



WIRTH M. MUNROE

MIAMI TO PALM BEACH
YACHT RACE



Navigating the Pandemic:

The Wirth M. Munroe's Race Chair Discusses the Challenges of Organizing the 64th Annual Ocean Classic in Uncertain Times

PALM BEACH, FL, October 29, 2020 – Staging a successful regatta in normal times is a challenging feat. There are lots of moving parts – coordinating boats, skippers, crews, partners, club staff and volunteers requires planning, logistical expertise and a little luck. Hosting a successful – and safe -- regatta in a time of COVID-19 has extra challenges, including coordinating with health officials to make sure protocols are in place for all activities on and off the water. Many regattas have been canceled since the pandemic swept the U.S. in March. But late in the summer, several regattas went ahead successfully, with the health and safety of all concerned top of mind. Buoyed by those successes, and in close coordination with state and local health authorities, the organizers of the Wirth M. Munroe Ocean Race will run the 64th annual edition of the coastal classic as planned on Friday, December 4. We asked Tom Bowler, Chair of the Sailfish Club of Florida's Yachting Committee and Event Chair of the Wirth Munroe Race for his perspective on staging the event in these uncertain times and to provide a glimpse into what's changing – and what isn't – for this year's race.

Q) Let's start with the race itself. The entry list so far is very promising – 21 boats across a broad spectrum, from offshore racing machines to cruiser-racers to coastal cruisers, with more than a month to go before the start. Are you surprised by the turnout, considering COVID-19 concerns?

A) During the tough spring and summer months, we felt that by December, if we could safely run the race, we'd see a robust turnout given pent-up demand and sailors just wanting to get back on the water and out on the race course. Entries at this point in October would indicate that was the right call. While we may not match last year's record turnout of 30-plus entries, I'm particularly pleased to now have 20 boats with a strong and competitive mix. It's great to see several first-time entries, the continued participation of multihulls, and notably the presence of several 60-plus footers. With just over six weeks until race day, who knows, maybe we'll inch closer to matching our 2019 entry record

Q) Among the entrants are some familiar faces but also some new ones. One notable casualty of the pandemic this year is the fleet of IC 37s, the new one-design class that made its offshore racing debut in last year's Wirth Munroe.

A) Indeed, it was exciting to have the 37's out in force last year and I'm keeping my fingers crossed for a return engagement this year. Sandra Askew is back with Flying Jenny and I imagine if the class decides to do a winter series, we'll see them return for this year's edition.

Q) Tell us about the conversations and considerations among the Race Committee and the Organizing Authority partners about the decision to run the race this year.

A) First and foremost, in our discussions has been the awareness that to run the race we need to be able to do so legally and of course safely. Everyone has remained focused on these two requirements, and as we look six weeks ahead all signals are "go."

Q) While many U.S. regattas were canceled over the summer, several went ahead successfully. Two that have similar logistical considerations to the Wirth Munroe are Edgartown Yacht Club's 'Round the Island Race in Martha's Vineyard and the Ida Lewis Distance Race in Newport, R.I., both of which were held successfully and attracted strong fleets. Did you look at these races – and any others – to see how they addressed the challenges?

A) Apart from some selective local yacht club racing over the summer with limited or no shore-side activities, the two iconic races you mentioned, and I would add Stamford Yacht Club's iconic Vineyard Race, really signaled the beginning of a return to larger format distance racing. Importantly, both races ran conservative, careful, well-communicated events and had essentially no onshore activities. Given the timing of the Wirth and the fact Florida has entered Phase Three of its reopening as of September 29th, we are now able to offer both racing and a version of our traditional post-race festivities at the Sailfish Club. However, like both Edgartown and Ida Lewis, we'll be guided by a very cautious, careful approach, including mandatory mask-wearing on club property and a socially distanced dining and seating plan.

