

Contender

2009 Port Huron to Mackinac Race Report

212 boats competed in the 2009 Bayview Yacht Club/Pure Michigan Port Huron to Mackinac yacht race. Our class consisted of twelve C&C 35's. The boats all came out of the same mold over 35 years ago, but they have aged relatively well, and the class is still going strong. After last year's record times, the owners voted to take the longer course of almost 300 miles around a small buoy set near Cove Island.



Contender's Captain and Crew Departing Port Huron

Contender is owned and skippered by Gary Graham. Gary has done more than 25 Mackinac races and thereby earned the title of "Old Goat." He pushes Contender hard all summer and then moves to St. Petersburg, Florida to crew on a J120 throughout the winter. I (Rich Odendahl) was sailing in my 23rd race and would be Tactician and Helmsman. Kevin Rossell kept very busy dividing his time between responsibilities as Foredeck, Helmsman and Chief Information Officer. Barb Stapleton did an excellent job trimming spinnakers and headsails for hours on end in positions that would make a landlubber's neck sore in ten minutes. Duncan Mein kept the mainsail working to its maximum. Barb's husband Steve did the grinding and some trimming as well. Dave Duarte is the

best hot-boxer in the fleet and kept our halyards running smoothly and incredibly well-organized. David Keys was our last-minute addition when the boat that he normally sails did not enter. David did an admirable job sharing the foredeck responsibilities with Kevin.



C&C 35's Start the 2004 Race on a Sunnier Day; Contender is in Foreground

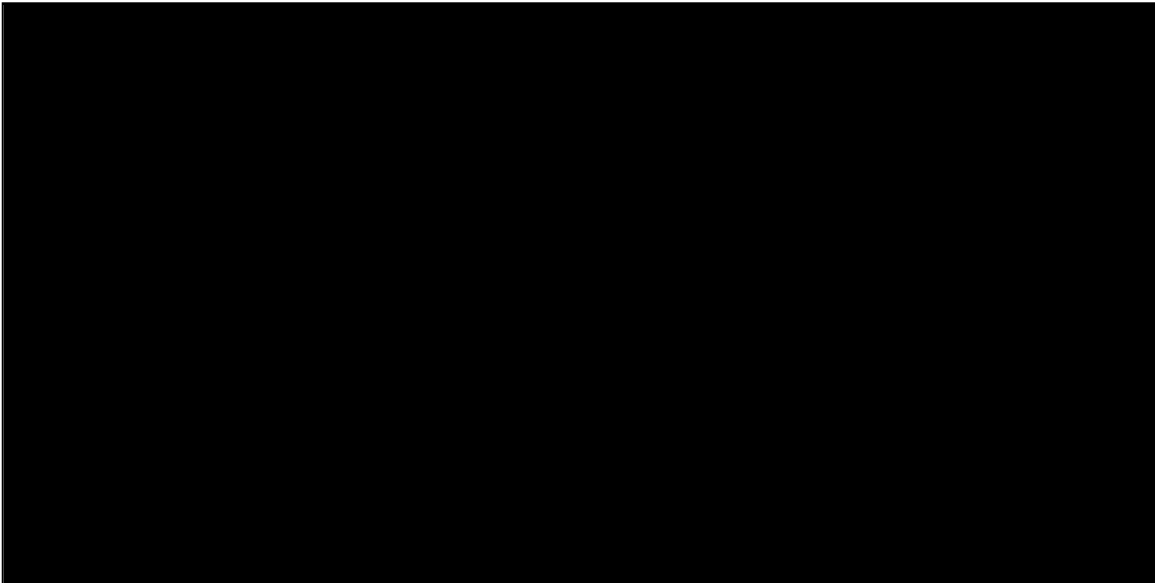
“Boat Night” is the biggest celebration of the year in Port Huron. All of the crew survived the pre-race party without too much damage. I had previously raced on a boat where one crew member had not shown up at departure time. We needed to leave in order to make it to the start on time. We offloaded his gear and left without him. We later learned that he had been jailed for drunk and disorderly. His bail did not arrive in time.

