

A History of the Scotch Bonnet Light Race

Compiled by Tony Gambacurta, SBLR Chair 2006, 2007.

Note: Blocks of bold text are intended to be sidebars.

Introduction

The Scotch Bonnet Light Race is among the oldest and longest invitational regattas on Lake Ontario. For the better part of 4 decades, the SBLR has been one of the most engaging sailboat racing traditions on Lake Ontario.

Each year in June, around the time of the Summer Solstice, an intrepid group of sailors embark from the Port of Rochester on a race across Lake Ontario. They make passage across an offshore expanse of clear water and into sight of Canadian shores. These hearty sailors then turn, rounding the legendary lighthouse on Scotch Bonnet Island at the north central shore of the lake - and return to Rochester non-stop. They experience challenges and rewards. The challenges of getting a team together, preparing the boat and equipment, of facing the elements, of dealing with navigation, time and distance. The challenges of a competitive race. They also share the rewards: knowing they can and have met the challenges, being part of a team with a common goal, and sailing offshore, over deep water, in one of the most beautiful fresh water lakes in the world.

The GYC also provides friendly, fun and delicious social events, including a Sunday combined Father's Day and Scotch Bonnet Awards picnic. Each year's event also brings custom regalia for participants as well as Flags and Trophies for the winners.

Sea conditions for the race

Mid-June often sees a transition from spring to summer lake conditions, resulting in quite a variety of weather, even in a single race! As we sail into the sunset on our first leg to Wautoma shoals, the weather can vary from a nice reach with a warm southerly breeze on our beam, to a cold, wet bashing into a stiff northwesterly that can result in sharp 4 to 6 ft wave conditions when the wind blows at 25 to 30 knots along the shore.

Lake crossings are an exciting experience. The night crossing brings air temperatures that match lake surface temperatures. A humid 40-degree temperature challenges sailors' ability to stay comfortable. Good foul weather gear and proper use of layering are tested in these conditions. If too many layers are added, sweat in your clothing can bring on the shivers. We also have years where sailors can race start to finish in shorts and t-shirts.

Not only do temperature and sea state vary a lot, so do the sights, seen some years in pea soup fog or in overcast skies and no moon, when it is so black there is nothing to see beyond the rails of the boat. Some years, all one sees is the navigation lights of the competing boats. Sometimes the star viewing is an astronomer's dream, with the Milky Way painted across the sky and more shooting stars than you can count. Sometimes we see the Scotch Bonnet Light in all of its decaying glory, and other times, it is only a partial gray-on-gray silhouette.

Every year the mystery of what each race will bring draws many of us back to experience the challenges and rewards that are the Scotch Bonnet Light Race.

The Island and The Light

Scotch Bonnet Island is a low-lying two-acre outcropping of limestone, that lies about a mile south of Nicholson Island, which itself lies less than a mile southwest of the mainland of Canada's Prince Edward County.

Erected in the early 1850's, the Scotch Bonnet Light' was first illuminated atop its 54 foot high stone tower in 1856. Originally an oil burner, the light was converted to acetylene in 1907, and finally extinguished forever in 1959. Today, a flashing white light atop a 72-foot metal skeleton tower stands nearby.

The crumbling ruins of original tower still stand today, but little remains of the attached keeper's house.

Scotch Bonnet Island supports one of the largest cormorant nesting colonies on Lake Ontario. Herring gulls, greater black-backed gulls, and black crowned night herons also nest on the island. They are believed to favor hatching their eggs by the radiated heat of the sun-baked rocks. To protect the nesting birds, public access to the island is prohibited between March 15 and July 31.

The 1970s

From Peter O. Allen Sr., Event Founder...

I thought long distance racing made some sense, as we were sailing boats with galleys, heads and berths. There just weren't many choices in destinations for such races. Sailing along the shore to Sodus Bay or Oak Orchard didn't seem to be all that much of a navigational challenge.

