

Lake Erie Solo Sailors Beat Lake Erie

By Paul Nickerson with help

For 12 years solo sailors have gathered to meet the challenge of Lake Erie on a course that takes them from North Cape YC on the west end to the Seneca Shoal buoy off Buffalo back to Erie. This 271 nm course offers some unique options for the skippers in choosing sides of the lake and a "U" turn at Buffalo for the 60 mile return to Erie. It's a course that typically offers everything in weather and Lake Erie conditions imaginable over a 2 to 4 day period.



NCYC Raft

As the sailors gathered at NCYC, a few came early from the east end to beat some bad weather in the forecast. This gave them time to hire a diver to scrub their bottoms and share some conversation with some aspiring young solo sailors. First question was "Why do you do this?" I think the group of 5 GLSS members there had a total of over 60 challenges and all agreed it was all about their love of sailing, love of their boat and the test of sailing skills.

These enthusiastic young racing sailors took a moment to realize that the challenge came first and the race was part of the fun of the challenge and part of the comradery that drew the sailors year after year. I think the greatest part of the Lake Erie Solo is the comradery as the clubs at both ends provide the participants opportunity to hang out with each other and socialize. Mark Smith has this reason; "For me, and I suspect a lot of the other GLSS sailors, the real reason I love the Challenge is this: It's the only time in my life where only one thing matters - the boat. Problems at work, problems at home, money problems, the problems of the world - they don't matter a bit. All that matters is concentrating on the boat, and the boat will take care of me."

The North Cape fleet enjoyed a good Wednesday night race with a tasty wind down dinner of a sausage hoagie and fresh corn on the cob enjoyed

by the solo sailors and club members sponsored by the Junior Sailors.

Ron Smallbone and I enjoyed a pot of coffee Thursday morning as the weather was overcast and unstable with storms predicted. Ron told me about his 2 week trek to get to the starting line from the Georgian Bay. This included a stop in Sarnia where he met up with GLSS member Tom Hughes. Experiencing an overheating problem with his Yanmar engine, Ron was in contact with ace mechanic, engineer and GLSS member Noel Brockman who was also heading for the LESC. Noel told him to come on down to his place on Lake St. Clair and they'd try to get it fixed. With Tom Hughes, Ron departed Sarnia heading down the St. Clair River to visit the Brockmans. Tom took the helm while Ron kept the bilge dry from the leaking water pump. Ron had ordered the necessary parts from a Yanmar dealer in Lasalle, Ontario and after a couple of days at Noel's, the water pump was fixed and Ron was ready to move on. Lesson learned by Ron was to change the water pump impeller before the tips break off and get into the cooling system.

Next stop was the Lasalle Mariners YC on the Detroit River. There at the dock to catch his lines was his host, Dave Evans. While staying with Dave



Epiphany Starts the 2018 LESC

and his wife Maggie, they celebrated Dave's 81st birthday with some Scotch. *Ratso* was also treated to a bottom wash and Ron power washed the deck. Good thing the Canadian EPA wasn't around. Other highlights of his stay besides Maggie's cooking included a barbeque and Pentangue (Bocci Ball) tournament, beach party, breakfast with Dave's biker buddies, and meeting up with GLSS members Tony Berands and Craig Morrison.

Becoming a GLSS member means more than finishing a sailing challenge, it means you've made many new friends who would do anything for you.

Climbing out of the cabin with our second cups of coffee we discovered that John Ollila had called in a diver to clean his boat bottom. When finished

on Finnair, Ron and I both paid him to also clean our bottoms. With a forecast for an upwind challenge this would be worth every cent.

A few more boats sailed in including first timer Lawrence Visnic and regular Allan Belovarac. Allan shared his adventure of having done the Chicago Mac solo in June and I know Lawrence was trying to soak up thoughts of just what he was in for. No matter how well you think you are prepared for your first GLSS Challenge, it's not until you cross the finish line that you realize the accomplishment. Wally McMinn, the Godfather of the Lake Erie Challenge and organizer of the North Cape end, spent Thursday having a semi-routine heart procedure and we were all happy when he arrived at North Cape for some evening fun.

Friday arrived with a forecast of scattered storms through the day and a cold front going through overnight. Winds from the SW were forecast to then go NW and clock East. Boats continued to arrive and receive final prep and provision. A near disaster was averted after the Michigan Bar and Grill called to say there was a gas leak and they may not be able to cater dinner. The kitchen volunteers from NCYC started to scramble but as soon as a backup plan was decided upon, the call came that the gas leak was fixed and the Skippers Dinner would be on time. Thanks to the McCulloughs, Quinlans and McMinn's who have served dinner for the last 12 years.

