Finish**

We had wind but not much. Anyone who has sailed Swiftsure knows that, once through Race Passage, it is tempting to head straight for Victoria, but one must sail the great circle route to avoid the ever present windless area northeast of Race Rock. Our spirits dropped with the wind speed as we pondered the possibility of being becalmed yet again, only this time within sight of Ogden Point and the Swiftsure finish line. Our helmsman, Oz, decided on a sail change. We threw up "Black Death," our giant all black spinnaker. This is a very nervous flying sail, made of a light and strong material that has absolutely no stretch. Trim it for an hour and your arms will feel like you spent a day at the gym. In these light conditions, it worked like a charm. I was so intent on watching the finish line grow larger and larger that I failed to notice that Black Death was being trimmed expertly by our two newest crew, Jim and Kate.

It would have been nice to come in first in division; we didn't. We came in second behind Mata Hari, a Catalina 36 from the Sloop Yacht Club in Seattle. Out of a dozen-odd boats in division, there was no third place; they all had dropped out.

Looking at the other Portland boats that finished, von Burner's Shamrock finished 5<sup>th</sup> in his race, while Kevin Flanigan's Ocelot finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in Cape Flattery Unlimited (IRC). Tom Kelly's Anam Cara won Line Honors among the Light Class boats in the Cape Flattery Race, 1<sup>st</sup> overall among the 54 Light and Heavy Class boats, 1<sup>st</sup> in division, and 1<sup>st</sup> in the Heavy Class, and 1<sup>st</sup> in Division 1 of the Light Class.

Doug Schenk's J/105, Free Bowl of Soup, and Tom Keffer's Velocity both miraculously made it through the Great Hole and finished. Scott Campbell's J/46, Riva won Line Honors among the Heavy Class boats, 1<sup>st</sup> in Division 1 of the Heavy Class,, and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Heavy Class of 31 boats in the Cape Flattery Race.

### **And Home We Go**

It was great for Wy'East to finish in the money, actually great to finish at all—and there is no prize money! We spent only about 90 minutes in Victoria before shoving off for Portland. This proved to be a great move. The light wind conditions from Victoria to Race Rock and the Great Hole beyond it, made for smooth motoring down the strait. The trip was made even better by the sight of a procession of yachts, some from the Lightship Classic race, which finally caught the light but steady wind and were finishing in the dark.

By Tuesday morning, we were back at sea, looking forward to another bright and sunny day. Then, it suddenly got way better. A west northwest wind of 10 to 15 knots picked up early in the morning and blew all day long. We trimmed the sails for a broad reach, set the boat on auto pilot, and shot straight down the Washington coast. With Wy'East sailing herself, Casey Jones and I spent all day enjoying the rugged scenery with absolutely nothing else to do. That wind carried us all the way to the Columbia River, where it built to 20 knots, enabling us to jibe and sail all the way to Astoria on the tail end of a flood tide.

Like the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Oregon Bar has 3 microclimates, the Entrance, Mid-Bar, and Astoria Area. Having crossed that bar hundreds of times, I can count on the fingers of one hand how often a following wind has stayed strong and blown in the same direction in all three areas. On that day it did.

All in all, Offshore-Swiftsure was a great series of events for Wy'East; first in class in Offshore, second in division for Swiftsure, and a Cadillac trip home. As we sailed through the Vancouver Railroad Bridge, I realized that the only negative part of the series of events was rapidly approaching-- its end. A day earlier, as we were approaching Buoy 2 and about to turn left and head for Astoria, we all shared a strong desire to simply keep going south and turn this brief spring vacation into an endless sailing summer.

Maybe some day...