

2016 Windmill Nationals (Oriental, North Carolina July 14-17) Craig Tovell

In the quaint rural port of River Dunes, North Carolina, 25 teams from 12 different states gathered July 14-17 for the 2016 Windmill Nationals. The field was comprised of contenders which included eight past national champions from seven states, along with seven runners-up from the last five years. Essentially, this created the most competitive regatta ever assembled.

Located about two miles off the mouth of the Neuse River, Pamlico Sound offers the second-best breeze in the country next to San Francisco Bay. As the event unfolded, nobody questioned that claim. In the meticulous preparation and scouting for a host site over the past year, Rock Hall, Maryland Fleet, led by class president and 2015 national champ Ralph Sponar with family support crew, wife Sandy, son Matthew, daughter-in-law Allie and Lansing Williams couldn't have chosen a better location.

Southern hospitality, the natural beauty, and resort feel surrounding the event set a vacation-like mood as well as brass tacks.

While the Windmill Class (WCA) is a big family of husband-wife, father-son, father-daughter, mother-son teams -- most take the event very seriously. Although the majority of foils conformed in 2015, a new trend appeared in measuring new suits of sails from three different makers. Past national champ and Class Measurer, Larry Christian from New Hampshire brought all boats to spec within half a day. Bravo.

In preparing the event, Ralph put together a crack Race Committee (RC) team from River Dunes, all familiar with the local conditions. They prepared to tow boats to expedite running the Regatta on time and for safety reasons. The fleet was to sail out a few miles into Pamlico Sound where the breeze picked up almost one knot for every quarter-mile into the open water. There was little to no land reference, making compass use necessary to spot wind shifts. Prevailing southwest winds would be true throughout the event, with slight current from the tide and historic Neuse River, although the depth was consistent for the course – a combination of four more factors than a flatwater race course.

The class schedule was to start reasonably early at 10:30 on the first day, then peel 30 minutes off the second and third racing days, to get off as

many races as possible -- long one-hour races on Friday and Saturday, then three races on Sunday before noon. Unlike the first two windless days of preparation, Race Day One began with a southwest prevailing and building breeze of 12 to 18 knots. Most teams de-powered their rigs by either raking their masts back with the shroud chainplate, flattening a traveler and applying more boom vang, or easing jib halyards and moving jib leads back a notch. Outhauls were flattened and some cunningham was implemented to flatten the mainsail, an adjustment which was marginally usable in many situations. As the day progressed, many raised their long daggerboards 10 inches to lessen tripping through the waves and to minimize hiking. Most also ran their auto bailer throughout the day because of tall intermittent motorboat chop. Those who didn't sometimes paid the price.

The wind condition called for at T5 (Triangle, Windward, Leeward) and Race Two was T4. Oddly, with 25 teams on the water, the first two races mimicked one another with the top five boats finishing in identical order -- again, all national champions or runners-up. "The Pack" seemed to start more near the RC end of the line, then worked their way right in both races.

But, as teams fatigued the fleet began to alternate positions. There wasn't much tacking upwind because the shifts were five to 10 degrees minimal with the weather marks miles away. Good ground could be gained with offwind planning, surfing with the whisker pole and subtle fore to aft crew weight movements to not bury the bow and submarine the boat. Whoever could stay on their wave the longest gained immensely. In these conditions, better boat handling earned the better finish.

After race three, when contenders had been on the water for over four hours, some teams broke down. Some capsized. One team suffered heat stroke requiring EMS on shore. Based on these difficult conditions, the RC wisely decided to retire the fleet after race three. Hats off to Lon Ethington and Meg Gimmi of Tampa for being in sixth after the first day leading the "Old Goats."

Most participants stayed in Oriental, North Carolina (2-time NA hosts -- another quaint sailing center on the Intercoastal Waterway) where they rehydrated and dined on the waterfront before calling it an early night.

Although it was forecast that there would be a diminished breeze for the next day, Race Day Two offered nearly identical wind conditions. Fortunately, the heat index dropped 20 points. Teams were more aware of their mortality and took better care of themselves. Unlike Day One, however, the right trend was more to the left especially at the start where the pin was slightly skewed, unlike the previous day's racing. People starting on the right or getting too far right paid dearly. Some scrapped their way back and others perished on the outside of the wheel, where the wind was often softened by shore affect.

Similar to Day One, the fleet was shrewdly retired after the second race as a local fisherman on the mark boat recommended abandonment. A torrential downpour with lightening ensued 10 minutes after the fleet had pulled and buttoned down. As the day's racing ended, positions were jumbled with many teams in striking distance of one another. The exception in this picture were the leaders and past national champs Ethan and Trudy Bixby from St. Petersburg, Florida. These skilled sailors are a team who rarely if ever make mistakes - they let you do "it."

Race Day Three started earlier with a diminished breeze and wind direction similar to the previous two days. Courses were shortened to W5 then W3 as described in the NOR and to get more races in within the time limit, although they weren't shorties at 50 minutes each. Unlike Day One and Two, teams changed positions drastically by the end of the third day. A memorable and remarkable feat of the event occurred in the last race, when past national champ Rick Fontana of Maine and his 12-year-old son Jasper led until the final beat. When the wind picked up the Bixby's nipped them right at the finish and captured top honors. See attached scoring.

Be sure to mark the Presque Isle Summer Regatta (Midwest Districts) in Erie, Pennsylvania on your calendar August 13-14th as tune-up as hosts of the 2017 Nationals. Big fun and big, fresh water! For information (Pat Huntley phuntley@velocity.net).