After dinner a quick squall went through and everyone hoped it would be the last and the cold front could finally move through. As the sun was going down it lit a Rainbow that went from the US to Canada.



A Brilliant Rainbow filled the Sky

Everyone has their own reason to do a GLSS Challenge. For the rookies it may just to prove to themselves they can complete one. For others there may be a revenge factor. Ron Smallbone lost a rudder in 2016 but was lucky enough to be towed in by the US Coast Guard. This year he would be testing his new rudder. For Mark Smith it goes

beyond his love of sailing. He loves the competition, in particular sailing against John Ollila. With identical ratings they never seem to get far from each other. For others it may just be a way to celebrate a birthday, or for Dave Evans his 81st. I'm sure it wasn't just about trying to pass Blair Arden in total GLSS Challenges as both were going for number 42. My own challenge was just wondering if I could finish another challenge after 4 years of cancer related issues and 2 hip replacements.



Tango and Moonbeam battling at the pin end.

Saturday started with a nice coffee, juice, donuts and fruit breakfast. Skip McCullough and his race committee lead the way to the starting line with a 6-8 knot Northerly breeze. At 1000 the fleet of 16 were on their way with scratch boat Russ Krock in his Schock 35 leading the way upwind towards the west end fishing fleet, Pelee Point and Buffalo.



West Lake Erie Fishing Fleet is always part of the course.

Mark Smith and John Ollila were on either side of me after a good start. Mark tells the story, "After an uneventful start, winds were light but pleasant on a close reach during the sail to Pelee Point. I had a frustrating time at West Sister when that island vacuum sucked all the wind from my sails for the next hour and the biting flies started swarming me. When the wind filled in, it shifted and put my nemesis, Finnair, who had been abeam of me, 1/2 mile ahead. Finnair's skipper, John Ollila, is a great

sailor and our boats have identical ratings, so I always use him as a guide to how well I'm sailing, happy when I can just keep up with him. It took me several hours to catch him, and that was the story of the whole race. He and I caught and passed each other several times over the course of the next 2 days."



Walkure II to port and Finnair to Starboard

Krock and Evans lead the fleet with Dan Pavlat, Lease Shock and Noel Brockman approaching Pelee Island passage busy with freighters. The beat was now as the winds increased and were more easterly and getting past the Southeast Shoal seemed harder than it should be. The waves at the shoal were larger and more confused as the winds must have been different east of the Islands. By dark the miserable biting flies were gone but the freighters were not.

After sailing nearly into Leamington, I tacked and sailed Pigeon Bay up the coast and Pelee Point to the Southeast Shoal Light. Trying to decide which tack to continue on for the night was decided by the red white and green lights of a freighter coming right at me so it was a tack towards Canada north of the freighter lanes and towards the hundreds of wind turbine lights flashing in unison on the Canadian Shore.

Not far from me, Mark Smith writes of his battle with John Ollila. "At one point Saturday night on the east side of Pelee Point I passed him a few yards to leeward rather than windward as I didn't want to risk a collision in the dark. Fifteen minutes later he passed me to windward (I still don't know how he barreled past me like a rocket) and when he got ahead of me, the bad air from his sails hit my wind vane (I had the autopilot steering by the wind setting). The autopilot sensed the bad air as a wind shift and turned the boat around 180 degrees. By the time I recovered I was a mile behind him and we didn't meet up again until Buffalo.

I headed south to stay south of the rhumb line as the predictions were for this to be the most favorable wind to approach Buffalo. This paid off and I made good progress Sunday sailing south of the rhumb line to Erie, reaching Erie early Monday morning."

While the back of the fleet struggled more on a beat to get past the shoal, the lead boats while favoring the north were heading towards Roundeau with Russ Krock being the only boat to clear Roundeau without tacking. With the bend in the Canadian shore and continuous wind turbine lights on a clear night, the progress seemed slow even though we sailed in hull speed conditions through a lumpy Lake Erie.



PeaceMaker during more peaceful times at the start.

It was during this time that Brad Enterline on *PeaceMaker* experienced an autohelm problem. After heaving to and making several attempts to fix it, Brad made the decision to withdraw and head to Erie, his home port. My advice to anyone with wheel steering has always been to go with a below deck linear or hydraulic drive system. I have seen way too many failures of wheel pilots and for solo sailors that is not acceptable.



