

RYC perspective on the Scotch Bonnet Light Race.

From Rochester Yacht Clubs "Rounding the Millennium Mark with 123 Years of Excellence: 1877 – 2000" Reprinted with permission

SCOTCH BONNET FEVER

Our river neighbors to the south, the Genesee Yacht Club, have provided a classic racing event since 1973.

The race is always scheduled for the longest day light Friday of the year to aid in the eyeball navigation on the Canadian shore. Before the Loran C day's navigation was the real secret of winning.

Knowing that the Trenton (Canada) Air Force Base Radio Beacon was 206 MHz and was in a direct line with the old Braddock Point mark and the Scotch Bonnet Island was priceless. It was also helpful to know that Scotch Bonnet Shoal was also in line and the navigator could watch the soundings rise to 25 feet and then drop off again a few miles south of the turn. In the fog the best close-in navigation tool proved to be nasal acuity - the gull deposits in the rocky little island are distinct.

With Loran and GPS the navigator's place in the crew hierarchy fell considerably. The races are now won at night. The crews that can stay alert and trim efficiently hour after boring hour will have the best shot. But, like all distance races, if you get too far in a corner there's a good chance you will have squandered the best of sail trim.

The lake hadn't had much of a chance to warm up by June so memories of cold wet crossings are frozen in sailors' minds. The same conditions give rise to morning fog, which makes crossing the shipping lanes twice very exciting. Stories abound of the crew hearing the "churning-chugging" of a lake freighter and the gentle rise and fall crossing its wake and never laying eyes on the giant. Another cold-water phenomenon seldom experienced elsewhere is the nighttime breeze that never disturbs the heavy cold stagnant air at the water surface. As a result the competing yachts can be spinnaker reaching along in the middle of the night at six or seven knots and the crew can look over the side and see their undisturbed moon lit reflections in the water.

In 1987, one of the larger Scotch Bonnet fleets (85 or so yachts) met with the most extravagant electrical storms nature ever worked up for Lake Ontario. Hours of brilliant cloud to water strikes destroyed night vision and VHF radios. Most every crew came home with tales of St. Elmo's fire, hot shrouds, or some other extraordinary event. But all boats returned safely with no serious hull or rigging damage.

The SBLR skippers' meeting is always charged with excitement waiting to see which ill-informed competitor will ask "is the light on?" It is safe to say that the Scotch Bonnet Light Race is the single largest generator of sailing "bar tales" on the south shore of Lake Ontario.

Text from "Rochester Yacht Club 1877-2000" pp107-108