

TO PARTY & RACE IN PARADISE

36th Regatta Time in Abaco, July 1-10

By Rebecca Burg - Southwinds Magazine - Sept 2011

Every year near summer's start, cruisers and serious racing sailors flock to the jewel-like islands of Abaco, Bahamas. A racing venue like no other, Regatta Time is an experience for the entire family. Boaters who are not interested in racing still schedule their trips around the event for an island-to-island tour in a supportive, social setting. This year's series of five races and daily parties began on July 1 in Green Turtle Cay and ended July 9 in Marsh Harbour.

The Party Begins

Regatta Time begins with the Stranded Naked Cheeseburger Party. The name may raise some brows, but this established tradition is family- and pet- friendly. Stranded Naked is a brand of swimwear by Bobb and Patricia Henderson, who host the grand party with help from volunteers. As usual, this year's beach bash saw a good crowd that found plenty of room on Fiddle Cay's powdery, white beach where booths, food lines and play areas had been set up. Bobb himself gave away toys to the kids while adults sipped margaritas or rum punches. For lunch, participants enjoyed cheeseburgers or dogs, complete with Jimmy Buffett tunes lightly playing in the background. Like a rubber invasion, rows of inflatable dinghies lined the beach on each side of the shallow play area. Larger vessels were anchored just offshore.

July 2 -The First Race

On July 2, sunrise over Green Turtle Cay was a golden aura, the silence broken only by birdsong drifting through the balmy, floral-scented air. Conditions were mild for the first race. Boats were organized into six fleets with their own starts. Andy Burke's Pearson 30, Abaco Glow, nailed the start in the non-spinnaker PHRF fleet. After the first leg, John Gehrig's J/46, Full Deck, caught up to Abaco Glow. Full Deck endeavored to put the needed miles over one of the fleet's toughest competitors. Burke's team refused to be daunted, or bored, and squeezed as much speed out of the light breeze as possible. On corrected time, Abaco Glow finished less than a minute over Full Deck. "You'll kill us on a reach," Gehrig was saying, as he and Burke reviewed their day at the awards party. It's Full Deck's first Abaco regatta, and Gehrig's team would earn some first-place trophies later in the week. Andy Burke has been racing in Abaco for over two decades in a series of boats that he's owned. His team consists of family and friends, such as returning crewmate Christina Chang, an active dinghy racer whose skill helped bring Abaco Glow to the podium throughout the week.

July 3-4 - A Lay Day and then Racing Continues at Treasure Cay

July 3 was a rest day, allowing people to explore the out islands and head to Treasure Cay for an afternoon party at the scenic Coco Beach Bar. On July 4, racing sailors started at Treasure Cay and finished near Great Guana with easterly winds averaging 15 knots.

"Today we had wind, so it was an exciting race," Donna Laclair said. Donna, the "Mango Queen," was having a blast with the "Flower King," John Hennessee. The colorful couple crewed on a friend's 48-foot catamaran, Surprise. Owned by Corky and Sue Clark, the elegant cruiser charts out of Stuart, FL. The boat isn't new to cruising, but it's trying out its first race ever. The Surprise crew found pure enjoyment. "Are you kidding?" Sue enthused at the final awards party. "We already have next year's Regatta Time marked on our calendar."

Hennessee, a retired doctor, artist and gallery owner, has at least 15 years of Abaco regattas under his flowery belt. Most anyone who's participated will recall John's beach party outfit, which consists of a silver crown and rainbow-hued blooms, some of them strategically covering, thong-like, important body parts. Female partygoers are often seen admiring and photographing John's floral "arrangement." During the after-race party at Grabbers Bar and Grill, Clyde Rodger's Sponge Cake was awarded a first in fleet, the trophy a cast bronze sculpture of a

Bahamian breed of dog. Clyde's wife, who volunteers at her local animal shelter, was thrilled. "We have 15 cats now," Clyde confided, then reassures, "They're all outside cats."

