

LO300 Solo Challenge 2012

By Gene Joelson

The 2012 Lake Ontario 300 Solo Challenge found six participants at the start line:

Better Still, Elite 326, David Courtney
Finito, Beneteau 46, Carl Ricciuti
JoelyRose, Catalina 36 MkI, Gene Joelson
Moonbeam, Catalina 34, Allan Belovarac
Mythos, CS Merlin 36, Ted Spanos
Why Not, Express 30, Chuck Watson

The race started under very light winds with the solo sailors in the first start. The light winds meant that before long the solo fleet was surrounded by the many other racers which made for an exciting and interesting first day. After rounding the first mark off of Toronto, the wind built nicely for the long run east to Main Duck. By sunset the wind was very strong and well positioned for an overnight spinnaker run. Ted was one of the first to use a flying sail which led to his first critical challenge. In the dark, while flying downwind, the shackle fastening his sheets to his asymmetric released - to his shock and surprise! Ted relates a good story about bringing the flying sail in and re-setting it; he says he prefers emergencies like that to happen in the dark since, "It's less scary at night – you can't see the water!".

The wind held strong around Main Duck and made for a fast approach to the Oswego mark. Some were lucky to make it around but others, like JoelyRose, were stuck within clear sight of the mark, trying to respond to every changing puff of wind to make the boat go. By sunset, the wind built again, first from the south and by morning it was on the nose, of course. Overnight was kept exciting by an amazing lightning storm with multiple lightning strikes directly on the land – quite a sight! The storm moved over the Lake bringing some rain and lightning, but the scary stuff tended to stay up in the clouds, thankfully!

The run west along the south shore became a challenge as the southwest wind built to gusts over 35 kts, forcing skippers to take the wheel in hand. Reefing sails under such conditions was challenging, requiring fast leaps from behind the wheel to the winches and back again, between wind gusts. The wind raged all afternoon with very large waves with short wavelengths. JoelyRose pounded into the wind storm for more than three hours making one wish for a proper thunderstorm rather than a wind storm – at least a thunder storm passes relatively quickly compared to that experience.

Ted was the first to round the Niagara mark for the final leg of the race and head toward another big lighting and rain storm moving west to east over Toronto. He observed constant lightning strikes hitting the ground ashore, and decided to shorten sail to let it pass ahead of him. This of course did not happen and he received the full effect while temporarily sheltering below. It didn't take long to realize that he might as well get Mythos going again because the storm would not cooperate by moving away. As Gene finally worked his way through the wind storm and was approaching Niagara he observed the storm over Toronto and thought about how Mother Nature dishes out punishment in the middle of the Lake, and then serves up another storm for desert at the finish.

Sailing the last leg in the dark was quite a challenge. Gene encountered an unexpected issue with instruments. While on a port tack he kept sailing into irons which was extremely frustrating. JoelyRose lost quite a bit of time on that last leg. Gene was reminded again that after 275 miles of single handed

sailing, one's problem solving ability can become dulled. Recognizing the symptoms of a problem and figuring out how to compensate to keep the boat moving can take much longer than it would on an afternoon sail. Eventually he realized that the wind indicator was out of balance causing him to sail the boat too close to the wind. By setting the boat heading a further 30 degrees off of the wind he was able to maintain boat speed in the rough seas.

While Allan has considerable sailing experience on Lake Erie, this was his first experience on Lake Ontario. He found the heavy winds to be a significant challenge and for many hours made little headway which dropped him behind the fleet. To his credit he persevered and completed the race when he would have found it much easier to accept a DNF.

Ted in Mythos took the Ross Seeley trophy for first place, JoelyRose was second, and Why Not was third. Chuck was awarded the GLSS President's Cup and Allan received the well-deserved Perseverance Trophy.

The race proved to be another very satisfying experience. The Solo LO300 is the ultimate "man against nature" challenge on Lake Ontario. The race highlighted again the need to prepare and prepare and prepare your boat and your mental state. Nature can throw the full range of weather at racers in the three (or so) days of the race. Equipment failure will never happen under ideal conditions of light wind and blue sky, it happens in the dark when the boat is sailing hard. Confronting and overcoming the many challenges by relying solely on one's own resourcefulness and determination to see it through is part of what makes the race so satisfying. The periods of beautiful weather where the boat is tuned to almost sail itself provides opportunity to think, to plan, and recharge one's spirit. The race makes one a better, more confident sailor, and brings one "closer" to one's boat. It enables the skipper to gain a deep understanding of how the boat responds to the weather, to changes in heading, to subtle changes in set of sail, and how changes in weather helm change the boat's speed. It inspires the skipper to try harder and to dream of improvements to boat, rigging and sails that can be completed over the winter to make next year's race even better.

The skippers who participated this year know that there are more sailors who are thinking about rising to the challenge of the Solo LO300 in 2013. We encourage you to join us at the start line!