

No wind but plenty of spirit for historic St. Petersburg-Habana yacht race



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Winds of political change revived the St. Petersburg-Habana yacht race.

But Mother Nature's winds didn't cooperate, so most of the main regatta and a second regatta had to be canceled and one yacht crew had to be rescued on the journey home.

Still, winners were declared, and *Fomo*, captained by Lloyd Thornburg of St. Petersburg, came out on top overall. The yacht finished the 284-nautical mile race that started in St. Petersburg on Feb. 28 in one day and 17 hours.

Of 74 competing yachts that started the race, only 22 remained in contention through the conclusion at Havana's Marina Hemingway.

The lack of wind drove 44 yachts to forfeit and switch to motors in order to make it to the finish line. Another eight chose not to travel past Florida.

Then a second regatta scheduled Saturday from Marina Hemingway to Havana's Morro Castle was canceled, too — because the winds were too strong.

"The weather didn't cooperate," George Pennington, chairman of the race said. "But everything else was excellent."

The St. Petersburg-Habana Yacht Race ran from 1930 through 1959. It was canceled in 1960 with the deterioration of United States-Cuban relations.

Inspired by the move by President Barack Obama to reach out to Cuba, the St. Petersburg Yacht Club revived the race after a 58-year hiatus.

Albert A. Fox Jr. of Tampa's Alliance for Responsible Cuba Policy Foundation, who worked as a liaison for the race, said the highlight was seeing a high ranking Cuban official in a conga line with Americans at the award's ceremony held in Havana, symbolizing a new reunion.

BACKSTORY: *Yacht race to Havana resumes after 58 years, complete with Cuban crew*

"Everyone had fun," said Victor DiMaio, also part of the race's coordination team. "But the history of this race being reborn was not lost."

For the first time since the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban government allowed a yacht from the island to participate in a U.S. sailing competition.



And a Cuban law banning Cuban-born people from returning to the island was suspended for the race. Tampa's Martin Saavedra Sr. on the *LaVie* made history as the first Cuban-born captain to sail to Cuba in more than 50 years.

His achievement came at a cost.

On Wednesday night, headed back to Florida, the *LaVie* had engine problems in turbulent waters and had to be rescued by the Coast Guard near the Marquesas Keys about 20 miles west of Key West, said Kim Haas with Sea Tow, a marine assistance provider that received a call for help.

The water was too rough for Sea Tow to bring the yacht in. As of Thursday afternoon, Haas said, the *La Vie* still was missing. Martin Saavedra Jr., contacted by phone, said everyone aboard was okay, but he declined to elaborate.

Robert Schaefer said his team made history, too. Their yacht *Metolius* finished third overall, pushed by a 100-foot sail promoting Rekker Rum, made in Schaefer's St. Petersburg American Freedom Distillery.

"We brought American freedom to Havana for the first time in over 50 years," he said with a laugh. "Hopefully we can do it again next year."

He can. A date for the 2018 regatta has been set, said Chairman Pennington — Feb. 27.

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2017 St. Petersburg-Habana Yacht Race winners

Overall: *Fomo* captained by Lloyd Thornburg

Spinnaker A: *Fomo* captained by Lloyd Thornburg

Spinnaker B: *Back Off* captained by Tony Barrett

Cruising A: *Graycious DC* captained by John Noble

Cruising B: *Patience DC* captained by David Kilcoyne

Cruising C: *SEABEE* captained by Richard Kinard

Cruising D: None of the yachts remained in contention

Multihull: *Cool Cat I* captained by John McMasters

Non-spinnaker: *Sleeper* captained by Christopher Brown

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33

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