There were no buoys out in the lake to which one could race. The nearest object that one could sail around and then return to Rochester seemed to be Scotch Bonnet Island, off the Canadian shore. Why not go there?

[At a time before Loran or GPS] Few of us even had dedicated chart tables back then. The largest boats racing in the club in those days were in the 25' to 27' range. So, as a test of navigation skills, as well we all those other skills involved in sailboat racing, the Scotch Bonnet Race was born in 1972.

The original course was direct to the island and back. The first race started early Saturday morning. With such small, slow boats this would clearly be an overnight race. I think we might have had five boats. The following year we might have had six boats, again starting on Saturday morning.

By 1975 Kenny Gjersoe took on the management of the Scotch Bonnet Race, and it became an annual invitational event.

The first race was won by past commodore Warren Miller. His boat, *New Issue*, was a Cal 25 and the crew included Miller, John Blonowicz, Joe Verdone, and Gerry Rossner. Other

contestants in that first race included Peter Allen, in *No Quorum*, a 24-foot Shark, Ed Elliston, in *Mako*, another Shark, and Tom Koltis in a Morgan 28 called *Xanadu*.

Bob MacIntyre started racing the Scotch Bonnet as crew aboard Milt Sales' *Hustler* in 1975, '76, and '77. Then, in 1978, he started racing his own boat, *Double Shot* (the first), a Cal 27T2. According to Barbara MacIntyre, who was aboard in 1978, the lighthouse was structurally intact in those days, but the light was not functional. She has vivid memories of the cormorants on the island, which were as numerous then as they are now.

The notice of the "1977 GYC Scotch Bonnet Invitational Race" stated that there would be "more fleets: IOR I, IOR II, LOR I, LOR II, MORC, with no fleet larger than 15 boats." The race was started on June 17 at 1930 with a 36-hour time limit. An "Early Finishers" Celebration Party was planned on Saturday, June 18 at 2000 hours. On Sunday, the awards were presented after a breakfast-brunch served from 0930 to 1230. The General Chairman was Earl Cliffler, Jr. Ernest Persi was Safety and Communications Officer. Jerry Rossner was in charge of Photographic Coverage and Photo Awards, and Peter O. Allen was Special Awards Chairman.

From Burt Ringelstein

During a SBLR in the Seventies, Ward Smith, my good friend and GYC sponsor, and Art Wachs were double handing. Ward was on the tiller and Art was below with a Heathkit AM Radio Direction Finder, which was the latest in electronic navigation before Loran or GPS. It was a bread-box size device with a turnable antenna on top and was tuned to a local radio station. As Art tuned and tuned, suddenly the Mormon Tabernacle Choir was heard loud and clear and Art immediately shouted to the helmsman "SALT LAKE CITY A-BEAM!"

The 1980s

During the 1980s, the event attracted a large contingent from RYC and other clubs on Lake Ontario. Participation in the race grew to over 100 boats, the greatest in its history. The reputation of the SBLR around the lake was elevated as a result of some significant changes which took place as the event evolved.

One significant change was the use of the LOR (Lake Ontario Rule) and IOR (International Offshore Rule) handicap rules to score the race. Both methods employed measurement rules, which predate the PHRF performance rules popular today.

For a number of years, Myron Archer chaired the committee. He started awarding the placement flags and silver bowls, which racers have looked forward to receiving all these years. He initiated several sponsored trophies. Rick Hibbs said "The first year he had that awards table set up on the lawn, the sight of all that silver on a sunny afternoon was breath taking!"

Myron called upon the RARA (Rochester Amateur Radio Association) to provide ham radio communication with a committee boat stationed at Scotch Bonnet Island. He also began notification of Seaway Sodus in order to inform shipping traffic about the race. Prior to those notifications, there had been a few near-misses between SBLR boats and freighters. Myron's efforts helped put the GYC on the path to a history of safe long distance racing.

Past Commodore Earl Cliffler was instrumental in the use of time-on-time handicap corrections, and the introduction of that system to the SBLR was another landmark in the SBLR history and a source of pride for the club.

