

Lighthouse to Lighthouse Race 2009

Outriggers, kayaks, rowing shells, competition, blue sky, 175 friends, food, sunshine, waves, “talk like a pirate” day, beer, clams and oysters.

How many stories might be written with the above words? How many days see all of the above? Such a day was September 19, 2009 at the Soundkeeper’s Lighthouse to Lighthouse Race, 14 miles of open water fun.

I have been regatta chairman of this race since 2003. I had a call in the spring of that year and was told, “Jeff Mard (previous chairman) says you’re running the race this year”. First I had heard of it! I’ve been doing it ever since, with a hearty and wonderful bunch of volunteers.

We had six different flights this year at five-minute intervals. The sliding seats were in flight two. We had Dolphins, a Maas, an Echo Ace and a Wintech, plus a couple Alden’s in touring class.

At 9:10 am, I lined up at one end of the line, Bill Russell the other. It was a fast start. Bill, Ray, Jake, Jeff, and Tim must have thought they were at the JCR (race last month). In that race the fleet took off at what must have been 38-40 strokes a minute.

I was at the back of the fast pack and losing ground (water?). The pack moved ahead of Peter in the Alden Ocean Shell and Pam Ellett and Mary Ellen Ludwig in the Alden Double. The first mile leg to Cockenoe Island was one mile of slight tailwind and wind ripples. I thought about the rumors of Captain Kidd’s buried treasure on Cockenoe, and the old pieces of eight found to back up the claims. Kidd you not!

Keep the pace, keep the faith. Watch my speed, my heart monitor and try to get a good stroke every stroke. My HR was running up to 158, a good effort. If I held that the whole 14 miles, I knew it would be a respectable race for me. I try to drive my legs hard enough to feel most of my weight come off the sliding seat.

I’d spot Bill wearing his green shirt, in my rowing mirror once in a while. Then we were passing the boats from flight one and the seascape in my mirror became more confused. There was a kayaker in a green shirt also. I lost track of Bill. He was ahead somewhere.

I got around Cockenoe and headed 235 degrees WSW towards Copps Rocks. There are nasty rocks off Copps Island, mostly covered at half tide.

This is my home water, so I go through here often. Kayakers go closer to Cops and get a better line. There are big rocks in there, close to the surface. It is easier to spot them if you are facing forward!

My hands are sweating on the black rubber grips on my oar handles. The oars are slippery, getting more difficult to control. I am frowning. At the end of one stroke, I drop my right (port) oar, slap my right hand onto the water, pull it out and throw some water over to my left oar handle. I grab my oars again and hit the trail. Feels much better. I do not regret the pause.

I get past Cops, past the 3-½ mile point where the 7-mile course racers will turn around. This leg is west. Going past the break in the Islands called Middle Passage, the broadside chop is enough to notice. Over to my starboard I see two guys rowing in a double sliding seat Whitehall. A Whitehall is a classic design, a standard fixed seat workboat from "the old days". Now they often rig them with sliding seats - very seaworthy. I am confused- didn't think they were in our race. They didn't have a race number I could see.

"Hey, you guys in the race?" I yell over.

"No, we're just rowing the course," they say. I hope they join us next year!

It was fast going in the lee of Sheffield Island with the NNW breeze. Then I got past Great Reef at Sheffield Point. It is one mile to Greens Ledge Lighthouse from there. The breeze picked up. It was 10-15 and some strengthening close to 20 mph. There's a good one-knot current out there and the breeze was at an angle to it. The water was plenty squirrely. It's been worse in other L2L's, but we knew we were in open water.

A half-mile from Green's light I saw Tim Willsallen on his return leg. So he is one mile ahead of me, probably be two miles by the end of the race. Then I see the other rowers, Jake, Jeff, Ray, and Bill go by in about that order.

Green's Ledge has some history also. Some story about pirates leaving someone tied to the rocks at low tide waiting to drown with the incoming tide. Or was it pirates that were left to drown? Makes you "shiver your timbers" either way!

By the time I got to Green's Ledge there was a dive boat "The Silver Dolphin", anchoring at the Lighthouse, blowing their horn and spewing diesel fumes. My timbers started to shiver. I did not enjoy the diesel fumes while pushing my lungs at race pace. (Hey, could I use carbon monoxide poisoning as an excuse for not going faster?)

Got past the Silver Dolphin. Wonder if they heard the notice to mariner's report about the regatta? It was slightly easier going back through the waves, and good to be in clean air. There has been enough spray on my hands that the slippery grip problem does not return

Once in the lee of Sheffield I could put on some speed again. Some of the OC-6 's and fast kayakers were passing me now. Hut, hut, hut go the OC-6'ers. Outriggers like to set the pace that way, with the stern paddler calling the pace. You can hear them coming- and going.

It was a good mix of water for open water racing. We had calm, chop and nasty. And then there was the ominous looking boat wake that had me stop and sit tight, thinking, "I probably won't flip." I didn't (power of positive thinking!). There were a couple kayakers that did go into the water around Greens Ledge - nothing serious though.

I saw John "Ziggy" Zeigler and partner go by in his OC-2 somewhere around Copps Island, one quarter of the race to go. Mark Ceconi got by me around Goose Island. I made 2 or 3 hydration stops along the way. Most paddlers use a camelback system and drink out of a tube. Saves on hydration stops that way.

