



69th Down the Bay Race for the Virginia Cruising Cup

Friday, May 25, 2018

Around 10 p.m. on Friday night, the Carkeek 40 Rival engaged in a fierce tacking duel with the XP 44 Sitella around Smith Point.

“I’ve got to say, it was pretty exciting crossing the bow of a Carkeek 40 after almost 12 hours of racing,” Sitella skipper Ian Hill said.

Rival ultimately got the better of that battle, but Sitella wound up winning the war.

Skipper Bob Cantwell and his crew aboard the Carkeek 40 captured line honors for the 69th Down the Bay Race, jointly organized by the Hampton Yacht Club and Storm Trysail Club-Chesapeake Station.

However, Hill and the Sitella team were awarded the venerable Virginia Cruising Cup as overall winner on corrected time. This marks the second time in three years that Hill received the Virginia Cruising Cup for top performance for the overnight passage from Annapolis to Hampton.

“This is a very prestigious award and it is definitely a huge honor to have won it twice,” said Hill, a resident of Chesapeake, Virginia. “I am absolutely ecstatic! Many great sailors have gone a lifetime without winning this award so I certainly appreciate the magnitude of this accomplishment.”

Cantwell came away with the Robert M. Ravin Memorial Trophy for fastest elapsed time, completing the 120-nautical course in 19 hours, 12 minutes and 51 seconds. The Annapolis Yacht Club member was pleased considering the upwind slog did not really suit his new boat.

“It wasn’t really our conditions. We were hoping to get a downwind reacher like last year,” said Cantwell, who took delivery of the Carkeek 40 in early March and is still learning its performance characteristics. “We tried our best to keep the boat as flat as possible and stayed close to shore most of the way in order to avoid the chop.”

Cantwell previously owned an XP44 and went head-to-head with Sitella in numerous races over the previous two years. He bought the old Denali2 out of Harbor Springs, Michigan

“When I contemplated the next evolution of the program I thought this boat made a lot of sense for the type of racing we were doing,” Cantwell said.

Rival made its debut in the inaugural Spring Race to Oxford organized by the Annapolis Yacht Club and came close to capturing line honors. Cantwell said the Carkeek 40 was about 100 yards from the finish line when the race was abandoned due to lack of wind.

That certainly wasn't an issue during the 69th Down the Bay Race as the fleet of 34 boats in six classes was propelled by steady winds out of the south-southwest from start to finish. Cantwell said Rival achieved 10 knots of speed in 17 knots of breeze and rarely sailed in single digit pressure en route to crossing the finish line off the Fort Monroe Sea Wall at 5:32 a.m.

"We are thrilled to finish first in this historic race and very honored to have Rival engraved on the Ravin Memorial Trophy," said Cantwell, a resident of Greenwich, Connecticut.

Cantwell shared steering duties with strategist Mark Sims while Quantum professional Jason Currie served as tactician and Mark Jeffries was aboard as navigator. Brady Stagg and Seth Barrows combined to trim the jib while Collin Linehan handled the main. Liam Harr (bow), Tyler Raven (pit), Forbes Horton (runners) and Elijah Bowen (grinder) completed the crew.

Sitella crossed the finish line just under 8 ½ minutes after Rival and was owed considerable time by the Carkeek 40. Under the ORC scoring system, the XP44 posted a corrected time of 22 hours, 2 minutes and 29 seconds – just over 21 minutes better than runner-up Slush Fund, a J/111 owned by Annapolis Yacht Club member Jim Connelly.

Hill raced with pretty much the same crew that helped Sitella capture both the Virginia Cruising Cup and Ravin Memorial Trophy in 2016. Quantum pro Dave Flynn called tactics while Mark Wheeler served as navigator. Martin Casey trimmed the main and was another key member of the afterguard.

"I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to have such great sailors as Mark Wheeler, Dave Flynn and Martin Casey as part of the crew. They are the reason why our program is where it is today," Hill said. "Dave and Mark have tremendous knowledge with regard to wind shifts and currents. Martin Casey is a very skilled helmsman and we really made some big gains while he was driving."

Brendan Casey was the offside trimmer with Jimmy Hardesty assisting on the jib and also pulling the strings on the spinnaker. Austin Meincke, Sean Henry and Chuck Eberwine teamed to take care of the foredeck while Chris Korpman worked the mast and Chad Wilkins managed the pit.

Racing got underway Friday morning in southerly breeze ranging from 11 to 13 knots with Flynn putting Sitella in superb position coming off the line. Hill has optimized the XP44 for upwind performance and this race provided the perfect opportunity to test the upgrades.

