

2012 Lake Erie Solo Challenge

Paul Nickerson

The 6th annual Lake Erie Solo Challenge offered every possible challenge to the fleet, even getting to the starting line. With water levels running low Lake Erie was as much as 2 feet below typical levels. Add to that the barometric effect of the North Cape YC basin and the 6 foot or so levels at the entrance and the challenge was on.

The first challenge saw John Lubimir pulling off the amazing feat of sailing the Singlehanded Trans Pac race from San Francisco to Hawaii in a new to him Quest 30, *Flight Risk*. First off, congratulations to John for finishing the 2100 miles to Hawaii. A little known story was that after the finish John lead the effort in Hawaii to recover the boat of one of the sailors who had to be evacuated for medical reasons. That's the GLSS and Singlehanded spirit that makes us a little different from other sailors.

At that point John then had to get *Flight Risk* back to Lake Erie. Ship it back to California, drive it cross country to Michigan and get it rigged, no problem! *Flight Risk* was rigged and sitting near the dock at NCYC with time but no water to spare and it was time to get the rest of the fleet in. We watched as a big boat tried to leave the harbor only to get stuck in the silt at the harbor mouth and turn around. Checking our fleet draft measurements we knew the 6' draft boats could probably get in but may move the muck doing it. But Dave Evans drew 7' and we hoped he could make it.

Thursday evening *Ratso* approached the entrance and we warned Dave on the radio it would take full throttle and a little luck to make it in. Dave stuck it in the mud and all the sailors piled onto Wally McMinn's *Odyssey* to go help. By the time we got out *Ratso* was free and back out on the Lake so we tried the next harbor north. Not enough water there either.

There was talk about anchoring the boat out but Dave would have none of that. He was determined to sail it in and with a little help from John Lubimir and myself, we got the mainsail up and with the mainsheet in hard on a beam reach with 15 knots of breeze, about 40 degrees of heel and full throttle we were at some bar for dinner and last call by 2300.

Friday we watched as the water levels went up and down a foot and Saturday morning they were back to a lower level.



Chip McCullough and his race committee borrowed a trawler and North Cape members came out with their dinghy to get Dave Evans and John Lubimir out into Lake Erie for the Challenge.



A couple of people standing on the boom and hanging from the shrouds helped do the trick with only a 5 minute delay for the start.

With a little bit of wind on the nose it was a light air beat to start. The winds got very patchy as boats split in all directions just trying to keep moving.





The bulk of the fleet sat together trying to get over the Southeast Shoal during the night. A Canadian breeze filled in during the morning and the boats that could stay in it worked their way down the lake while others struggled and found themselves heading for Cleveland.

Monday morning the fleet sat in a stationary cold trough which triggered a couple of waterspouts for viewing.



Behind the fleet a rather large cell formed on Lake Erie and dumped a lot of rain on Cleveland but nothing on the fleet. It was a struggle for every mile and some boats counted more 360s than miles. Few boats covered 100 miles in the first 48 hours and little wind was forecast for the week. By late Monday afternoon about half the fleet was motoring towards Erie.

Monday evening the winds filled in to reefing strength for a while getting the sailing fleet past Erie but the breeze was short lived. There was no offshore breeze to speak of and the goal was still just to keep the boats moving. Sitting at the Erie Yacht Club I was amused watching the tracking and trying to guess where the wind was. Evans and Lubimir enjoyed a close 2 boat duel from Erie to Buffalo and back but even with a large lead, they were not always the fastest boats.

Tom Hughes had found a hole in the middle of the Lake and struggled much of Tuesday to clear Long Point. On shore we struggled to decide if we should push the awards banquet to Thursday as it was obvious some of the boats would be in late. With 5 of the 7 boats around Buffalo we decided to push the banquet back to late afternoon.

Ratso and *Flight Risk* engaged in a tacking duel from Dunkirk to Erie and John Ollila on *Finnair* had a little better wind behind them and was seen gaining ground but nobody was going very fast. A couple of minutes after midnight *Ratso* finally crossed the finish line with *Flight Risk* a couple of miles and an hour and a half behind. Making steady progress *Finnair* crossed at 0339. Bill Tucker and Blair Arden were halfway back from Buffalo and working hard to make the Awards Banquet. Meanwhile Allan Belovarac and Tom Hughes were still working towards Buffalo in a battle of Catalina 34s.

The awards banquet was great and thanks to the Erie YC staff for their flexibility and great food. With 2 doggie boxes of leftovers in the fridge, we watched the Wednesday night EYC racers drift around Presque Isle Bay in little wind. Allan Belovarac found more breeze on Lake Erie crossing the line at 2300 while some of us were enjoying a late round in the bar. With leftover banquet and class flag in hand I awarded Allan first in the Michigan Class. Someone made a joke to me about "why the food" and I said just watch. It went down like he hadn't eaten in 48 hours with a chaser.

Now, just one more boat on the course. Tom Hughes on *Split Decision* still had 20 miles to go but looked to have some decent speed with a night breeze. After a few hours of sleep, more than Tom had, I woke up and checked the tracking to see him circling around the finish in the dark. It was just daylight and he was headed in. Erie, describes the harbor entrance at night and Tom had sailed very close to the finish without crossing the line in the dark. The sheer determination to finish after nearly 118 hours earned Tom a second in division and yes, his leftover banquet dinner for breakfast which he devoured.