As the smallest boats on the longer course, we were the first start scheduled for 11:30 Saturday morning. The course was dead downwind. Gary and I developed a plan to start near the left end of the line on starboard tack where we would enjoy the right-of-way, then quickly gybe onto port as we were anticipating better wind on the left side of the course. This worked fabulously and we soon found ourselves leading the tightly packed fleet toward the buoy set in the far northeast corner of Lake Huron. Saturday was spent cruising along under spinnakers and dodging a few thunderstorms that stopped only long enough to soak everything and everybody on deck. Barb had arranged some boil-in-bag meals and we enjoyed a warm chicken and asparagus dinner. It was a wonderful change from eating pretzels, sandwiches, granola bars, pretzels, licorice and pretzels.



C&C 35 "Siochail" Dukes it out with a Freighter Shortly after the Start

Many non-sailors ask us if we stop and pull into a harbor or anchor at night. Nope. We push the boat just as hard as during the day. Many races are won and lost at night. Contender does not use a conventional watch system where two groups of four sailors alternate between sailing and rest every four hours. Instead, one crew member goes down and another comes up each hour. This worked well, and I had a chance to sail with everyone except Gary. Of course, in difficult conditions or when more complicated maneuvers are required, we reserve the right to call on the resting crew members for help.



View from the Deck at Night

Saturday night had no moon and, to make matters worse, heavy fog rolled in after midnight. Visibility was down to less than a boat length. During the worst of it, Steve was having trouble seeing the leading edge of the spinnaker even though he was wearing a headlamp. There were no stars in sight, no other boats, no waves visible, not even the horizon. Gary had hoisted the radar reflector into the rigging in case we encountered a freighter. In a previous race, I remember hearing the engines on a freighter that we never saw. Nervous times. With no visual references, I had a difficult time steering an acceptably straight course. Going downwind, each wave slapped the stern of the boat erratically. With the fog and condensation I could barely see the dancing numbers on the digital compass ten feet away. Adjusting the light and damping on the instrument helped only a little, so we decided to try the primitive approach. Kevin uncovered the seldom used analog binnacle compass and rigged an LED light. It's been many years since I raced without a digital compass, but I quickly became reacquainted with the mental gymnastics of turning the steering wheel to keep the compass card from spinning as it rocks and floats in its oil-filled globe. The dense fog made it necessary to reach through the spokes of the wheel to wipe the condensation off the compass glass every minute or two, but the centuries-old technology helped a lot. My sleepy eyes focused on the glowing orb, and my mind was soon transfixed on the exercise of steering a straight line. Eventually the fog lifted and the first rays of light appeared in the eastern sky. Gary came up on deck, and it was time to go off watch for a couple of hours of much-needed sleep.



Barb's Happy that the Fog is Starting to Lift

In the darkness of night, it's normal to lose track of competitors. When the new day dawns, out come the binoculars and we try to figure out how we did in relation to the competition. At least that's the way it used to be. For the first time this year, all of the boats carried GPS trackers that transmitted our position, speed and course to an overhead satellite. People on shore could follow the progress of the boats through the Pure Michigan website. Of course we could

also download the information when we were within range of a cell tower. Kevin spent considerable time holding his cell phone at the perfect angle and height to download the web pages that confirmed our position in the fleet.

On Sunday the wind became light and fluky. We sailed in and out of the fog and from patch to patch of wind. We were in close company with Siochail and Mystery. The lead changed several times under the highly variable conditions. I went off watch when we still an hour or two from the rounding mark. I asked to be awakened two miles out so that I could use the GPS to direct the helmsman to the buoy in the fog. Fortunately, the fog lifted as we approached and we could see boats rounding the mark a couple of miles ahead. It seemed odd though as the position of the mark was a mile northeast of the position printed in the scratch sheet sailing instructions. We figured that it must have dragged during the heavy storms earlier in the week. We later learned that there was an error in the instructions that had been printed and distributed. A correcting addendum had been put out shortly before the race that not everyone had received, including us. We rounded visually behind friends Cindy and Eric on the J120 "Night Moves", but in third place; ten minutes behind Mystery and six minutes behind Siochail. The fog rolled in again shortly after we turned to the west. At the post-race party we heard several stories of boats losing considerable time searching for the misplaced mark in the pea soup.