Sitella has been outfitted with a 9 ½-foot keel that is two feet deeper than the original along with a new ruder. “We just couldn’t hold a groove so we needed a deeper keel in order to gain some height. I felt like we could improve the performance of the boat,” Hill explained.

“What we basically did was turbo-charge an upwind machine. I think the modifications we made to the boat paid immediate dividends,” Hill added. “I thought the boat went really well upwind. You could definitely see the height and speed advantage we gained.”

Flynn and Wheeler primarily kept Sitella in the middle of the race track. Not many sail changes were required during the upwind slog with the crew merely switching the No. 1 and 2 genoas depending on pressure.

Sitella secured first place in both ORC and PHRF A, racing against four of the same boats in both classes. Sonrisa, another XP44 owned by Greg Kelly of West Palm Beach, Florida, finished second in PHRF A and third in ORC.

“I am very happy and surprised to come out on top considering the caliber of boats we were up against. That was a premier fleet on the Chesapeake Bay in my opinion,” said Hill, a utility contractor.

Rick Hanson skippered Rosalita to victory in PHRF B, which was the largest class with 10 boats. The J/109 completed the course in 23 hours, 8 minutes and 21 seconds – just over 14 ½ minutes ahead of the Nanuq. Rosalita saw that margin over the Sabre 426 owned by Glenn Doncaster reduced to just over eight minutes on corrected time.

“I have to say it was a real challenge to stay focused. Going 120 miles on the nose with pretty heavy chop is tough,” said Hanson, an Avondale, Pennsylvania resident. “Our gameplan was to stay out of the heavy current when we could and stay right to catch the shift when it came in.”

Hanson said that anticipated shift arrived just south of the Potomac River and bent right so Rosalita was able to cover considerable distance on one tack. “Being in the right place paid off and credit to the crew for sticking to the strategy even though we fell behind our main competition for a while,” he said.

Hanson steered and served as his own navigator while his son Kyle Hanson contributed as tactician, trimmer and helmsman. Jordan Wiggins trimmed the main and steered for a while Kevin Petrikas worked the pit. Bowman Alex Razzook and mastman John Deamaley rounded out the crew on Rosalita, which competed in Down the Bay for the first time in seven year.

Seeker, an Ericson 34 owned by Alan Johnson of Hampton, Virginia, topped the PHRF Non-Spinnaker class that drew six entries. This was the first class victory in three attempts for Johnson, who had almost the same crew that helped the J/30 Goes to Eleven capture PHRF C in the 67th Down the Bay Race.

“We’ve had very good success in this race with this crew,” said Johnson, who had Jamie Shoemaker, Steve Miller and Frank Edgar aboard.

The Ericson 34 was designed by Bruce King as somewhat of a rule-breaker within the half-tonner realm, boasting a radical delta-wing keel. When the boat heels over it has a longer waterline and therefore sails faster in that mode.

“We were able to fly the No. 1 the whole way and just put a bubble in the front part of the main whenever things got a little hairy,” said Johnson, guessing that Seeker averaged about six to seven knots of speed. “That setup kept the boat driving really hard. When the wind eased up we just pulled the traveler back to weather.”

Robert Dunigan Jr. and Dan Lawrence joined forces to sail Jane Says to first place laurels among the four Doublehanded boats. Dunigan and Lawrence have entered the J/124 in the Annapolis-to-Bermuda Race and were required to complete an overnight voyage in advance.

“Down the Bay provided a perfect opportunity to see how we worked together and sort of get the mechanics down,” Lawrence said. “This boat is set up very well for a two-handed crew and we wound up getting along very well indeed.”

Jane Says posted an elapsed time of just over 23 hours, 52 minutes, which would have been fourth among PHRF B entries. Lawrence and Dunigan spent about a third of the race on deck together since so many tacks were required.

“We took a reef early when we went into Cove Point and that was a wise decision,” Lawrence said. “We wound up speeding up and the boat was much easier to control.”

Ben Carver and his crew on the Corsair F-27 Entourage were repeat winners of the Multihull class, which also drew four boats. Alicia Carver, Joshua Nealy and Larry Forgy comprised the crew with everyone swapping positions throughout.

Carver won last year’s Down the Bay Race with an elapsed time of 10 hours, 35 minutes and 31 seconds. It took almost 13 hours longer to complete the course this year.

“It was a hard race on a multihull with no downwind sailing whatsoever, and the chop was simply mind-numbing,” said Carver, a Norfolk resident. It was really important to work the two shores since the wind was so shifty and the chop was such a factor. That was the overriding factor in our decision-making.”

Entourage hugged the western shore waiting for a big right-hand shift and was rewarded handsomely – sailing one one tack from the mouth of the Potomac River to the York River 1 mark – a distance of some 60 miles. “We got a nice big lift to say the least,” Carver said.

