

## **38<sup>th</sup> Annapolis-to-Newport Race Gets Underway on Chesapeake Bay**

The 38<sup>th</sup> biennial Annapolis-to-Newport Race got underway Friday and Saturday in similar light, upwind conditions on the Chesapeake Bay.

Organizers with the Annapolis Yacht Club started 61 boats in six classes on Friday morning in a southerly breeze of about 4-6 knots. Chessie Racing, a Tripp 62 owned by AYC member George Collins, was the biggest and fastest of the Friday starters and quickly surged to a comfortable lead.

However, a squall caused Chessie Racing to park up near Solomon's Island and allowed the trailing boats to catch up, albeit only briefly. The 62-footer steadily pulled away from the competition and was 52 nautical miles from the finish line at 11 a.m. on Sunday morning.

Tactician Chris Larson called for a course just east of the rhumb line out in the Atlantic Ocean and Chessie Racing steadily ticked off the miles in running and reaching conditions as southwesterly winds prevailed.

Kenai, a J/44 skippered by Chris Lewis of Austin, Texas, led a tightly bunched group of boats that were sailing off Atlantic City about 174 nautical miles from the finish.

The Naval Academy Varsity Offshore Sailing team has always used the Annapolis-to-Newport Race as the kickoff to its summer training. Coach Jahn Tihansky entered five boats with the Navy 44-footers Integrity and Defiance starting Friday. A pair of Farr 40-footers (Ranger and Zephyr) along with the J/133 Wasp started Saturday.

"We're a little thin on experience this time. Having lost last summer really hurt. Only the rising first class has been offshore before," Tihansky said. "We're definitely behind the eight-ball when it comes to blue water experience."

Tihansky and other coaches will be aboard all five boats as safety officers, providing experienced guidance while allowing the midshipmen to make all key decisions and perform the crew work.

"Getting there safe is always the number one goal. Given the overall lack of experience, I think the expectation to win is not really applicable in this scenario," Tihansky said.

Jimmy Praley was sailing the family-owned J/120 Shinnecock without his father and namesake for the first time in the Annapolis-to-Newport Race. James Praley is chairman of the 2021 Annapolis-to-Newport Race and needed to be ashore at the finishing port to attend to organizational duties.

“It’s definitely going to be strange to not have my dad aboard,” said the younger Praley, who had completed six previous editions of the offshore classic with his father as navigator. “It will be tough to fill his shoes.”

Shinnecock was stranded in Rhode Island throughout the pandemic and only recently was delivered back to Annapolis, compressing the preparation process.

“We got the back here about three weeks ago and have been in crunch mode ever since,” Jimmy Praley said. “Fortunately, we’ve done this race so many times we know the drill on all counts.”

Shinnecock was among four J/120 sloops competing in ORC 3 class, which has a total of 18 entries. “Our goal is to always be the first J/120 to finish. It won’t be easy because all of them are sailed very well,” Praley said. “It’s going to be really tactical in the Chesapeake Bay and I think that’s where this year’s race is going to be won or lost.”

A huge spectator fleet surrounded the starting box on Saturday morning as 21 boats in two classes began the passage. Old-timers had flashbacks to the 1970s as Running Tide headed across the line on starboard tack followed by Kialoa III. Those two fabled sailboats did battle many times in major offshore distance races up and down the East Coast back in the 1970s.

In the 1975 edition of the Annapolis-to-Newport Race, Kialoa III and Running Tide finished second and third, respectively, in Class I behind Salty Goose. Kialoa III, just launched that year for owner John Kilroy, set an elapsed time record of 55 hours and 40 minutes.

Running Tide, owned at the time by Al Van Metre, would end years of frustration by winning IOR Class I in the 1981 and ’83 editions of Annapolis-to-Newport.

Beau Van Metre bought back Running Tide 34 years after selling the legendary race-boat and spent \$4.5 million restoring and updating her. The northern Virginia real estate developer hired respected designer David Pedrick to oversee the refit with the purpose of making the Sparkman & Stephens 61-footer competitive in 2021.

That goal was achieved by redistributing the weight from above the deck to below the floorboards. Running Tide was built in 1969 with all stainless-steel rigging and deck hardware. Van Metre installed a carbon-fiber mast that is 10 feet taller and one-third the weight of the original. Instead of 16 huge winches, Running Tide now only has six and they weigh a fraction of their predecessors.