Q) Will the Wirth M. Munroe Race run its two-course format again this year – The 60-mile Classic from Miami to Palm Beach and the 40-mile Sprint from Fort Lauderdale to Palm Beach? Was there any consideration given to consolidating those two at any point because of logistical challenges related to COVID-19?

A) Feedback has continued strongly in favor of the two-course format and as such both the Classic and the Sprint are on offer again this year. We did briefly consider consolidating to a one-course format in the interest of simplicity and reduced manpower. Judging from current entries, we made the right call to again run both courses.

Q) What are some of the changes that have been made to this year's race because of COVID-19, particularly the post-race activities including the Rum Punch reception, the awards ceremony and the legendary seafood buffet dinner?

A) First, we are fortunate that the physical setting of the Sailfish Club lends itself well to spreading attendees out and hopefully conducting significant portions of the post-race event outdoors, including the awards ceremony. There will be a contactless temperature scanning kiosk in use for all racers and guests to be checked before entering Club grounds. Arriving boats will again be provided with the traditional Rum Punch refreshments, however, with a focus on minimizing contact and maintaining

social distancing between servers and race crew members. Likewise, the buffet will be reorganized such that a chef/server will prepare a plate and serve a guest from behind a Plexiglas shield rather than the typical self-service approach. As the Sailfish Club has gradually resumed more “normal” operations valuable experience has been gained in successfully planning and executing a variety of events as well as routine member dining and socializing. This experience and the new protocols implemented will be particularly valuable as we host our upcoming Wirth Munroe Race onshore events.

Q) Like many Race Committees, the Wirth Munroe Committee moved to create a virtual Skippers’ Meeting several years ago. Since virtual meetings are now considered part of the “new normal” will this year’s Skippers’ Meeting be done via Zoom or Skype?

A) We’ve offered a live streamed option over the past few years in addition to our traditional in-person meeting at the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club. We’ve erred on the side of caution this year and will only be providing a streamed meeting. No physical Skippers’ Meeting will take place. Our technology choice and attendance instructions will be distributed shortly.

Q) How did the race Organizing Authority and the Sailfish Club management work with state and local authorities to determine the best way to stage a “safety-first” event?

A) Working closely with our great partners from both the Storm Trysail Club as well as the SORC, along with Sailfish Club General Manager, Mr. John Newman, we took a “prepare for the worst and hope for the best” approach. Over the summer months we had contact with the Florida State Department of Health, Palm Beach County Health Department, and the Town of Palm Beach Code Enforcement Department. These contacts helped us to understand both Florida Governor DeSantis’ June 20th Executive Order mandating capacity limits and social distancing rules as well as the subsequent September 29th Phase Three Reopening Order, under which we are now operating. It will continue to be our clear policy to require mask wearing and social distancing while on Club property and to expect all racers and guests to fully comply with instructions related to these requirements while at the Club. The success and safety of the event depends on everyone’s personal diligence and strict observance of the protocols put in place at the Club. We each need to do our part: temperature check; wear a mask; social distancing; follow directions....

Q) Other than the usual at-sea safety requirements that all racers need to follow, are there any other COVID-19 related tips for racers based on your conversation with health officials?

A) We all know it’s the personal duty and responsibility of each skipper to decide whether to race or not in any given event. In today’s environment skippers also need to determine if each crew member is feeling well so as protect the balance of the crew and those onshore following the race. The Organizing Authority and Club management are doing everything to create a safety-first environment and each skipper should remind crew members of the rules and their responsibility to follow them.

Q) Finally, the Wirth Munroe has always had a very high “fun factor.” Can racers expect the same for the 2020 edition?

A) We're all looking forward to kicking-off the Florida winter racing season, and what a great way to do so by entering the Wirth Munroe Race and then enjoying a fun and safe awards celebration and dinner at the Sailfish Club of Florida.

To enter the race and view the Notice of Race, please go to www.YachtScoring.com.

For more information and to make dinner reservations, please contact Sarah Gay at (561) 844-0206 or SarahGay@SailfishClub.com.