BYRA / PPYC 50 K From the Deck of the J/24 “Rascal.” Pete Phillip

Crew: Kees Craye – Bowman, Scot Podosek – Sheet Trimmer, Andy Phillip – Sheet Trimmer / Navigator/ Helmsman

It was about 5:43 pm Saturday when we rounded marker R-8 and headed toward Craddock Creek and the SML dam. The wind had been steady since the southbound S Curves and we had opened up the best lead on “Bandit” of maybe ½ mile. The sky ahead was overcast but nothing like the black clouds rolling from the southwest back toward Bridgewater. It looked like a serious system with heavy wind and rain. We hoped the fleet was experiencing better conditions on the water than the clouds above were showing.

We made our R- 8 call to the race committee and sailed on a close port reach to R-6. As we neared the marker the wind lightened up and rotated to the East. More and more we were headed, now sailing toward the mountain east of Vista Point and the wind was failing fast. More and more we heard the sound of heavy rain. We were dry at this point and could not see a hint on the water but we knew it was coming closer and closer from the groaning sound growing louder. “Anyone who wants to be dry needs foulies on now” I said to the crew. We had not needed the rain gear all day but this was different. It was about to rain hard. “Close the cabin hatch and try to keep the boat dry.”

The wind died altogether and the rain moved in from the shore. No storm, that’s good, but monsoon buckets of rain coming straight down. Visibility was reduced to four boat lengths. The cockpit drains worked just fine and most of us were dry. Not everyone heeded my warning. The shower was short lived although quite intense.

Just like that the rain ended. The breeze slowly returned. I looked back. “Bandit” was around R-8. Their breeze was still light. But they had caught back up to us twice already in the race. Glenn Cliborne and team have more lives than five cats. You never count them out. “Dark Horse” had also caught us once today back at the S Curve on the up-river leg and had led the race to the Bridgewater Marina turn. So I worry when the wind lightens up. No lead is safe on Smith Mountain Lake.

But this time our breeze freshened and we rounded R-2 and sailed close hauled toward the dam islands. Downdrafts off the mountain were quite tricky but we safely navigated the cut between marker R-1 and Dam Island. Then a short ride around Bar Island careful not to get too close and run aground right here. Once we popped around the second island we were treated to a steady breeze off our stern. We hoisted the spinnaker and headed back toward the Blackwater River. We past “Bandit” going the other way with “Dark Horse” closing as they beat into the east wind. We were feeling comfortable now and Andy took the helm.

We past marker B-1 entering the Blackwater River at 7:08 and called in to the race committee. We were hopeful of finishing before dark. That would be an accomplishment considering how slow the first part of the day had gone. Looking back toward the mountain…oh my! It was really dark with huge black clouds enveloping the sky and the mountain. It appeared as if Smith Mountain had become an active volcano spewing smoke and ash into the sky. This would prove to be a tough test for boats back at R-1. Once again we had escaped the stormy weather. But up ahead we saw another threat. We had storm clouds coming toward Pelican Point and points west from the south. We kept the spinnaker up but Kees was prepared for a fast sail change if needed. I asked for the helm back. If things were about to get dicey, I wanted to be driving the boat.

As we past Pelican Point and neared the Lucky Island marker B-13 “Bandit” was back at Christmas Tree Island. But up ahead comes this powerboat right toward us. Scot says “The Poker Run is over. What is this crazy doing out here?” It was Randy Stow from the US Power Squadron. Randy had been tracking us all day on the GPS tracking web site monitoring our signal. At 7:30 he said “Rascal is in the lead and close to the finish. They need a cheering section.” So Randy and Judy hopped in their powerboat on Gills Creek and headed out to meet us at the island. I answered Scot “That’s not a crazy, that’s Randy and Judy here to cheer for us.” They followed us around the islands and all the way back to Pelican and cheered as we crossed the finish line. Then the horn sounded and the race committee cheered.

On the last leg from Contentment Island to the finish we past “Bandit” and “Dark Horse” sailing the other way toward the Lucky Islands. Dale Kovach hailed us from “Dark Horse” “Hurry up, you are ten hours behind.” Their fundraising effort had earned them a 10+ hour handicap advantage on corrected time. They would go on to win the NKF Trophy for best finishing time adjusted for charity dollars donated on behalf of their team.

The “Rascal” boat finished and pulled up to the dock just as the flash of lightening lit up our boat and the sky opened up for another drenching. We had finished before dark barely, with a 15 minute lead. The crew was safe and although drenched, safe back on dry land. We would wait for our celebratory beer until this storm past. We had sailed for ten hours and beat the best sailors on the lake to the finish. We had to wait a while to know that everyone else was ok. But for the moment we were four happy guys.

It was a great feeling as this last storm blew over and radar indicated a calmer night ahead.