Team Dark Horse, Winner of the SML 50K Around the Lake Race

It was the summer of 2015 when Pete Phillip of the Blackwater Yacht Racing Association (BYRA) first approached us about supporting the 50th anniversary of Smith Mountain Lake by participating in a 50 kilometer sailing race. With SML being known for light or no winds during summer months our thoughts immediately went to baking in the sun for two days while drifting around the lake. However, calmer heads prevailed and we immediately agreed to participate in the race to support the 50th anniversary of SML while knowing we generally do not know what we are doing one week to the next. Time passed, plans were made and during one of our spring series races we were informed that not only were we going to sail in the 50K race but BYRA and Pelican Point Yacht Club (PPYC) were going to stage a fund raiser to support the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) and that for every dollar donated in our team’s name we would receive 30 seconds off our corrected race time. This was a totally new twist and a totally new game. We had donated too many other charity events but had never solicited donations that would not only help a charitable foundation but help us in the race. At first there was some trepidation of the unknown, would anyone want to contribute? Would we lose the race before we started? However, we thought we could start it off with some contributions that would keep us in the race and help the NKF.

At our next racing weekend and much to our surprise we found that one of our competitors, another J/24 sailboat named Boogie Board had set up their donation web site had had already collected more than a $1,000 in donations. This was a game changer, we were already more than eight hours behind and the race was still five weeks away! What to do? That evening we set up our web site with our picture, names, and that “we need all the help we can get”. After our initial donations the quest was to get the word out. We wanted to make the donation process easy, informative and interactive with those that had no idea the race was going to take place and that we were looking for their support. Our first e-mail to friends and family contained a photo of our smiling faces sailing Dark Horse with a short overview of the 50th anniversary of SML, race information and the details of the donation process. To make it as easy as we could we included a direct link to the 50K NKF web site with step by step instructions to make a donation. To keep interest up we included a link to the Marine Traffic web site explaining how during the race everyone could follow our progress and that of our competitors. Response was tremendous, within minutes we had our first donation of $200 followed by an e-mail asking about the 30 seconds off our time for every dollar. We explained that while you could theoretically win the race before it started, other boats were already in the lead and we were now competing not only in sailing but in contributions and further explained that our goal was to at least start the sailing part of the race even with our closest competitor.

Donations started coming in with more questions. After a couple weeks it was time for another e-mail. This one included a thank you for contributors, update on donations to date, $1,900, photos of the boat that many friends and family had never seen and a map of the lake showing the race course. They were also informed that were still in second place but only 40 minutes behind. More donations rolled in including our largest donation of $500 from Anthony and Phoebe Patterson. With only a week left we sent out our last e-mail reminder that it was everyone’s last chance to support Team Dark Horse and reminding everyone to follow the race on their computers.

When the contribution window closed we had collected $3,325 in five weeks for the NKF and were tremendously surprised that we had collected more than three times our original optimistic goal. We were also embarrassed that we would start the race with about a 10 hour lead on our nearest competitors. During the race we moved from near the back of the fleet to first at times and then finished third. While passing the leading boat racing off to finish ahead of us we reminded them they had better hurry because we had a 10 hour lead on corrected donation time. They smiled back and reminded us that we still had to finish the race and we could still run aground. As it turned out we sailed right by the finish line and almost missed it as lightning and thunder storms had entered the area with high winds and driving rain cutting visibility to only 50’. We did finally find the finish line and want to thank all our contributors for their generous support.

Dale & Judy Kovach, and John & Debra Fourqurean