From Bob Elliot

The 1980 race which was the only one postponed from a Friday evening to a Saturday morning start because of a really nasty storm. Lillian Roemer was in charge of the stake boat at Scotch Bonnet Island and she left long before the storm arrived. There were some communications problems and she didn't learn that the start was postponed. She and her crew stayed at their station all through the storm that night.

This item appeared in the July, 1984 issue of Haarstick Sailmakers LOFT LINES newsletter: "The 80 mile Scotch Bonnet across Lake Ontario was another Haarstick success story. *Foxfire, Dr. Jekyll, Desperado, Hooligan, Venture, and Azrael* all won their respective divisions. A clean sweep! *Kewero, White Pepper, Good Times, No End, Newave, Kaleidoscope, and Yellow Fever* all placed.

The July, 1985 issue of the Haarstick newsletter reported that their customers won 7 out of 8 divisions in the 1985 Scotch Bonnet Race: Cliff Sertl's *No End*, Harry Voss' *Kiki*, Bob Brorein's *Good Times*, Fred Muhleman's *Rigel*, Jim Hill's *Venture*, Ed Fischer's *Cherokee*, and Ernie Coleman's *Desire*.

By 1986, 99 boats finished the race. The best elapsed time for a monohull boat, 12:04:36, was posted by Tim Kinsella's Olson 40, *Polestar*. Ray Howe's tri-hull, *Volena*, completed the race in 9:35:33.

101 boats entered the race in 1987, but 38 did not finish, while four others withdrew before the start. The best elapsed time for a monohull boat, 16:07:54 was scored by an Express 37, *First Class*. The best corrected time, 17:18:46, was posted by Steve Corona's Freedom 25, *Azrael*. The best multi-hull time was 15:17:41 turned in by Bob Howe's trimaran *Nueva*.

Of the 94 entrants in the 1988 race, 14 did not finish. Division winners included James MacArthur in the J/33, *Highlander*.

1989 saw 97 entrants representing thirteen different sailing clubs from all over the lake. They included a 10-boat fleet of C&C 35 MKIII's. Cliff Sertl took monohull line honors in the J/35 *Das Blau Max* with an elapsed time of 16:10:24, finishing only 6 seconds ahead of John Odenbach's C&C 37R *Rampage*. Other division winners included Ed Burns in the Hunter 40 *Farfelue*; Harry Voss in the Pearson 36 *KiKi*; David Hill in the J/30 *Innisfree*; Bob Fields in the Express 30 *Vitesse*; Michael Dwyer in the Tartan 30 *Hooligan*; Tom Foley in the Pearson 30 *Summer Snow*; Tim Donovan in the Pearson 26 *Silvercloud*; Bob Brinkman in the Merlyn 36 *Magician*; Don Wulf in the Chrysler 26 *Panarella*; and Todd Weber in the multihull *Northern Cross*. A short course for J/24's was won by Reid Stava in *Bateau Blanc*.

From Bob Blakley ...

There was that awful night in the '80's when after turning the mark at Wautoma Shoals it looked like the end of the world ahead of us save for the lightning! Forging on across the lake, a strange buzzing was heard, sounding like many bees. But no bees, rather looking up the mast we saw a strange arcing electrical discharge making the bee

noise. It was like in a Frankenstein movie. The top 3 feet of the mast were engulfed in this corona. I felt the hair standing up on my arm and then the next thought was "we are going to get hit by lightning I'll bet". I guess it was futile to crouch down in the cockpit, but after a few minutes the corona passed and didn't return. Luckily no lightning either.

From Darbbie Thomas...

I remember the start of the 1986 race on June 12th. The weather was ominous at the start, and it just got worse as time went on. I was aboard Wave Runner out of SBYC, and I recall the captain telling the crew not to touch the standing rigging because of the lightening all around us. Though we weren't struck by lightening, we did get to see St. Elmo's Fire in the rigging. One RYC boat was struck, and all of its electronics were fried. We never did find the Wautoma Shoals turning boat.