July 5- A Lay Day for Local Play as the Fleet Heads to Marsh Harbour

During July 5th's lay day, sailors enjoyed an afternoon party at Mangoes restaurant in Marsh Harbour. During the day, people experienced local attractions such as diving and snorkeling.

Regatta followers and long-time cruisers Pat and Joe, on LovePat, admitted to an unusual snorkeling experience. Pat was floating along, admiring the tropical fish that had grown unafraid of human presence at a popular snorkel site. One small fish thought it would be productive to wriggle between Pat's snorkel and mask, and then grab hold of her upper lip. It refused to let go despite Pat's expected response of arm waving with a panicked, splashy retreat. "It sucked onto my lip like a vacuum cleaner!" She recalls. Pat hollered as loud as she could into her snorkel and the fish gave up after one last sandpapery nip. Though sore, her lip was okay, but she inevitably faced some good-natured teasing from fellow boaters.

July 6 - Marsh Harbour Race

Pressed for time, some sailors flew in, chartered boats and entered the regatta in this fashion. Donna Noonan and a crew of ladies chartered a 37-foot Beneteau and dubbed her Wicked. Stuart Miles chartered a Moorings catamaran, just Too, and took a first in his class midweek. Roy Hutcheson, who's raced his own boat in Abaco, entered a cruiser from Sunsail charters and campaigned her as New Yot. On July 6, boats battled in a buoy race near Marsh Harbour. New Yot's crew of friends worked like pros in a carefully timed start. On the final legs, Robert Fritz's 25-foot Catalina, Sinderella, and New Yot raced nose to nose. The two were in different classes, but their crews enjoyed challenging each other. Close enough to indulge in casual conversation and crack jokes, the two finished side by side, only one second apart.

In another area of the course, Sponge Cake and Abaco Rage were locked in a covering duel. Bearing down on the last mark, Sponge Cake put the pressure on Rage. At the buoy, the classic Bahamian sloop fumbled and nearly broached, her crew scrambling in chaos on deck. Sponge Cake slipped away, concerned and puzzling over how it had managed to fluster the tough old Abaconian into such a wild stumble. Later, Sponge Cake was glad to learn that it hadn't been the cause of Rage's blunder. The wooden Bahamian sloop had been appreciating the battle with Clyde's team. However, a few non-crew members who were along for the ride innocently didn't know Rage's routine, and the boat lost control. (Three narrow boards, called pries, are pushed over to the windward side and the crew, feet dangling over the water, sits on these for a delicate balance between weight and heeling angle.) Abaco Rage regained her footing enough to finish about 30 seconds over Sponge Cake.

July 7 - Race to Hope Town

July 7th's Marsh Harbour-to-Hope Town race saw 15- to 18 knot southerly breezes. The early morning cruiser's announcements on VHF 68 included enthusiastic happy 50th birthday wishes for Ryan Hamm, who's racing with Rick Moore on the J/ 120, Moose Down. In a few days, Moore, a pilot, will be celebrating his 30th anniversary. "We've got even number karma going," Ryan said. Competing in the spinnaker fleet, Moose Down shared some tight finishes with Abaco vets Susimi and Tampa Girl.

Despite a course demanding numerous tacks, Abaco Glow covered 16 miles in only three hours. Through the series, Burke's team faced strong competition from Full Deck, Toki, Direction and Dixie Chicken. Abaco Glow would earn the most bullets in its fleet. Mark Williams and his Charleston based cruiser, Dixie Chicken, raced with his daughter onboard. Mark confides that he's not very competitive, but enjoys the highly sociable Regatta Time. "Today we succeeded in finding all the marks," he noted with a chuckle. While Dixie Chicken's rivals were hard at work in race one, Mark's team was drinking margaritas on Treasure Cay's famous beach. "Dixie Chicken does not miss a party," Mark assures.

