

McKEE'S MINUTE

There's frost on deck as the crew straggles down to Seattle's Shilshole Bay Marina and piles



aboard my Riptide 44 *Dark Star*. It's barely 5 a.m. as we begin the 21-mile trip to Tacoma for the Vashon Island Race.

Joe [Bersh] goes to start the stove for coffee only to find we're out of propane. As the owner, I receive glares for my exceptionally poor preparation. Luckily, some of the crew didn't trust me to begin with and brought their own coffee, which they're coerced into sharing. Allan [Johnson] warms his breakfast on top of the diesel engine.

The morning is cold but beautiful; dawn breaks as we power south. Fog starts to form, and our helmsman, Kris [Henderson]—the one with the best gloves—has his hands full avoiding all the flotsam. By the time we arrive at Tacoma YC, visibility is 100 yards.

The race begins with a light, tricky run down Colvos Passage, conditions *Dark Star* loves. We ghost into the lead, but the fleet catches up when the wind dies. A northerly fills in, and we finish the 30-mile race just before dark.

The beers come out as we turn for home, and the sun sets with an orange glow. Just as the stories start, BANG!, we smash into a log, which thuds off the bow, keel, prop, and rudder. The engine stops. Everyone glares at Allan, who had just taken the helm. He shrugs his shoulders; everyone laughs. The engine starts, and by the time we're at the dock, all is good with the world.

It's been an epic day, not necessarily because of the race, or the result—which was mediocre—but because I got to spend it with friends, doing what I love, in a beautiful environment. I'm glad I have my boat. It doesn't make much sense on a rational level, but it allows for days like today, so it's worth it.

—JONATHAN MCKEE

Is Cuba Finally Libre?



PROTESTORS, STATE DEPARTMENT resistance, Coast Guard intervention—these are just a few of the potential pitfalls threatening the effort to bring back the Sarasota to Havana Regatta.

Easily the most exotic destination within a day's sail from American shores, Cuba has beckoned racers since the 1930s. Races to Havana from ports in South Florida and across the Gulf Coast thrived until the late 1990s, when the U.S. government began making the permitting process far more difficult. The final death knell came in 2001, when President George W. Bush began enforcing the embargo with renewed vigor. Organizers of the 2003 Conch Republic Cup (Key West to Havana) were brought up on federal charges—later dismissed

—and the threat of Coast Guard seizures shut down all lingering races to Cuba.

Fourteen years after the last officially sanctioned race to Havana, encouraged by an apparent easing of tensions under the Obama administration, Sarasota YC is leading the charge to return to Marina Hemingway. The club has petitioned the State Department for permission, billing the race as a humanitarian exchange, a way to bring up to \$50,000 worth of Optimist sailing gear to the children of Cuba. More than 120 boats have already registered for the race, the start of which is scheduled for May 16.

Cindy Clifton, Sarasota YC's regatta chair, has been working with Jose Escrich, commodore of the Hemingway International Yacht Club

Pending approval from the State Department, the Hemingway International Yacht Club of Cuba (above) will welcome American racers once again.

of Cuba. Besides the distance race and several onshore events, they're planning a buoy race to Morro Castle, the Spanish fortress that has guarded Havana since 1589.

Despite these plans, the race is still pending approval from the State Department. "Since we started organizing in 2009, we haven't seen any push-back from the Cuban-American community like there was in the past," says Clifton. "There are two youth sailing programs in Havana, and these kids don't even have lifejackets. But we still haven't heard a thing yet from the State Department. Not a thing."

—TROY GILBERT

BEACH BALL REDUX

Six years after Michael Spies' Beneteau 40.7 *First National Real Estate* stunned the maxi crowd by taking overall handicap honors in the 2003 Rolex Sydney Hobart Race, another Bruce Farr-designed racer/cruiser proved itself in the race to Tasmania. A pair of Beneteau First 40s, sharing the cruising-friendly girth of their "beach ball" predecessors, took the top two handicap spots in the 2009 Sydney Hobart. Mike Welsh's *Wicked* (right) placed second behind Andrew Saies' *Two True*.

—MICHAEL LOVETT

