



The Wirth Munroe’s “Man of Many Hats” On How This Year’s Race is Shaping up as the Final Countdown to December 7th Begins

GUS CARLSON • NOVEMBER 26, 2018

Tom Bowler makes wearing many hats at once look easy. He is Chair of the Sailfish Club of Florida’s Yachting Committee, Event Chair for the Wirth M. Munroe Ocean Race, a member of the Wirth Munroe Race Committee, liaison with the Storm Trysail Club, Biscayne Bay Yacht Club and the SORC, and an accomplished ocean racer as well, having sailed a number of marquee offshore events in his stunning Morris Ocean Series 46 ESCAPADE II, including Marion-Bermuda and Wirth Munroe races. It’s no surprise, then, that with Tom’s



Tom Bowler, SFC Race Committee Chairman, aboard Escapade II

unique perspective as a racer, race official and an event organizer, he is one of the architects of the new two-course format to be rolled out in this year’s edition of the Wirth Munroe – a new 40-mile “Sprint” course with a Fort Lauderdale start, complementing the 60-mile “Classic” starting off Miami. Like anything new, Tom suggests, the two-course format, designed to spur interest especially among smaller boats by giving

sailors a choice, has generated lively discussion. “Change always comes with challenges, but it appears entrants do like the options,” Tom says. “Feedback has been largely positive, and we appreciate the ongoing constructive input that will help us create a better experience at every level of participation.” With less than two weeks until the start of this year’s Wirth Munroe, we asked Tom to share some insight into how the race is shaping up, and what sailors can expect in the revamped “Race to the Buffet.”

Sailfish Club of Florida: *Let's start with the fleet itself. The quality and diversity of the current entry list looks very strong, with everything from grand prix racers to racer-cruisers to cruisers to multihulls signed up for both courses. There are lots of Wirth Munroe veterans and some newcomers, too. Are you pleased with the make-up?*

Tom Bowler: Strong indeed, and I'm certainly pleased. As we speak, we have a robust fleet of nearly 25 boats with less than two weeks remaining before the Wednesday, December 5th registration cut-off. Registrations were both early and varied, with a significant grand prix component as well as a noteworthy number of new entrants about to experience the Wirth Munroe for the first time. With five classes offered, we've currently got good representation in four of the five and there's still time for the fifth (ECRCA) to fill in. It's particularly nice to see continued strength in our foundational racer-cruiser entries. The fact we've again expanded our ultra-high-end grand prix rock stars while continuing to appeal to our dedicated Florida-based local skippers is pretty cool in my view. Needless to say, having the multi-hulls back on the race course is great and I think speaks to our outreach and communications efforts.

Sailfish Club: *There are a number of well-known heavy hitters among the grand prix entrants – BELLA MENTE, SPOOKIE, WIZARD, WARRIOR, CHESSIE RACING and INTERLODGE IV, to name a few. The big-boat fraternity clearly sees the Wirth Munroe as a worthy test, yes?*

Bowler: Without a doubt, the Wirth Munroe Race fills a key niche in the South Florida big-boat winter racing schedule. It's in part having storied destinations at both ends of the race along with the fundamental attraction of challenging ocean conditions, including wind and sea state variability, the interplay with the Gulf Stream, and all packaged and delivered in a one-day race event. That's pretty special in my view. Certainly being an established member of the SORC Islands in the Stream series adds to the appeal and vitality.

Sailfish Club: *All eyes will be on Jason Carroll's MOD 70 trimaran, ARGO, the odds-on favorite to collect line honors and break the course record for elapsed time. Wirth Munroe veteran Tom Reese, whose FLIGHT SIMULATOR is one of two other multihull entries, expects ARGO to set a torrid pace. Those of us who saw ARGO in this year's Vineyard Race can attest to the boat's "other-worldly" performance, smashing the elapsed time record. How does having such an awe-inspiring entry add to the excitement of the race?*

Bowler: Arguably, it's a game-changer for us. We indeed targeted the multi-hulls as a needed presence after a period of absence. However, had no idea we'd be seeing ARGO on the line along with our friends from FLIGHT SIMULATOR and NEWBORN ELF, a Corsair F-28R. This is really starting at the top of the league, and now we'd love to fill in the roster with the Gunboats and other high-quality competitors. Clearly, multi-hulls need to be an essential component in the overall fleet.