Once again, Sponge Cake and Abaco Rage kept each other on edge. “That was the most perfect start...,” a Rage crewman was saying about Sponge Cake during the awards party at Sea Spray Resort. The secret may be Clyde’s -team. Long-time crewman Brad Riggle, a daring soul who once drove a Jet Ski from Miami and across the Gulf Stream to Bimini, was onboard with his sweetheart, Loretta. Calling tactics was Paul Rooy, an author and pilot. Also crewing was his wife, Mary Lightfine, a nurse and pilot. For their honeymoon, the two flew over the Amazon and have had led active lives by traveling to far corners of the world to help others. Mary founded Volunteers Without Boundaries and Rooy has written books about flying and about the couple’s remarkable adventures.

Dennis Gorden, who used to be in the ice business, named his boat Toki, after the smiling Eskimo character on his company logo. He first learned to sail in the army, and then bought Toki, a Moorings 51, after retiring from the ice trade. For next year’s regatta, Dennis plans on getting a group of adventurous souls from the Halifax River Yacht Club to come to Abaco. Efficiently helming Toki is Katherine Hunter, president of a web service company. At first, learning to sail and race was a challenge for her. “I still hold the record for dumping my boat the most times,” Katherine explains about her sailing school experiences. However, she stuck to it and discovered sailing’s addictive side. “Now I know what all the words mean,” she said about the pleasure of participating in racing a boat as opposed to just riding along. Katherine actively promotes racing, encouraging more women into the sport. Roy Hutcheson’s New Yot finished mid-fleet and had fun doing so. “When you come down, pick up a charter boat with a non-racing crew of friends, that’s not so bad,” Roy observed. What truly mattered was that his crew was enjoying the experience. “We came, we saw, we drank rum!”

July 8, 9, 10 - Another Lay Day, the Final Race and the Party’s Over

After another lay day on the eighth, the final race was held on July 9-and the last chance to test one’s skills against a fine group of cruising and racing sailors.. On the way to the battlefield, Sponge Cake ran aground on soft bottom. Eyeing the clock, the blue cruiser finally broke free with seconds to spare, a black cloud of diesel smoke marking a frenetic rush toward the gate. “I think we dug a channel right to the start line!” Clyde said.

Abaco Rage’s team was amazingly resilient after over a week of party action, but after crossing the finish, a tired crewmember fell into the water. Clyde’s team beat Rage, Sponge Cake taking second, under Mikhail, Matt Salatino’s Moody 41. Michael Carrington’s entry, Susimi, won an overall award for skilled racing as well as for surviving a rough night some days ago. The racer had cut a corner to a channel and went aground. The tide fell and poor Susimi was nearly on her side like a beached whale. Surrounded by supportive peers, Carrington’s team had a place to stay and Susimi was freed, unharmed, by the next day.

In the multihull fleet, John Novak’s corsair 28, Overdo, enjoyed the close contests with Splash. “We throw beers overboard to distract the competition,” jokes Overdo’s crew. Novak’s Corsair 28 is a formidable competitor and kept close rivals Splash, Nalu Nalu and Merlin on full alert. John Sexton built Splash, a Corsair 31, from a set of plans 10 years ago. An Abaco vet, this year it was only John and his teenaged daughter Betsy who were able to make the long trailer trip from Minnesota to Florida, then sail to Abaco.

The whole journey was an adventure. “We’re doing all the things we dreamt about,” John said. Betsy’s high school classmates find it hard to believe her unique summertime activities. Splash went home with more unforgettable memories and a collection of trophies. “Abaco Glow really showed us a good time,” Mark on Dixie Chicken, said about his competitor. Mark was impressed by the sportsmanship on the course and camaraderie during the parties.

The final awards party under the tall coconut palms at Hope Town Harbour Lodge stretched well into the balmy, tropical night. The party zone overlooked the Atlantic, its lazy surf foaming over the island’s glittering beach. Entranced by the Abacos’ beauty and Regatta Time’s wellorganized week of non-stop enjoyment, many were already making their plans for next year.