Sunday saw most of the fleet heading south making slow upwind progress towards Buffalo but enjoying decent sailing conditions. With slow progress and unfavorable forecasts for return sails and tight time schedules, *Odyssey* and *Otis B*.

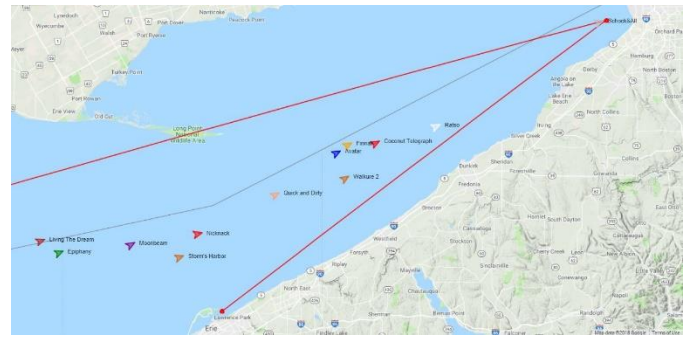
Driftwood withdrew and headed west. Don't think this wasn't an anguishing decision knowing Dave Evans finishes every challenge he starts. A radio failure forced *Tango* to retire and head for Geneva. During the radio check-ins I noticed Noel Brockman on *Quick & Dirty* seemed to have a booming radio for someone who should be miles ahead. At 1800 Noel came on to say he was a few miles behind me as we approached Ashtabula. Close enough to shore for an internet connection I pulled up the Kattack tracking and there he was just out of sight in the haze. His story or lesson to us was his recent diagnosis with Type I Diabetes and his failure to control his body and mind had led to a reaction that literally had him sailing the wrong way for many hours. Now with everything under control he was gaining fast as we played a few shifts near shore as night approached.

I think I have been using AIS in some form or another for at least 10 years. First was an AIS compatible VHF radio that when tied into my GPS and laptop navigation software showed me all I needed to know about nearby shipping. When deciding to sail to Chicago and do the Lake Michigan Mac in 2014 I added a Vesper AIS transponder. There was nothing like sailing in the fog for three weeks near the shipping lanes and have the freighters hail you in close situations. During our challenges it's also interesting to be able monitor other skippers who have AIS transponders. Sometimes you end up with an AIS buddy, someone you continuously monitor for speed, heading and distance. My AIS buddy for this challenge turned out to be Rob Burger on *Storm's Harbor*. We have similar boats in that they are not great on a beat and this challenge was a beat so far. PHRF has him much faster so after getting an early lead on Rob I was always looking over my shoulder on the AIS wondering when he would catch me. Now maybe he was looking at me thinking I'm not catching *Nicknack* so maybe he's sailing good and we're both sailing well for our boats. There we sailed almost within sight of each other for 2 days.

Sunday night was a steady struggle of variable winds making everyone pay attention for every mile looking for a favored tack or shift to get to Seneca Shoal a little quicker. I remember a radio check where some boats were complaining about no wind while I had a steady breeze happily doing 5 knots.

Mark Smith reported: "Monday morning the wind was very light and shifty, and the boat was almost dead in the water, making less than 2 knots. I put up a spinnaker and got the boat moving again at about 3 knots. All was well until the wind made a sudden and huge shift to dead-ahead, wrapping the

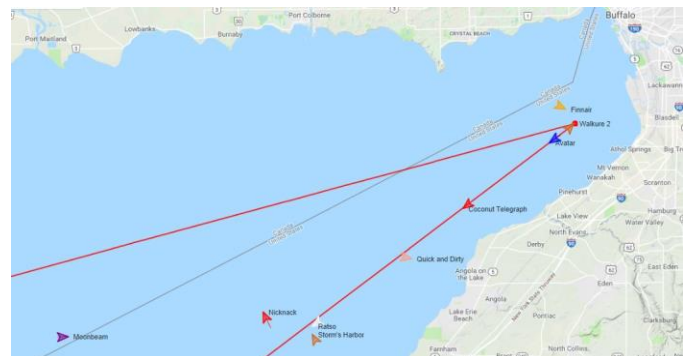
whole boat in spinnaker. It took me an anxious half-hour to get the sail down and get a jib back up."



Monday Morning at 0600 showed everyone pointing more or less towards Buffalo. *Shock n' All* is at the Seneca Shoal buoy.

The one boat that seemed happy was Russ Krock on the Schock 35 *Shock n' All* which was a boat designed for sailing upwind. Monday morning he got around the Seneca Shoal Buoy by 0600 and was heading to Erie. With fluky winds at Seneca Shoal many of the other boats got close but couldn't quite get there.