The 1990s

1993: According to Jack Kreckman, skipper of the O'day 28 Knot Home, "A light air start took us to mid-lake around midnight. It was cold and damp, with intermittent rain, but the wind improved somewhat in the middle of the lake. The most memorable part of the race was the end, which for us was around 1400 hrs on Saturday. There was no wind to speak of and the fog was so thick we could hear the foghorn on the pier for over an hour before we saw the pier. In fact we could hear voices on the pier for half an hour before we passed it."

1994: As reported by Bob Elliott, skipper of the C&C 35 *Bedlam*, "We started in very light air and tried to pick up a sea breeze by going close to the shore, to no avail. In fact, it was 0315 Saturday morning before we rounded the Wautoma Shoals buoy. Once we passed the first mark, however, the wind picked up and we reached across the lake nicely under spinnaker. At mid-lake the temperature was in the thirties and the mist felt like little ice daggers hitting our faces. At 0920, we rounded the island in hazy sunshine, reaching back to Rochester by 1545 Saturday afternoon." *Earth Voyager* finished at 0946, the last boat crossed the finish line at 1904 Saturday evening.

1995: Another light air start tested the collective patience of the fleet. However, for what it lacked in intensity, it made up with consistency, and boats slowly but steadily moved across the lake. The overnight temperatures were not nearly as cool as most years, and the breeze picked up to 5-6 knots by midnight. According to Robert Polhemus, skipper of the Pearson *Vanguard Siesta*. "The wind continued to build to 9-10 knots, and we rounded the lighthouse at 0715 the following morning in 12 knots of breeze. The trip back to Rochester was so foggy that we frequently could see only the top one-third of the sails of nearby boats. By 1300 we were within the bight of the Rochester embayment, about nine miles from the finish line. Then the wind completely disappeared, and we bobbed within sight of the harbor for the next 8-1/2 hours." Even *Earth Voyager* needed 13-1/2 hours to finish, while *Das Blau Max*, the first monohull to finish, took just over 19 hours. The last boat to finish, *Wanderer*, a Pearson 28, crossed the line at around 0100 on Sunday, 29 hours after the start of the race.

1996: We started with more wind than usual, making excellent time in a building breeze. We close reached to the island by 0300 Saturday. Although it was typically cold at mid-lake, it remained dry and things warmed up nicely by breakfast time. With winds ranging from 10 to 20 knots for most of the race, the bulk of the fleet was home by 1000 on Saturday morning,

while Whitey LeBlanc, finishing at 1235 aboard the Catalina 28 *Marimba*, set a new record for the fastest time by the last boat to finish. The trimaran *Cakewalk* finished at 0534, and the first monohull, *Das Blau Max*, finished at 0727.

1997: A down year for the Scotch Bonnet Light Race, the date was changed twice, first to avoid conflicting with the Sodus Bay Challenge Cup, then back to the original date to avoid the prospect of finishing during the Harborfest Fireworks show. We also experimented with the format of starting the race on Saturday morning rather than the traditional Friday evening. The result: only 33 boats entered the race. However, even worse, only 4 boats finished. The race course was pockmarked with numerous holes, so that few succeeded in moving consistently for more than an hour or two at a time. By 0200 Sunday, most of the fleet still hadn't rounded the island, 19 hours after starting. Faced with a 1000 Sunday time limit, it took only a little simple arithmetic for the skippers to conclude they had no chance to finish on time, and one by one, they called in their DNFs and started their motors. Even *Earth Voyager* averaged only 5 knots, finishing in 14-1/2 hours. The three monohulls that finished within the time limit, *Contender*, *Foxfire*, and *Sea++Major*, finished between 0815 and 0906 Sunday morning, while Bill Golden's *Cardinal* crossed the finish line only a few minutes after the time limit.