I start feeling a few blisters. I hope they don't tear. That makes for slippery grips. Otherwise, it is a minor annoyance.

I got to the corner of Cockenoe. One mile to the beach, the beer, the food, and the race stories. Here was a 15 mph headwind, a head sea and currents at the mouth of the Saugatuck River that didn't help much either. I set the speed coach on my boat to meters per second. Sprinting in wind ripple flat water might show me 3.8 m/s. The faster parts of the course I saw 3.0-3.3 m/s. That last mile it was hard to get much over 2.0 m/s. Closer to the beach we had more and more of a lee, less head wind and flatter water. I do like to finish a race with some panache. I was close enough to hear Coop yelling encouragement. I was pulling ahead of the fast sea kayak that had been close to me that last tedious mile. About 0.2 miles to go I was able to pick it up to a respectable pace and hit 34 spm and 3.8 m/s for a proud finish. Coop yelled again, this time "good finish." I suppose any finish is a good finish. Now for the beach!

It was a record day. Course records were broken. There were a record number of boats - 98. It was an Outrigger ECORA Race. We haven't had six OC-6's since 2003. It was the last in the new series of open water rowing races started by Ray Panek. It was a surfski series race of intense

and record breaking competition. It was a sea kayak and fast sea kayak race extraordinaire. It was a neophyte open water race for some. It was a day of volunteerism and extraordinary people. It was a record good time! A day that made the world just a little better

George Hill brought his fixed seat rowboat, Adirondack Guideboat. Only fixed seater this year. Could use some more traditional rowers. We had Frenchman Francois Michaud, just three weeks in the USA. He brought his sliding rigger Virus Turboskiff. Francois did the 7-mile course. The rowing world needs more sliding riggers, especially in the Open Water events. When is some rowing shell maker going to make a real racing class open water sliding rigger? Virus Turboskiff is great and really fun to row, but hey, it's too short. Come on Virus, Maas, Peinert, Wintech, and Echo. You know it is the better design. In sliding seat boats most of our body weight slides back and forth on every stroke. Our boats lurch. Surfskiers just cruise. Make me a boat around 24 feet with a sliding rigger. Make it tough enough for real water. Maybe I could keep a few more of those surfskiis from passing me then! If not, I may just have to earn my fame with my smoked corn and clam chowder. While the surfskiis are smokin' me out in the open water!

I was thrilled this year to have even more support than usual from my rowing club, Norwalk River Rowing. They (we) have been a growing part of the L2L for a few years. The always good timing was even better this year with NRRA members Jim "Coop" Cooper and Sarah Kline joining veteran L2L helper Malcom Watson in the starting/ timing boat. If I say it ran like clockwork, is that a pun, or just the plain truth?

Volunteerism - that is the key. Any regatta takes lots of people and lots of volunteer hours. The danger of mentioning names, such as above, is that it seems like you are leaving people out. There will be thank yous, written and spoken. Thanks Ellen Hertensten (I just had to throw that one in!)

It's a race. It's a beach party. It's both. What a great venue, Compo Beach in Westport CT, beautiful beach with plenty of parking just steps away. Westport- thank you, thank you, thank you!

I would like to take credit for the beautiful weather. Would that be stretching it a bit? Heh, I did pick the date!

One of this year's rowing stories was the inaugural open water race of NRRRA member Jake Watkins. Jake had been getting in a few rows in the club Peinert Dolphin. Last week I heard from Jake that he had been out to the end of the harbor in a few waves and was having second thoughts. "I thought I was going to flip eight times!" Bill Russell and I gave Jake a few rough water pointers, like stay relaxed, be flexible, shorten the stroke if needed and feel the oars grab before applying pressure. I sent Jake a couple links to rowing in rough water.

The tips and articles must have worked. The water out by Greens Ledge Lighthouse was a lot tougher than Jake had seen at the mouth of Norwalk Harbor last week. Jake came in third place for sliding seater's, beating very competitive Ray Panek, more and more competitive Bill Russell and veteran "the older I get, the better I was" rower, yours truly. Tim Willsallen came down from Ithaca to take 1st place sliding seat racing 1x, beating Jeff's record from last year.

The surfskier times were amazing! Cory Lancaster beat the course record set last year by Ken Cooper. And Cory's time was only 4th for kayaks! The first place guy, Sean Brennan, had an inhuman time of 1 hour 47 minutes 19 seconds. This is a fastest boat ever course record, beating the "Sea Line Eight" eight person rowing shell from 2003 by 6 minutes! We will have Sean's name put on the trophy cup. Joe Glickman and Craig Impens were 2nd and 3rd for surfskiis and overall! Four kayakers broke previous kayak records. It was not a fast course either! Tim Willsallen, fastest rower, took 4th overall.

The OC-6's broke their own course records. NY Outrigger found beating the previous OC-6 course record was only good for 2nd place this year. Manu'iwa came in 6th place overall to take OC-6 gold and OC course record!

At the Captain's meeting, I mentioned it was "International Talk Like a Pirate Day".

"For those of ya that put your backs into it, thar be gold and silver out there!"

I guess everyone listened!

Long Live Open Water!

Wayne Lysobey
9/20/09