I kept Rob Burger in the rear view mirror but he was getting closer as we sailed the US coastline making steady progress. Around Dunkirk I looked toward shore and there was *Shock n' All* enjoying some downwind sailing back to Erie. Up ahead Mark Smith on *Walkure II* tells his story. "Heading for Buffalo, I had a lucky wind shift and with the new wind direction I was able to head straight to Buffalo until I hit Sturgeon Point, when the wind again became very light and shifty and I floundered around for a couple of hours trying to get the last 15 miles to the turning mark. When I finally got there, I found that several boats, including Finnair, had been stuck up in the Northeast corner of the lake unable to get to the mark. I rounded the mark a little before Finnair and both of us headed to Erie on a close reach, with me leading by a few hundred yards." Dave Evans on *Ratso* also made the near shore course work and had rounded in 2nd overall writing "Another of Lake Erie's finest".



Mon at 1600 half the fleet is around Seneca Shoal with *Walkure II* just ahead of *Finnair*.

There's an old Pat Daily song about Lake Erie that goes
"It's the Legend of the Lake and you can never tell,
She can be real mellow and then blow like Hell,
Don't think she can't take it,
She's taken better sailors than you my friend.
Keep your eye on the sky cause
The Legend of the Lake
Says the Lake has got its eye on you."

It was about this time I remember turning into the weather radio and the forecast had changed to a "High Wind Warning" for later. *Storm's Harbor* and *Nicknack* sailed on port tack towards shore behind Sturgeon Point. As I felt I was about to sail into a hole I tacked out into the lake. It wasn't long before I was crossing tacks with Rob and he had to duck me but continued towards shore.



Storm's Harbor takes the stern of Nicknack 200 miles into the LES.

As he got to the wind hole he tacked out and having tacked back on *Nicknack* it looked like another close crossing. About a quarter mile apart the wind just lifted off the lake. Quickly a new wind filled in off shore and filled the sails on *Storms Harbor*. It stopped right there and Rob sailed off while I waited and waited for the wind to come to me. Thirty minutes later it finally reached me and I was off and laying Seneca Shoal 12 mile ahead at 6 knots with Rob a mile and a half ahead. About this time we started see the leading boats on their way back to Erie enjoying a close reach with good winds. Also at this time, Russ on *Shock n' All* was finishing at Erie.

The winds built to about 15 knots as we sailed towards Buffalo and the sun was setting. Rob rounded a little after 2022. I made the decision to put a reef in the main while it was still light as I knew the lake had its eye on us. Rounding the buoy

around 2037 I was sailing on a close reach at hull speed. Life seemed great for a while.

The winds built a little but up ahead Lease Schock on *Avatar* was reporting heavy wind, dropping his main and sailing with just his #4 jib. Everyone else was doing the same. From *Walkure* // Mark Smith writes, "My lucky break came Monday night about 40 or 50 miles from Erie when the wind started picking up. Starting at about 10 knots a little forward of the beam, it built to about 25 with stronger gusts. Since I don't have roller furling headsails (I still prefer hank-ons), it takes me about 15-20 minutes to make a headsail change, and not wanting to give Finnair time to pass me, I sailed with a full main and my largest jib (a 150%), clearly way overpowered but moving faster than my hull speed (the boat's maximum theoretical speed) until I had enough of a lead to reduce sails. Starting with a double reef in the main, which didn't help much to calm the boat or my nerves, then heaving to in order to drop my large jib and raise my smallest (85%). Within another hour I was still overpowered and dropped the main, still sailing above hull speed with just my #4 jib, but now sailing comfortably and even able to do some napping (the 15 minute naps really worked for me this year and I never got over-tired).

There was no napping on *Nicknack*. As I reached Dunkirk the half rolled furling Genny and reefed main were over powered and gusts were registering over 35 knots. It was time for the ultimate test of my new hips as I had to go to the mast to drop the main. I reset the Watch Commander (a constant 30 minute alarm) and headed up the leeward side. Calf deep water on the leeward rail was actually warm. I got the main halyard released but the new heavy main needed help coming down. I worked around the mast to the high side and started pulling the main down one foot at a time. It seemed to take forever but it was finally down in the Lazy Jack lines. Hands and knees back to the cockpit and a big sigh of relief as the boat was under control and still doing 6-7 knots. My Watch Commander alarm went off and I started to enjoy the ride.