1998: Another light air year for the race, the average speeds ranged from 5.2 knots to 3.2 knots. Most of the fleet finished late in the afternoon or evening on Saturday. Spinnaker division winners included Tim Kinsella's *Polestar*, Bob Fields' *Vitesse*, and Bob Porter's *Harrier*. Non-spinnaker winners were Bob Polhemus' *Siesta*, John Nicholson's *Chenonceau*, and Kermit Sleggs' *Ariadne*. The multihull winner was Paul Abendroth whose Corsair F-27 trimaran also took the prize for the farthest travelled boat, coming from Yellow Springs, Ohio (near Dayton).

1999: Among the more peculiar Scotch Bonnet races, the 1999 event was characterized by a number of large windless areas interspersed with substantial areas of 10-15 knot breezes. The trick was to be in the right place at the right time. In only one division was the differential between the first and last finishing boats less than two hours. Division One was typical with the first boat finishing in 13 hours vs 20 hours for the last boat in the division. Even though fourteen boats did not finish, 21 stubbornly inched out of the lulls to finish within the time limit, some even posting surprisingly good elapsed times. The Olson 40, *Rambunctious*, for instance, finished in just over 13 hours to lead all monohulls.

The 2000s

Scotch Bonnet 2000 was blessed with some of the best weather ever enjoyed during the event, even though it faced one of the worst forecasts. With predictions of thunderstorms issued even on the day of the race, 43 boats showed up to be treated to consistent 8-18 knot breezes from start to finish. The spinnaker fleet started with a 1-mile weatherly leg toward Crescent Beach where all 24 spinnakers were set on a broad reach. Almost the entire fleet passed the mark boat at the island between 0100 and 0300. In fact, 26 boats rounded the island between 0149 and 0249. The year 2000 was also a record setting year. Gene Angelidis' *Nobody's Business*, a Nelson Marek 43, set a new monohull mark of 09:33:48 for the 79 NM course, while Dave Poulin's *Rambunctious*, an Olson 40 established the record for best corrected time of 12:00:26. Ray Howe and *Earth Voyager*, meanwhile set a new multihull record of 07:05:00. That year also saw a new record of 12:11:58 for best elapsed time for a monohull of 30 feet or less when John Rodgers' *Mad Cow* beat Bob Porter's *Harrier*

by only 11 minutes as both boats sprinted across the finish line close reaching under spinnaker. Finally, Leonard Redon's *Passages*, a J/42, posted the best elapsed time for a non-spinnaker boat, finishing the race in 11:50:47, while Jim Ely and his J/35C, *Moonrise*, set the record of 12:47:09 for best corrected time for a non-spinnaker boat.

2001: Bob Porter, a regular SBLR racer from Oswego Yacht Club was once again denied a division win as *Flicker* beat *Harrier* on corrected time. *Blue Knight*, *Polestar*, *Aria*, *Real Time*, *Tantrum*, *Ariadne* were also division winners. *Earth Voyager* won the multihull division. Trophy winners: *Blue Knight* won the Allen Trophy, *Aria* won the Founder's Cup, *Laughing Dragon* won the Giambra Cup, and, *Ariadne* won the Stewart Trophy.

2002: Sailing conditions were overcast, occasional rain, winds from the E clocking to S at 10-20 knots. Division winners were: *Das Blau Max*, *Moonrise*, *Mad Cow*, *Flicker*, *Tantrum*, *Fair Lady* and *Sundance*. *Moonrise* won the Allen Trophy, *Mad Cow* won the Founders Trophy, *Rambunctious* won the Giambra Trophy, *Tantrum* won the Stewart Trophy.

2003: Boatpix showed up for the start and took pictures of the boats from a helicopter. Boats finished with elapsed times of only 12 to 17 hours. Division winners were *Shades of Grey*, *Blue Knight*, *Destiny*, *Flicker*, *Paradox*, *Chutzpah* and *Dolcinea*. *Mad Cow* (J-30, John Rodgers) won the Founders Trophy for the 5th time in 6 years. *Blue Knight* (J-35c, Peter Pape and Hank Stuart) won the Allen Trophy for the 2nd time. *Shades of Grey* won the Giambra Trophy and *Paradox* won the Stewart Trophy.

