

Hook Race 2020

By: Ed Palladino, RYC Hook Race Co-chairman:

The 37th running of the Racine Yacht Club HOOK race was scheduled to take place on Saturday July 18, 2020. The date is traditionally the same day as the Chicago Mac.

The HOOK race is 189 nautical miles from Racine, Wisconsin, up the western shore of Lake Michigan, and “hooking” through Death’s Door, a narrow and often treacherous passageway between Washington Island and Wisconsin’s Door County peninsula, into Green Bay, and ending in Menominee, Michigan.

The race promotes the “challenge of the Door of Death.” Legend has it that a raiding party of Potawatomi Indians all perished when their war canoes capsized in a squall on their way to the Door peninsula to engage the Chippewa in battle. Nobody could have foreseen at the start of this year that the challenge for the HOOK race and race committee would be much greater than navigating Death’s Door. There were storms in the forecast...

In March came the news of COVID 19. For the race committee it felt like a punch in the gut. Would we be able to hold the race? First the Queen’s Cup cancelled. The HOOK committee resolved to monitor and closely follow the COVID restrictions issued by the cities of Racine and Menominee as well as Wisconsin and Michigan. There would be no pre-race or post-race Gosling rum parties, no entertainment, no dinners. Everything possible would be done virtually: pre-race forms, post-race check in sheets, protest forms, race notice board, merchandise sales, even a virtual skipper’s meeting.

On June 5, 2020, the Mac race cancelled. On June 9 2020, the board of directors of the M & M (Menominee and Marinette) Yacht Club who had hosted the finish line of the HOOK race in years past made the difficult decision not to participate due to COVID concerns. The upshot was that more than 100 boats sought to register for the HOOK (nearly double our usual number), but the HOOK seemingly had no place to finish. The HOOK committee contacted the Menominee Marina and other local marinas, and local hotels, restaurants and businesses to see if we were still welcome, and we were. The race was on!

This has been a tough year for sailing with many events around the world being cancelled, due to the current worldwide pandemic. One such event was the annual Chicago to Mackinac Race. Chicago Yacht Club (CYC), due to restrictions in both Chicago, Illinois and on Mackinac Island Michigan, was forced to cancel the 112th running of their race.

With the announcement of cancellation and confirmation that RYC Hook Race was still on, registrations quickly soared to record numbers. The decision was made to limit the number of entries, to prevent the need for rafting boats in both Racine and Menominee and again minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19. The limit was set at 100 boats and we quickly reached that limit. More boats were placed on a waiting list.

July 18, 2020 was a beautiful morning on Lake Michigan to hold a sailboat race. The Hook fleet began staging just outside of Racine harbor. Winds were sustained out of the South with 2-3-foot

waves. For a racecourse primarily running North, the current conditions were favorable for a new finish time record to be set! Storms loomed for the afternoon and nighttime hours. There were 7 starts for the 13 divisions. By 09:50 AM the 91 boats of the fleet were headed North to Door County in colorful fashion, flying their spinnakers.

The first storm hit at 12:30 PM Saturday afternoon off Milwaukee Wisconsin. The storm brought rain, thunder and lightning, and steady wind out of the South between 35 and 45 MPH. It subsided after pummeling the fleet for 3 hours and causing damage to some. Two boats dismasted. Several other boats sustained damage severe enough to cause them to retire from the Race while others found themselves unable to continue and retired. There were no significant injuries reported. The remaining fleet continued to race North.

The second storm hit the fleet between 02:30 and 04:30 AM on Sunday Morning. This was the big one. This storm caused one boat to lose a boom and dismasted two more. It came out of the West in a line from Sheboygan Wisconsin past the tip of Door County. With the thunder, lightning, and rain came the wind with speeds up to 60 MPH and, some sailors reporting 80 MPH wind gusts. One captain reported that he could not even see the mast from the helm at times because the rain was being blown so hard. As the crews continued to battle the elements, a chill ran down their spines around 04:00 AM when the radio informed them of a M.O.B.