Up ahead I could see the bright white stern light of *Storm's Harbor* and wondered how he was doing. A newer boat with a smaller headsail and roller furler main, I thought he must be sitting back enjoying the ride. Oh, but he doesn't have a dodger, just a large Bimini. The sail from Buffalo to Erie is always long mentally and we seemed to have our share of heavy air at night over the twelve Lake Erie Challenges.

Behind me Allan Belovarac on *Moonbeam* was just around the Seneca Shoal Buoy at 2209.

Epiphany's log reads: "I had to double reef the main sail. Just after midnight I learned Living the dream, Lawrence Visnic was about a quarter mile away. He rounded Seneca shoal light at 128am and I went around at 159am. The Seneca shoal light is very difficult to see and you have to use your GPS to find it. There are so many background red blinking lights with the windmills in the background.



Monday night at 2300 the fleet stretches from the PA line to Buffalo.

After and during the rounding my boat started to get out of control so I doused the number one head sail stuffing it down the forward hatch and put up the number three head sail. The winds are blowing a sustained 20 plus knots. I set a course to the finish line at the outer channel markers that lead to the Erie harbor."

Ahead the boats were approaching the finish with *Coconut Telegraph* second across at 0108 followed by *Ratso* and *Avatar*. Dave Evans, never short on words, left the comment on his finish form, "Thank Christ it's over". The Race Committee kept busy as boats kept coming in through the night. Mark Smith held on to finish at 0316 ahead of John Ollila with Noel Brockman in between. The green range lights of the Presque Isle entrance and the finish buoys could be seen for 12-15 miles so the last 2 hours seemed to take forever. As dawn approached *Storm's Harbor* crossed the line at 0608 and twenty minutes later *Nicknack* followed while the Brig *Niagara* rounded the Presque Isle peninsula.

Tying up at the Erie YC guest dock I found many of the skippers awake and ready to catch lines. Amazing what adrenaline does! With a break in the action everyone agreed we would meet and go to *Avantis*, the closest restaurant and an Erie tradition, at 9:30 for breakfast. Imagine 9 recovering

skippers making a mile long walk starting with a half mile trek uphill on appropriately named Ravine Drive. Next through a residential area that is not totally logical to sailors who know Erie by water, not land. You guessed it, we got a little lost. There was a debate to go left or right and the fleet split tacks. Out came a couple of smart phones with Google Maps. Everyone finally made it to *Avantis* but the right side of the course was definitely favored. After a long breakfast, we took an indirect course back to EYC. All roads lead to a loop that overlooks Presque Isle Bay and eventually Ravine Drive.

At this time Alan Belovarac was finishing and the Race Committee met him at his home club down the bay. Back at the EYC guest dock skippers speculated on the conditions on the lake. There were strong winds and a few clouds producing showers. During the afternoon those showers turned into a couple of nasty squalls. Ron Smallbone reported: "It was a very windy close reach all the way. I was close to Lawrence Visni on 'Living a Dream' all the way. For some reason he headed out into the lake in the vicinity of Erie, Pennsylvania. I found out later he just had fallen asleep. At 1530 I crossed the finish line just as a rain squall descended on the area. After tidying up I made my way to the Erie Yacht club. I just got tied up when a second severe cell hit the area. Noel Brockman registered 34 knots of wind as this cell roared through."

Having drifted offshore on his course, *Living A Dream* now had to make his way back towards shore and the finish. Part of the price he paid was the squall Ron described plus another close to the finish. Even the last squall had its reward, a beautiful rainbow. Lawrence finally crossed the line at 1909.



Lawrence's friend Jim Lee awaits at the Erie harbor entrance to congratulate his Friend.

At that time everyone was gathering in the EYC dining room for the traditional Tuesday evening dinner. Just as the food was coming out Lawrence entered the EYC basin and it was time to get him tied up. The guest dock was full and the best place to put him was on the basin wall. Problem was, Lake Erie was high and the pressure from the weather left only a couple of inches of wall. With all his dock lines we were able to tie him off the wall from other docks. Time to get back to dinner.



Everyone lends a hand getting Living A Dream tied up. Pressure from storm cells effect water heights in Lake Erie's harbors and it was about 3 inches from flooding the basin wall.

Lawrence later went on to write:

"I have crossed Lake Erie, circumnavigated Lake Erie and even made it all the way to Lake Michigan on one occasion. None of my voyages, however, compare to completing my first Solo Challenge. As I crossed the finish line in the 2018 Erie Solo Challenge my sailing self-esteem grew exponentially. It didn't matter that I came in last. I had made it!