2004: Another fast race year with *Acadia* (Beneteau 40.7, Rick Shaheen) finishing in under 12 hours and the slowest boat in only 15 hours. In a continuing rivalry between them, *Celtic Fire* beat *Flicker* to win their division. Other division winners were *Blue Knight*, *Hiawatha*, *Aria*, *Passages*, *Voyageur* and *Flight Simulator*. *Earth Voyager* raced in a single boat division and finished in 5 hours and 15 minutes! *Uprising* won the Founders Cup. *Hiawatha* (Catalina 38, Bob Porter, OYC) won the Allen Trophy, *Acadia* won the Giambra Trophy, and *Voyageur* won the Stewart Trophy.

2005 brought a heavy air start and all the way to Watoma. Winds died as boats neared the Island. The winds eventually filled in and boats reported a wonderful ride home. For most boats, it was a long race. Division winners were *Silver Bullet*, *Jibe Talkin*, *Allegro*, *Celtic Fire*, *Moondance*, *Knot Bad*, and, *Dolcinea*. *Discovery II* (Olson 30, Dave Overy) won the Founder's Cup. *Silver Bullet* (Beneteau 40.7, Kiki Voss) won the Allen Trophy and the Giambra Trophy! *Knot Bad* won the Stewart Trophy, the only GO boat to finish the race.

2006: At the Awards Tony Gambacurta said "This year's race had exceptional sailing. I could not have asked for better weather. Although I did predict something like this". Division winners were *Eole*, *Passages*, *Moondance*, *Flicker*, *Hiawatha*, *Silver Bullet*, and *Flight Simulator*. *Flicker* won the Founder's Trophy and the Allen Trophy! *Rampage* (Concordia/Farr 47, John Odenbach and Susie Robbins) won the Giambra Trophy. This year was the inauguration of the Genesee Rochester Trophy and it was won by *Allegro* (C&C 35, Jim Hill).

2007: Light air at the start, wind picked up after Watoma. After rounding the island there was plenty of wind (and rain) to get boats home. *Flicker* (Pearson 30, Bill Thompson) won the Founder's Cup and Allen Trophy for the second year in a row. *Flicker* started the SBLR for

the 22nd consecutive time. Other division winners were *Sarabande*, *Aloha*, *Moonrise*, and, *Hiawatha*. *Petrel* (Islander 26, Wilkinson) won the new single handed division. *Desire* (Columbia 26, Ernie Coleman) won the Genesee Rochester Trophy. *Mullet* (Beneteau 40.7, Chad Henry & Chris Werner) won the Giambra Trophy and *Moonrise* won the Stewart Trophy.

2008: A very powerful thunderstorm ripped through the fleet shortly after the start. Boats recorded gusts in excess of 50 knots. "The rain really stung when it hit your face, so much lighting at times, it was as though the sun was back out." reported one crew. 13 of the 36 boat fleet dropped out. Although the temperatures were not at their coldest, around 50 F offshore, it was a rainy foggy wet event. Division winners were *First Today*, *Hiawatha*, *Petrel*, *Blue Skies*, *No Agenda*, and, *About Time*. *Hiawatha* won the Allen Trophy, *First Today* won the Founder's Cup. *Mullet* won the Giambra Trophy for the 2nd year in a row. *No Agenda* won the Stewart Trophy. *Allegro* won the Genesee Rochester Trophy for the 2nd time. This year was the inauguration of the Warren Miller "New Issue" Trophy for first time SBLR racers. It was won by *Orr What* (Jim Orr, RYC).

To Be continued...

Acknowledgements

Although I had the fun of editing this, I copied heavily from Bob Elliot's work. Thanks also to Peter Allen, Rick Hibbs, Bob Blakely, John Meagher, and Darbbie Thomas.

From SBLR Founder Peter Allen...

Thanks to the many people who have championed the event and provided many hours of volunteer time to its care and feeding over the intervening years. Who would have thought?