

2006 PC Nationals

September 16-17, 2006

It's never just a boat race. The Pacific Class annual championship is decidedly different from the fleet's usually genteel once-a-month racing; it's completely unlike, certainly, the perennial "race" to Coronado for lunch or the non-spinnaker bay runs to get out the families. The fleet of beautifully-designed, carefully-restored, and lovingly-kept sloops, only one under a half-century old, rarely get close enough to kiss. But that all changes for the class championships. Then it's flat-out, bring your ringers, Nascar-racing, and if you're afraid to get close, you came to the wrong party.

We knew going in that at least six boats were capable of winning the two-day, five-race series; our driver, Jack Sutphen, had won in four of them. Three others could be spoilers, and none could be completely discounted. #45, Andy LaDow's **Salsa**, was fast. #18, Bennett Greenwald's **Minx** won it last year, and #14, the Lindley/Kenny/Gould group's **La Cucaracha**, had won it three years before that. #26, Gene Trepte's **Water Wagon**, was loaded with pros, but so was every other hot boat. And #31, Tom Hurlburt's **Skylark** and Betty Sherman's #84, named for her father, Carl Eichenlaub, who recently built her from the "post war" Kettenburg design, were unknown quantities. Just about every boat sported a new main, jib, and kite, so whoever was going to win it would have to earn it.

The forecast we had before heading out on Saturday was for no more than 11 knots, which favored us. Getting a 5,000 pound wood, lead, and dacron amalgamation through the often sloppy waters off San Diego is never easy, and a shortness of breeze compounds it. The softer the conditions, the better we expected to do. Our crew was light, Jack, a former 12-meter driver, was on the tiller, and his cousin, ex A-Cup'er Bruce Sutphen, was calling the shots. Our bowman had plenty of experience, and I've been trimming for Jack for eight years. So, notwithstanding the depth in the competition, we felt we had a decent shot to reclaim the championship we'd relinquished last year to #18.

The forecast was only off by about five knots, but the difference between 11 and 16 knots in a narrow, 32-foot arrow with a 400 sq.-ft. main is like war and peace. The boat loads up so fast that getting to the high side can be a vertical climb up the rail, and the controls, designed for San Diego's typical 9 to 12 knots, strain under the increased pressure. Being light is bad, and the long ground swell (coupled with the increased wind waves), threaten to stop the boat with the rush of each crest. Puffs knock upwind boats, already laboring, over even further, and the downwind ride, with everyone pushing the envelopes on spinnaker size and shape, takes on the characteristics of a Wonka-vator on crank. The boats sail beyond DDW in a breeze, and the main on a boat hiked to weather is in constant danger of chicken-winging.

We started the first race well enough, not realizing it would be our best start of the day, but our pre-race wind shots didn't clue us into the right-hand shift that would persist throughout the day. Pinned well to the left, we tacked to port and watched #14 lead several boats across our bow. Two legs later, however, we were the after pair of two match races, with #45 swapping places with #14 just before they finished at the pin end, and us over-lapped behind 18 finishing at the boat end.

We went the right way the next race, but a second-row start is costly when everybody wants to go the same way. LaDow, currently the local Etchell's fleet points leader, clearly had #45 dialed-in, and his all-North crew jumped out to a solid lead to take the second race going away, confirming Jack's notion that his former boat sailed well in breeze and that **Salsa** would be tough to beat in the conditions. We again faired no better than fourth, with the same two players, 14 and 18, in the same two slots ahead of us.

Our third start was just about as bad as our second, and once more we faced the prospect of digging out from under the fleet, over-powered, under-weight, and now, pooped. And the boat was getting tired, too. Rounding the last leeward mark, we had worked back into our familiar fourth and set our sights on 31 when we heard a loud bang and saw the jib drop a full foot-and-a-half down the headstay. A quick look inside revealed that the wood screws for the jib halyard fine-tune had pulled out. Bruce lashed the block, and we were able to get about 95 percent of the jib height back, but we sailed the port leg with a nervous eye on #14, which had rounded only a few boat lengths behind and had tacked away when we broke.

That would have been enough if that was the end of it, but we got a new surprise when we flopped onto starboard. The upper shroud had un-pinned itself and was no longer supporting the top of the mast. This was worse. In 15 knots of breeze, this was a dismasting waiting to happen. We eased the main as much as possible, and, with Jack feathering, we limped up the long starboard beat anticipating the unmistakable crack of exploding Douglas Fir. Bruce re-pinned the shroud with, fittingly, one of the woodscrews from the jib fine, and we eked out our third fourth-place finish, just a length or so ahead of #14.

The first day's results gave LaDow a half-Nelson on the series, Greenwald was second with eight points, Scott Lindley in #14 was third with nine, we were fourth three points back, and Hurlburt was one point behind us. Given the problems that had developed on the final beat, we were just happy to have a boat with a mast and still be in the hunt.

Sunday saw the 10 to 12 knots we had hoped for, but didn't get, on Saturday. The early afternoon left-hand back made Jack's perfectly-timed pin-end start unbeatable, and we sailed the two-lap windward-leeward course to a comfortable win over 45 with 31 right behind. 18 recovered well from a potentially-disastrous OCS to take fifth, and 14 had fallen to eighth. The win moved us into a second-place tie with 18 and a three-point lead over 14 and 31. Our plan for the last race plan was simply to stay ahead of 18.

The final race start found 14 and 18 nicely pinned below us, but the late afternoon righty gave the boat-end starters a huge advantage. Although we were ahead of 14 and 18 going up the beat, we were all very deep in the fleet, as far back as ninth, and, worse, 31 was in second crossing well ahead, just behind the unstoppable 45. Curiously however, the boats which had gained on the right, and which were now going left, didn't cover us when we continued toward the starboard layline, and the veer which had paid so handsomely for the leaders now benefitted us. We rolled several boats in the last third of the beat and rounded the top mark in third, four lengths behind 31.

The dying breeze made the regatta's last leeward leg a stress-fest, with us continually closing the gap to 31 ahead and 18 behind constantly squatting on our breeze. We simul-jibed with 31 at the bottom and felt we were clear ahead, but we relinquished the inside rather than risk a protest. 31 rounded wide, however, and we were trapped below them. This gave #18 a lane above us, which they pressed to good advantage, and we spent the final beat in a three-boat drag race for the only two pieces of regatta hardware left to win. 31 finished the race second, 18 finished third, and we ended-up fourth (has a nice familiar ring to it, no?). Although we had lost second in the regatta by a point, we had won third by the same margin over 31.

So ended, for us, the 76th annual PC National Championships. And while it's typical, almost expected, to sign-off with a "We'll be back next year," that phrase actually means something when your driver is 88 years old. The boats are a handful in a breeze for the young guys, and Jack takes a beating in those conditions, so it was with great relief and much happiness when he quietly announced to us that rumors of his retirement had been greatly exaggerated, and we truly will be back for another go at it next year.

Carl Hancock