As I was motoring in to the Erie Yacht Club I thought, "Well, nothing is going to top that." I was wrong. All of the veterans interrupted their dinners to greet me. Once I was tied up these titans of Great Lakes sailing gave me a *very* hearty ovation and each one shook my hand. It was overwhelming.

During the festivities that followed I said to one of the members, "You can own a sailboat but that doesn't make you a sailor. You can day sail and even port hop picking your fair weather windows but that doesn't make you a sailor. Hell, you can even be racer and sail technically better than I do but that doesn't make you a sailor. Completing this, however, now *that* makes you a sailor." I stand by that statement."

The challenge was over but the fun was just getting started. One of the great aspects of the Lake Erie Challenge is the hospitality of the Clubs that host the fleet. After dinner and an attempt to close the bar the skippers retired to their boats for much needed sleep, including Dave Evans.

Wednesday the skippers enjoyed a tasteful luncheon for the award banquet. GLSS member and EYC Commodore Greg Gorny's grandson Owen helped present the flags as each of the skippers got their moment to share highlights of the adventure.



After the luncheon and a group shot of the Skippers, plans were discussed for the return deliveries. With westerly winds still blowing 15 to 20 everyone felt EYC would be a nice place to spend the night. Besides it was race night on the bay with the start just off the basin wall. With 15 to 20 knot winds and a downwind start it was quite entertaining as a crowd gathered on the wall for the entertainment. In the middle of the course the Brig Niagara was anchored waiting its next adventure. This is how sailboat racing should be done.



GLSS skippers look on as the EYC Beer Can Series A fleet starts about 100 feet off the seawall.

With the winds still blowing westerly on Thursday morning, only John Ollila dared adventure west to get home. Ron Smallbone was headed NE to Port Colborne and the Welland Canal to get back to Toronto; "The wind and waves are favourable for a broad reach on a warm sunny day. I'm hitting in excess of seven knots regularly and the auto helm seems to be holding the course. At some point I surfed down a wave and reached 10.3 knots! (Twice!).

I'll have to keep an eye on the fully laden Algoma Compass, she's doing 12.4 knots steering a course of 58 degrees true and obviously headed to the Welland Canal. I just can't believe the speeds I'm doing on this broad reach with just my cruising head sail. I'm regularly reaching speeds of 8 plus knots. What a ride.

Friday Aug. 24

A boat from Chicago, Illinois an Island Packet 43, 'No Worries' pulled in late last night. This morning I met the crew and the skipper/ owner Bill Fagerstrom. Bill knew Mark Gannon, Jim McClaren and Joe Turns solo GLSS Chicago members. He's a GLSS member himself having done the solo Chicago to Mackinac Island Race three times in the early 2000's, it's a small World! They are headed to Mystic, Connecticut where it will stay for a year, then they plan on crossing the Atlantic to the Azores then cruise the UK and ultimately they're going to Sweden. Bill's wife is from there."

For the rest it was time for another trip to Avantis for breakfast. All the remaining boats were now on the guest dock as the high water allowed the deeper draft boats to clear the stone hump that can be an issue.



Skippers wind down on the dock before the Thursday Night Party.

Anticipation was high for the EYC Thursday night party (including band) on the lawn as the skippers started with their own dock party. The EYC members not familiar with our group had to wonder what was happening to their club as Dave

Evans took over the dance floor. The rest of us were wondering also!

The forecast for Friday had winds going south for a favorable ride home and they did just that leaving a lot of great memories of another GLSS Lake Erie Challenge.

Once again Lake Erie supplied the GLSS with a true challenge. Twelve of the 16 starters survived to finish even though a 200 mile beat and 35 knot close reach were not what skippers would have requested on the menu. Nobody enjoyed the fly attack of Saturday. The new guys finished first and last. The old guy, I'm sorry, senior superior sailor, vaulted into the lead of GLSS Challenges finished. Anyone else plan to complete 42 challenges, including several in their 80's? If doing a new GLSS Challenge is on your bucket list, it should be, and Lake Erie should be at the top of that list.



Dave Evans....



Second wave of starters at the Committee Boat.



Blair Arden going for challenge #42.



Ron Smallbones at the NCYC bar trading tales.



Fleet docked at the EYC Guest Dock.



Sun sets on the fleet at NCYC



Squall hits Just as Living A Dream finishes.



Starboard!



Living a Dream watches the fleet full away.



Schock n' All and Walkure II enjoy the sail home.