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## Powerboater in a Sailing Regatta

A powerboating couple learns there is more to sail racing than tacking and tactics

**I**N THE INTEREST OF FULL disclosure, it should be noted that I am a powerboater and the closest I've come to sailing is when the breeze catches the bow of my boat and blows it downwind. I bring this up because if you are an avid sailor looking for the latest sailing techniques you should probably just roll your eyes and turn the page now. But, those who read on will find a brief observational foray into the world of sailboating from the perspective of a powerboater.

The call to action came late one February night, "How would you and your wife like to crew on a committee boat for the Toliva Shoal Race?" From the description of the job we would have an enjoyable winter cruise with little to do between releasing the lines and the corresponding tie-up.

The Toliva Shoal Race is the third race

in the four part Southern Sound Series in Puget Sound, hosted each February by the South Sound Sailing Society and the Olympia Yacht Club.

My wife, Cis, and I arrived on the scene early Saturday morning—race day! The air was cold, crisp, and clear. Despite an earlier sprinkling of salt, the docks were still covered with a thin sheet of ice. After confirming *Time Out* was ready for service, we skated back up the dock to the clubhouse. When we arrived, we were greeted by the racers as warmly as if we had been life-long sailors.

We immediately received a hearty breakfast and enjoyed our eggs with a side order of racing strategy. The hottest topic at our table was the wind. I had checked the weather earlier and learned that winds for the day were predicted at 10–20 knots. In listening to the racers, it appeared they

had their own weather forecasts that showed exactly how the wind would behave at various times throughout the day. I have to admit that these detailed forecasts proved to be entirely accurate.

After breakfast, we met George and Betty, the race officials who accompanied us on our journey that day. The tide was high and the winds were light in the harbour as Captain Pat Brower orchestrated a trouble-free departure.

The route for the day's race had boats lining up for the starting gun at the Olympia Shoal, making their way past Nisqually and up to the Toliva Shoal buoy, then returning through Balch Passage, past Johnson Point and finally passing the start/finish boat back at Olympia. Our boat, *Time Out*, was assigned the position of chase boat number one. It was our job to observe the boats as they passed two key locations. The first location for our observations was government buoy three, just off the Nisqually Delta.

Sails were blowing in every direction just ahead as we approached our first location. It looked like the boats were randomly milling around the start line, taking up all the navigable water between where we were and where we needed to be. George politely explained that starting line position was critical to the sailors' success. After this short explanation, he helped to guide us past the swarm of racers.

There were three classes of sailboats in the race. To accommodate them all, the start times for each class were staggered. As soon as the first starting gun sounded the relaxed sailors we met before the race were instantly transformed into ardent competitors.

The quiet wind intensified and so did the seas. The ebbing tide was fighting the fresh north wind, which caused the inlet to become choppy. We moved from the flybridge down to the main saloon for a smoother, warmer ride.

As we moved inside, the racers hiked out over their rails to counterbalance the wind's affect on their boats in an attempt to maintain balance and coax every ounce of speed. The boats were flying along, exposing the sailors to the salty spray fashioned by the sea and wind. Fortunately, the racers were



dressed for the conditions and many of the crews were wearing foul weather gear, safety harnesses and PFDs.

Soon, Betty mentioned it was time for us to take our place near the buoy. Our job was to make sure our race officials were in the right place at the right time. From our boat, the officials were responsible for recording all the action. They noted the order each boat passed the mark, as well as the time, sail number, and boat name. At times the boats were spread out, but at other times the racers came in groups and our entire crew was conscripted to help spot boat names and sail numbers.

Once we recorded the last boat to pass our position, we received a call from the race committee. Even though VHF was the official method of communication, most of the committee's communications took place via cell phone to avoid revealing race information to the racers. We were instructed to move to

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our final checkpoint off Johnson Point.

We had to move fast to reach our second position ahead of the fleet. As we arrived, we could see Mount Rainier towering over the lead boats as the wind propelled them toward our location. I could imagine the exhilaration the racers felt as their boat heeled over, the crew hiked out on the windward side, while the leeward side of the boat dug in nearly to the rail.

The lead race boat passed our position quickly and almost immediately we were passed by groups of race boats. We were in awe of the precision and close quarters manoeuvring. At times the racers were three abreast, sailing just inches from each other. Other boats passed equally close to the day mark, nearly scraping barnacles from the piling at the apex of the turn.

During a lull in the action, our guests explained how critical timing was as

the racers rounded the mark. As the boats turned, they simultaneously adjusted course and trimmed the sails, all while the crew strategically relocated to new areas of the boat. Then, at the critical moment, we could hear commands being shouted to hoist the spinnaker sails.

We learned that sail material strongly influences racing performance. Most racers have abandoned the familiar white Dacron sails for stronger and more exotic materials like Kevlar and carbon fibre.

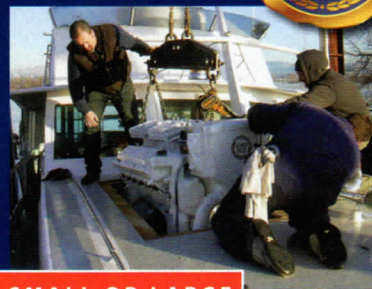
As evening encroached, the call came from the race committee informing us that our job was complete. Right on cue, the wind diminished and the inlet was flooded by the tide. This set the stage for Captain Pat to safely guide *Time Out* back to the boat house.

Although we still have a great deal to learn, we enjoyed exploring the world of sailboat racing. And, most importantly, we gained a new appreciation for our fellow boaters. 🍷

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