

# The Origin and early history of the Scotch Bonnet Race

by Peter O. Allen, Sr., founder of the event

I started sailing in 1967, while vacationing on New Jersey's Barnagat Bay, near Toms River. When I joined GYC in 1969 I had no interest in racing. I simply wanted to associate with other sailors and maybe learn a little bit about that inland sea to the north of Rochester. Previously I had been able to see both sides of either Barnagat Bay or the Hudson River, at Kingston.

Soon bitten by the racing bug, I came to enjoy GYC's course racing. Under the watchful eye of Jack Lee, I even won my first race. I thought long distance racing made some sense, as we were sailing boats with galleys, heads and berths. There just weren't many choices in destinations for such races. Sailing along the shore to Sodus Bay or Oak Orchard didn't seem to be all that much of a navigational challenge. All one had to do was keep New York State off to starboard or port and sail fast.

There were no buoys out in the lake to which one could race. The nearest object that one could sail around and then return to Rochester seemed to be Scotch Bonnet Island, off the Canadian shore. Why not go there? More about this later.

Let's have a word about marine navigation back in the early 1970s. If you knew how to use a sextant and the sky was clear you could determine where you were. On a sailboat bouncing around in a seaway that determination might have a tolerance of around two miles. Radio direction finders (RDFs) could be used, but there weren't a lot of radio stations that would allow you to triangulate your position. And again, the "null" in the RDF's antenna wasn't really "crisp," meaning the position plot could still be off by a mile or two. One was often as well off with a good dead reckoning plot, if your navigator was sharp.

Few of us even had dedicated chart tables back then. The largest boats racing in the club in those days were in the 25' to 27' range. We had a fleet of five 24' Hinterhoeller Sharks, a fleet of five 26' Thunderbirds, and a fleet of about five Bristol 27s in various deck/cabin/accommodations configurations. There were several other boats such as a Pearson Triton, a Cal 25, and maybe a Grampian 26 or two. So, as a test of navigation skills, as well as all those other skills involved in sailboat racing, the Scotch Bonnet Race was born in 1972.

The original course was direct to the island and back. The first race started early Saturday morning. With such small, slow boats this would clearly be an overnight race. I think we might have had five boats and I don't recall who won. I know it wasn't me! The following year we might have had six boats, again starting on Saturday morning.

We had just bought our first Pearson 26 and had added to our all-Haarstick inventory a

Ratsey Lapthorn "Chuting Star" spinnaker, styled after the successful close-reaching spinnaker used on the winning America's Cup boat. I ordered that sail while on a business trip to New York City. driving up to City Island I walked in to the office of the Ratsey Lapthorn sail loft on Schofield Street, the main drag. I spent quite a while talking with an older limey gentleman, finally ordering the sail. As I was about to leave he gave me his card. It was Colin Ratsey with whom I had been talking.

The wind was light and out of the north northeast. The rest of the fleet went east. We set the Chuting Star on a starboard tack, hoping that we might get lifted to the rhumbline. It took us most of the day to get across the lake and we were still a mile or two from the island when the wind died. But there were no other boats in sight. Either they had all gotten around well ahead of us (we hadn't seen any boats headed back to Rochester), or we were way ahead of the rest of them. I chose to believe the latter case.

After a while we spotted a few sails on the eastern horizon. We still had no wind. As the rest of the fleet approached they brought a little wind with them and we all rounded the island more or less together; in effect it was a brand new race! As night fell the fleet separated, either from boat speed or navigator's choice of which tack to take. We sailed throughout the night with no idea of where any other competitors lurked. How do you cover boats that you can't see?

Sunrise revealed an empty lake as we approached Rochester. We took our time as we crossed the line between the two pier ends and sailed to our dock. We then walked out on the Summerville Pier and looked around. There were no boats in sight. Our closest competitor was a red Shark sailed by Ed Elliston. We guesstimated that we owned the Shark about 58 minutes on handicap. At that time GYC, like most other clubs, was scoring on a time-on-distance basis, so the handicap was based on the rhumbline distance, without regard to the amount of time consumed by the race. Remember that we had effectively restarted the race back at the island, as all the boats had rounded together.

As our watches ticked away we finally spotted a blip on the horizon to the north. The blip got larger and the watches kept ticking. The blip evolved into a red sailboat. Surely they couldn't finish within an hour of our time.

The Shark finally crossed the finish line about 57 minutes after our finish. How many placed during those eighty plus miles had we frittered away a stinking sixty seconds? Too many, or at least one, that's for sure! Those who follow the Scotch Bonnet Race may recognize the foregoing as the rationale behind the Founder's Cup award to the first scratch GYC boat under 30' LOA to finish the Scotch Bonnet Race.

By 1975 I was fully involved in my new business. I had sold the Pearson 26 and was sailing a Laser off the beach in a fleet out of Harbor Square (now Westage at the Harbor). Someone else took up the running of the Scotch Bonnet Race, possibly Kenny Gjersoe. It was decided to

make the race an annual invitational event.

Thanks to the many people who have championed the event and provided many hours of volunteer time to its care and feeding over the intervening years. Who would have thought?

Is there a better choice today?

For any number of reasons I think it might be fun to consider a race that would take us around the NOAA weather buoy about 21 nautical miles north of Webster. (No such potential race mark existed in the early 70s.) It might be an out-and-back race. Or it might be a triangular race, with a buoy off either Pultneyville or Sodus Bay. It could be run in either direction, clockwise or counterclockwise, depending on the strength and direction of the wind. Such a race might replace the Scotch Bonnet Race or be added to GYC's racing schedule.

As an out-and-back race it would be around 40 N.M., less than half the distance of the Scotch Bonnet short course. Maybe that would attract more entrants.

Note – With no thought to posterity, I failed to keep any records on the first races. If any reader can add to or correct the foregoing, please let me know. I am eager to see an accurate and complete history of this event. Please send your comments to me: pquorum <at> aol <dot> com.