Sarah Pederson, a seasoned sailor and Racine Yacht Club member, found herself bobbing in the 57 degree water, four to five miles off Sturgeon Bay, in the pitch black, during a huge thunderstorm with four-foot swells. When the storm struck, the crew had reduced sail and all on board were wearing safety gear consisting of life vests with strobes, whistles, and safety harnesses with tethers that were clipped in.

Suddenly the wind shifted, and the boat broached. Sarah and other crew that were on the high side of the boat were violently thrown backwards as the boat shifted and water rushed down the deck. When the water hit her, the clip on her safety tether failed and Sarah was swept into Lake Michigan.

Sarah was seen going overboard by her crew members. The crew now had to right the boat and get the boat under control by dropping sails, securing lines, and getting the engine started. One crew member noted the MOB coordinates and called the US Coast Guard. Due to the storm and swells Sarah and the crew lost sight of one another. Sara was alone in the darkness.

Sarah's first thought when she hit the water was to breath. She knew she had to regulate her breathing. Sarah also told herself to remain calm. As she drifted in the night, Sarah tried to use distant lights from towers on shore to keep herself oriented. When she scanned for search lights and saw them, she blew her whistle.

The crew from Sara's boat, other vessels, and the US Coast Guard were searching for her for about an hour during the storm. They were looking for her strobe light and listening for her whistle. As the storm subsided Sarah's crewmates spotted her in the water and pulled her up on board the sailboat. Sarah was then transferred to a US Coast Guard boat out of Sturgeon Bay. She was taken to a hospital and treated for hypothermia.

The Hook Race continued. At 06:59 AM Sunday July 19, the first boat of the fleet, Thunderstruck, Rick Hennig's Farr 60, crossed the finish line in Menominee Michigan and took Line Honors. Thunderstruck had set a new finish time record of 21 hours and 9 minutes. This beat the previous record of 23 hours and 54 minutes set back in 1987. The Overall winner and PHRF 1 winner Madcap, John Hoskins' Santa Cruz 52, followed Thunderstruck and crossed the finish line at 07:32 AM.

Of the 100-boat field 4 withdrew, 5 did not start (DNS), 29 did not finish (DNF), and 62 successfully completed the Hook Race. All finishing boats received a warm welcome into the Menominee/Marinette community. The professionalism and ability of Menominee Municipal Marina, Bill Cavill and his staff was outstanding. All boats finishing the race were slipped and provided with power and water.

Division winners were –

1st PHRF 1 Madcap John Hoskins
1st PHRF 2 Bandit John Sieracki
1st PHRF 3 Rocketman Kim Downing
1st PHRF 4 Exile Andy Graff
1st PHRF 5 Runaway Mark Wessel
1st PHRF 6 Sirocco Doug Vaccarello
1st J109 Courageous Ray Douglas/Kris Maybach
1st J111 No Surprise Scott Sellers
1st Beneteau 36.7 Fog Greg Rasmussen
1st T10 Erica Brian Kaczor
1st S2 9.1 Paradox John Swanson
1st Doublehanded Takedown-2 Ron Otto
1st Cruising Clarity Steve Gancarz

Over the course of our planning, adjusting, running, and finishing the race the RYC Hook Committee overcame many obstacles during this difficult pandemic. It could not have been accomplished without the outpouring of support from our partners, from the sailing community, and the dedication of the volunteers. While other Lake Michigan races were unfortunately cancelled, the RYC Hook Race succeeded. Thank you to all the participants.

I would like to thank all our sponsor as well. Goslings, Evolution Sails, Racine Riverside Marine, Murray's, Pirates Cove, Watermark Bayview Restaurant and Bakery AmericInn, Quantum Sails, UK Sailmakers, Best Western, Double Tree by Hilton, Avenue Grill & Bar, Cornerhouse on the Lake Tiki Bar, Yachtsman Corp, Boat Tailors, USI, Reefpoint Marina, Reefpoint Brewhouse, Nielson Sails and Harken.

The planning for the 2021 Hook Race begins...