Dave, Steve and Gary Working Downwind

Sunday night and most of Monday were spent beating upwind into the Straits of Mackinac. Gary's watch was pounding into three-foot waves near the Duck Islands when the crew noticed that the leeward shrouds were excessively slack

and the turnbuckles were at their limit of tightness. Immediate efforts were made to figure out why. A little flexing is normal, but a rig does not normally change tune like this during a race. Weird!?! Extensive inspections revealed that the mast was slowly compressing the water-logged wooden mast step into the bilge. The boat was about an inch shorter than when we had started. The speed did not seem to be suffering, but after the race it was noted that there was a pronounced hook to starboard in the mast. Maybe this was a secret Contender “go-fast” tune? There was no way to make this repair at sea, but after our return the old wooden mast step was removed and replaced with three two-inch-thick acrylic ribs epoxied to the hull under an aluminum plate.

Structural concerns aside, we were working the wind shifts and gaining ground on the competitors. One particularly favorable shift pulled us into the lead ahead of Mystery and Siochail. We were feeling good; that is until the wind died. We stopped completely thirteen miles from the finish line. Our knot-meter read 0.00. The lack of speed and my consequent inability to steer resulted in an uncontrolled 360 degree spin. Calms are nervous times when you have a lead; especially when the boat is pointed away from the finish line. Often the wind will fill in from a far corner of the course, propelling boats from the back of the fleet to the front and right past the frustrated leaders. After a couple of hours of going nowhere, the wind arrived as the sun set for the third time on this race. We quickly accelerated and made excellent speed under the light spinnaker. But it was not to last. The wind died yet again two miles from the finish. We were parked in the middle of the course. We could see the finish line and smell the pines and the horses and the fudge, but we couldn't get to the island. In fact, the current was setting us slowly backwards. The boat tracker website showed that Tir-na-nog had found some wind and was catching up quickly along the north shore. It seemed like hours, but was probably only 15 minutes before we found a little breeze and were able to coast along at two knots under our light genoa. *Only an hour to go at this pace.*



Dave, Rich and Steve Going Slow



David and Duncan Trimming

We approached the finish line in the darkness to find a dozen boats bobbing around, sails flapping, going nowhere. As we fell into the same windless hole, I watched the knot meter start to wind down; 1.8.....1.2.....0.8.....0.5. We were only a third of a mile from the finish. Tir-na-nog was nipping at our heels off the starboard quarter. On top of that, this is a narrow passage and there is a reef just offshore that several boats have struck when the wind died and the current pulled them backward onto the rocks (including two boats earlier in the day).

I looked up and saw that the wind had backed. We could carry a spinnaker. I asked the crew how long it would take to get a chute up. This was highly irregular to ask for a sail change so close to the finish after nearly 60 hours of racing. On some boats they would have told me where to go; probably accompanied by raised middle fingers. On other boats, the spinnaker would have been useless as it had not been packed. Some skippers would have overruled me. I am proud to say that the Contender crew had the sail up and pulling in less than two minutes. The speed picked up to about one knot and we coasted across the line past several becalmed boats with flogging genoas. Tir-na-nog finished in second place; close enough behind to land a well-struck nine-iron on her deck.



Boats Rafted in the Harbor at Mackinac Island

It's been said that the Mackinac Race is a long, boring sail between two fantastic parties. The tight racing in our class and multiple lead changes made this race anything but boring. Likewise, the parties on the island did not disappoint. It was a glorious sunny day and the band set a fine tone for the festivities. The long-standing and unfair stereotype of sailors and their rum was once again proven accurate. Our competitors offered many gracious and sincere congratulations at a private gathering for the C&C class. We had the chance to reveal our winning tactics after the Bell's Brewery Babes provided the tongue-loosening libations. A loud cheer erupted when we went up on stage to accept the winning flag.



Rear Left to Right; David Keys, Kevin Rossell, Rich Odendahl, Gary Graham, Thistle the Wonderdog.
Front Left to Right; Steve Stapleton, Dave Duarte, Duncan Mein, Barb Stapleton

There was a sad postscript during the cruise home. Gandalf, one of our prime competitors and winner of the 2009 Detroit NOOD regatta, exploded, burnt and sank after refueling from a jerry can. Fortunately, there were no serious injuries and the crew was rescued by a nearby boat. Gandalf is a total loss, but we hope that it will soon be replaced and captain and crew will be out on the course again.

Sailing Quiz:

This gentleman;

- A) Is helping to trim the Mission Point Resort lawn for the post-race party,
- B) Needs to find an easier way to get fresh milk for his cornflakes, or
- C) Is enduring the hazing that precedes his induction into the "Old Goat Society."

