

A Schooner Race

Five minutes before the start of the race the fleet, a cloud of white sails, twirls and turns with their only noise the crack of canvas and the hiss of salt water down their hulls. To the average observer their moves would appear to have little purpose, random even. This is the Nova Scotia schooner fleet; more than thirty schooners with the grace of swans and the seaworthiness that comes from over a century of building for local conditions.

With two minutes left to go before the start, things change. First one boat and then another turn and pick up speed until the entire fleet is heading for the start line. Every boat's intent is to hit the start line at full speed as the gun's crack announces the start of the race. Courses are set, sails trimmed, and crews relay positions of other boats to the helm so collisions can be avoided. Exactly on time the gun sounds and the schooners cross the line, jostling for position and making quick changes to sail trim. Within minutes the fleet has started to separate as the larger boats leap ahead of the smaller boats.

This describes a typical start, but there is no typical race. On any given day a person in a schooner race might see any or all of the following:

A dead calm with the fleet of thirty majestic schooners tightly packed without steerage on a cobalt sea. The skipper cools his feet in a bucket of seawater while an impromptu concert breaks out and the sound of flute, mandolin, and drum drift across the water.

The fleet sails during bad weather in high winds; spume is blown from the top of white-capped waves while rain drums on the deck and flows in streams from the scuppers.

Two schooners, racing rivals for years, duel tensely for seven hours only to have one boat cross the finish line four seconds ahead of the other.

The crews of the schooner fleet are tight knit and friendly and it is not uncommon for them to wave and exchange greetings during the race. Crew members volunteer for years and it is not uncommon for some to travel thousands of miles to join the Nova Scotia schooner fleet's Race Week.

The skippers are friendly among themselves as well. Boat racing is generally known for being loud and prone to racing disputes. However, the schooner captains rarely raise their voices, and the number of racing appeals since 1961 can be counted on one hand. Professionalism and grace under pressure are the usual hallmarks of these skippers during a race.

As the race ends the first boats to approach the finish line are the larger schooners, some of which reach eighty feet or more in length. The first one crosses the line and receives the coveted 'gun' signaling they are first to finish. The following boats receive a horn as their bowsprits cross the line and one by one the fleet comes home.

Occasionally two boats come flying down to the finish line at the same time. When they are on the same tack it is a straight story of pursuit; usually the fastest boat crosses first. However, if they are on different courses then there is the potential for high drama and excitement. As the boats, each weighing at least seven tons, barrel down to the line they will have to cross the path of the other boat. The skippers eye the narrowing gap, judge who has the right of way, make minute changes to course and sail trim and pass each other so closely that a cracker could be tossed from one boat to the other. They then race neck and neck for the finish line with the boats barely ten feet apart and the crew intensely focused on wringing the last bit of speed out of the boat. As soon as one boat hits the line the crew shouts with joy of the win.

After crossing the line the boats make for the dock, lowering their sails with the sunset as a backdrop. There the crews will tidy their boats and break out drinks and food. The skippers will also prepare their boats for the evening and the race tomorrow, but in the back of their minds they will be wondering where they placed after the racing handicap was applied to their race time. Soon enough the times will be posted and skippers and crews will either celebrate or talk about what could have been long into the night.

--Niels A. Nielsen