

N.A.I. 2004

(The North American Invitational Predicted Log championship contest)

In the opinion of John Willister, HYC; navigator for Pete Healy, HYC, the contestant representing the Southern California Cruiser Association.

The N.A.I. 2004 was held on the waters of southern Lake Michigan and hosted by the Chicago Yacht Club. As I was the navigator for my brother-in-law, Pete Healy, I had the job of doing the first rough draft of our plan of action for competing in this contest.

My most difficult part was getting back into the world of three decimal points in navigating after spending almost the entire month of July on a friend's sailboat in South Florida and the northern islands of the Bahamas, the Abacos. If ever the expression, "changes in latitude; changes in attitude," was apropos, it definitely applied to me. After the first week on the sailboat while in Bimini, I took off my watch and didn't look at it again until a few days before I had to board my flight back to L.A. It only took a couple of days to switch from the Log Racing accuracy of .431 nautical miles to "about a half-mile" and estimates of hours, minutes, and seconds to "this morning" or "today; maybe." Not good for a Log Racer.

As Rita and Pete Healy had driven to Chicago and left in mid-July, I had no idea of what the course or contest rules were until returning home on July 28th with only six days to do the basic plan and then fly to Chicago on August 4th and jump right into the three decimal world again.

Chicago had always been my favorite mid-west city as I had been based there for two years in the early 1980's when flying for TWA. Chicago is a great city and the Chicago Yacht Club is one of the finest yacht clubs in the country.

I had been there in 1995 for the same event as part of the crew (J.D. Smith and myself) working for Tom Collins, the SCCA contestant for 1995. I remembered the unexpected currents encountered and wondered if the same thing would be in store for us and how we would determine their effects this time.

The wind had been blowing for several days when I arrived on August 4th along with a front with some big thunderstorms churning up the waters. The wind was still blowing hard enough to generate four to five foot waves on Thursday, the 5th, so the time trials for speed calibration were put off until Friday. The seas had calmed down somewhat by Friday (not completely), so Pete and I derived a fairly accurate speed curve (we thought) for the boat Pete had drawn for the race.

A big difference for the Great Lakes versus our ocean waters is that they use statute miles instead of nautical miles. The "Measured Mile" course on a breakwater was a statute mile and even that was subject to an error according to the chart. It was listed as 5307 feet instead of a normal 5280 for a statute mile, but the local Contest Committee said they had "chained" the mile and found it to be 5280. This was to become, I think, the major reason for the fact of everyone being considerably fast on almost all legs of the contest.

This contest was interesting in that two of the legs were to be done in a prescribed time of twenty-one minutes for the first leg and then twenty-seven minutes for a later leg. That meant we had to adjust our speed to meet a mandatory time for those two legs. This worked out to 8.01 knots for our boat on the first leg and 10.44 knots for the other mandatory leg. We elected to speed up to the 10.44 knots after the first Check Point for the entire remainder of the contest. And, as I will elaborate later, was the reason I believe we ended up winning the race.

The course was interesting and very scenic along the lakefront with the Chicago skyline a beautiful sight for most of the race. As the course zigzagged back and forth, north and south, I tried to determine the current, if any. During my brief six days at home before flying to Chicago, I had looked up the University of Illinois web site to see if they had any information on what could cause a current(s) in the lake.

I knew that the wind had generated some current due to coriolis acceleration with the wind having blown hard for several days, but the wind died down the night before the race. Also, the possible seiche effect of high water at one end of the lake and low water at the other end of the lake generating a current was considered but I didn't see any significant difference in the level of the water along the lakefront from what would have been normal.

So, in all truth, I had no idea whatsoever of what was going on in that lake. I knew from the very basic three-part equation of log racing, i.e., time, speed, and distance, that getting an accurate distance and an accurate speed would be the most important parts. Using the Nobeltec navigation program and electronic charts, an accurate distance was no problem down to three decimal points (providing the chart was accurate). Impossible to do as accurately with paper charts and a divider.

As I am a retired airline pilot that has been trained to "make a flight plan; fly the flight plan," and "always use a check list," that is exactly what we did. No innovation unless the "flight plan" and "check list" obviously wasn't working. We ran the first leg at 8.01 knots with NO variations to try to make the required twenty-one minutes for the leg. Then we speeded up to 10.44 knots with NO variations for the rest of the race except one instance to jump the wake of another boat. We were the second fastest boat out of the twelve contestants, didn't make any major mistakes in identifying or calling the marks, and that is why we finished in first place. We simply let the basic laws of mathematics give us an advantage by covering up any errors we might have made.

As SCCA Commodore Craig Ryan once explained to a question directed at him on how to get a good score in a Predicted Log race, Craig said, "Get an accurate distance, get an accurate speed, and GO FAST!" That is exactly what we did... we drove around the course at the second fastest speed without making any major boat handling errors or course/mark mistakes and the simple mathematics of "the speed advantage" gave us less of an error than the other contestants.

I believe the distance for the "Measured Mile" was not exactly accurate or everyone, including us, would not have been fast on almost all the legs. Also, I believe the mark at the southern end of the course was off station slightly to the north or all contestants could not have been fast going to it and then reversing course around it back to the north.

All in all, for me, with an abrupt "change in latitude ; change in attitude" back to the three-decimal world of Log Racing from the laid back lifestyle of the Bahamas, it was a great event. The weather on race day was superb and the activities, cocktail parties, and preparations put on by the Chicago Yacht Club for the N.A.I. 2004 were superb.