Sailfish Club: *SPOOKIE skipper and Wirth Munroe advisor Steve Benjamin's vision of attracting more one-designs has gained some traction – so far, there are three TP/IRC 52s and a Class 40*

entered this year. Is it a stretch to suggest that with boats getting faster and the Wirth Munroe offering a short-course option, we may eventually see more one-design racing in future WMRs?

Bowler: Steve and I are in contact, and his support is much appreciated. Whether it's the TP52s or other great one-designs, we offer a welcoming home for them in the Wirth Munroe. The dual-course offering of the Classic and Sprint hopefully opens the door nicely for additional one-design presence, whether large ocean racers or smaller one-designs. There's no reason a larger portion of the TP52 fleet shouldn't make their way south in future years and enjoy this great race. We're playing a long game here, and thinking out over the next several race cycles.

Sailfish Club: *Let's turn now to the race format. Remind us of the thinking behind the two-course structure and why the time is right to do it now.*



Bowler: The two-course format is really just a logical outgrowth of the decision made in 2016 to return to a Miami start for the 60th anniversary of the race. That was a good decision based on the speed of boats today and the desire for a return to the original course length, along with a deep sense of history and tradition that Miami was from the beginning the Wirth-Munroe starting line. As we began work on this year's race we, as always, reached out to racers and heard two consistent themes: keep the Miami start and consider adding a second

start in Fort Lauderdale to ensure a satisfying race venue for the smaller boats and select racer-cruisers who simply find the Miami to Palm Beach course too long and time-consuming. To keep the race alive and vibrant we need to change things up, while remaining true to the original race legacy. We hope we've created a best-of-both-worlds response to the feedback. The Classic course from Miami to Palm Beach is part of the SORC "Islands in the Stream" series.

Sailfish Club: *How are the class/divisional and course splits shaking out? Any challenges or surprises?*

Bowler: First, having introduced the two-course format, we adopted a self-selection approach to course selection. To the extent possible, we'd like skippers to choose the course that makes the most sense for them. Generally, this has worked out well, with the boats you would expect to choose the Sprint course having done so. In 2017 we offered ORC but had no takers. However, this year we do, which is an interesting switch, although it may end up causing some concern relative to the number of IRC boats registered. ECRCA, like ORC, had no takers last year, but potentially has a couple of interested boats this year. It's too soon to know if there

will be sufficient interest to comprise a proper fleet, but we'll see over the next several days. I'm pleased we made the offer, and that it was noticed.

Sailfish Club: *Knowing that it takes time to adapt to change, is the feedback so far on the two-course format about what you expected?*

Bowler: Feedback is spot-on and consistent. Skippers are pleased the option is there, and whether it's the shorter run to the starting line or the added assurance of making it to the finish line by 1800 hours, all seems right.

Sailfish Club: *Logistically, staging two starts is challenging. Can you tell us how you are organizing and staffing the Miami and Fort Lauderdale starts, and what entrants can expect at the respective starting areas?*

Bowler: This is where our collaborative approach and partnerships shine. We've got our long-term friends and history with Biscayne Bay Yacht Club hosting the skippers' meeting, the SORC managing the Miami start; and the Storm Trysail Club on station in Fort Lauderdale to manage the Sprint start. This race is a team effort. My wonderful team at Sailfish Club will, as usual, handle the Palm Beach finish line, scoring, and of course, the legendary reception, buffet dinner and awards event.



Bowler's Morris Ocean Series 46, ESCAPADE II Racing

Sailfish Club: *Are there other changes or enhancements racers will see this year, on or off the water?*

Bowler: Beyond the Sprint course addition, we are focused on ensuring that our on-the-water staffing is robust and well prepared, and that our Sailfish Club post-race events are of the usual high quality. We hear lots of favorable feedback on the events and are working hard

to earn that feedback. The behind-the-scene activities that racers never see, including significant dock/slip accommodation arrangements at Sailfish Club are keys to the overall success of the race. It's a big undertaking with lots of moving parts.

Sailfish Club: *They say the proof is in the pudding, so can we assume the Organizing Authority will reach out to participants post-race to gather more feedback on the format?*

Bowler: Feedback is key to continuous improvement in everything, and the Wirth-Munroe race is no exception. We are planning a racer survey shortly after this year's events and will be looking forward to hopefully a high level of participation, which will be critical to our planning for 2019 and beyond.