A new carbon-fiber rudder is 200 pounds lighter than the one it replaced and provides far better maneuverability. “The boat feels like it has power steering now. It was like driving a dump truck before,” Van Metre said.

All those technological upgrades have clearly made a major difference as Running Tide paced well with the competition in its class during the first few miles of the 2021 Annapolis-to-Newport Race.

Ironically, Pedrick designed Kialoa III, a 79-foot ketch, while working for Sparkman & Stephens in 1974. The Palmer Johnson-built boat was converted to a sloop in 1976 and held the Sydney-to-Hobart Race record for 21 years.

Now owned by Thorpe Leeson of Newport, Rhode Island, Kialoa III does not appear to have been retrofitted or otherwise updated much from its glory days.

Van Metre had numerous professional sailors aboard as crew, including former America's Cup competitors Larry Leonard and Mike Toppa as watch captains. Leonard was among several Annapolis natives who know the Chesapeake Bay like the back of their hands and advised Van Metre to take Running Tide to the Eastern Shore side of the bay.

Van Metre appeared a bit nervous at the wheel as worked hard to point the old warhorse so she could cross in front of a tugboat pushing a barge that was bearing down on Running Tide as it sailed through the shipping channel.

After narrowly clearing the commercial vessel, Running Tide came as close to Kent Island as its 10-foot draft would allow before finally tacking onto port.

Another reason for crossing the shipping channel was to get into deep water as an ebb tide helped propel the fleet south toward Norfolk. Also, those boats on the Eastern Shore side of the bay were first to sail into the building sea breeze, which piped up to around eight knots as the leaders headed toward Bloody Point.

Despite the many updates, Running Tide is still a vastly outdated design as there have been five decades of technological improvements to racing sailboats. Van Metre has no idea how Running Tide 2.0 will perform versus its competition in ORC 2 class.

"We're all anxious to see if the improvements we made will work. Nobody knows how it's going to play out," he said Friday afternoon. "I can tell you from sailing the boat that it feels much faster, a lot livelier. I know the rig and sails are a hundred times better. We'll know in the first couple hours how well the boat is performing."

Organizers with Annapolis Yacht Club certainly did not want to postpone the start of a 475-nautical mile distance race, but it appeared for a while that might be necessary because there was not enough wind to propel the fleet across the line.

About an hour before the 11 a.m. warning gun, the entire fleet sat becalmed with either no sails hoisted or just the main. Fortunately, about 15 minutes before the race committee went

into sequence, the sea breeze started to fill in at around 4 to 6 knots and competitors were able to begin pre-start maneuvers.

“Things were looking ugly there for a while, but we got lucky and had enough wind to start on time,” principal race officer Dick Neville said.

Almost all of the Saturday starters chose the pin end of the line and headed on starboard tack for the Eastern Shore. Prospector, a Mills 68 that is favored to post the best elapsed time, quickly tacked onto port and sailed to the western shore.

That proved a mistake as the pressure was not nearly as strong on that side of the Chesapeake Bay and shallower water lessened the positive impact of the current. Prospector, owned by Shelter Island Transatlantic Partners, did not need long to overcome that temporary setback and move to the front of the Saturday starters.

Prospector was well ahead of the rest of the Saturday starters after 24 hours of racing. The 68-footer was sailing off Chincoteague about 290 nautical miles from the finish at 11 a.m. on Sunday and was on pace to place first in ORC 1 class that features the largest, fastest boats in the fleet.

Prospector completed the 120-nautical mile Chesapeake Bay portion of the race in a phenomenal time of just under eight hours during the 2019 edition of Annapolis-to-Newport. The Newport-based boat was on pace to break the course record of 40 hours, 14 minutes and 36 seconds that was set by the Volvo 70 Warrior in 2017.

However, Prospector was dismasted while beating into 20-25 knot winds and eight-foot seas in the Atlantic Ocean, approximately 30 miles offshore and 70 miles north of Chesapeake Light.

“Our number one goal this time around is to finish the race,” said Larry Landry, one of four owners and navigator aboard Prospector. “We showed last time that we’re perfectly capable of having things go wrong.”

Landry acknowledged the chances of breaking the course record this year are slim but was hopeful the Saturday starters will get better breeze in the bay than the Friday starters, allowing Prospector to post the fastest elapsed time.

“It all depends on the conditions we’re dealt in the Chesapeake Bay,” he said. “If we can get out of the bay early Sunday morning, we should be in pretty good shape.”