



Del Rey Yacht Club Puerto Vallarta Race Series

History of a Race that Made History

The oldest continuously run long-distance race to Mexico's mainland has a 40-year past. It begins with a vacation and the creative imagination of six intrepid Del Rey Yacht Club racing skippers during November of 1966. It was just after they had completed that year's Mazatlan Race that the original idea of a new race to Puerto Vallarta was hatched. S/C Gerry Blankfort, S/C Albert Allen, S/C James Feuerstein, S/C Ronald Kaplan, Stan Lieberman and Sid Renkow agreed to work together on what was a novel concept: establish a sailboat race to Mexico that ended in the splendid shadow of Banderas Bay.

Blankfort, while drinking in the beauty of Banderas Bay that fall, was quoted as saying, "The course to Puerto Vallarta is a skipper's dream and a challenge to his navigation. There is an ocean to sail, a cape to pass, a sea to traverse, islands to skirt and a bay to glide into."

By 1968, the allure of the then undiscovered Puerto Vallarta was enhanced by being the locale for the making of the movie *The Night of the Iguana*, and furthered by the rumors of the steamy affair between actors Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. P.V. suddenly became a compelling travel destination for American tourists.

The timing was right for DRYC to further work with the Mexican government in Mexico City, and the crucial groundwork for this new blue water race was soon in development. With the encouragement of some personal friends of Blankfort, the Gershensons (who owned the Posada Vallarta Hotel), DRYC prepared final arrangements for the first Puerto Vallarta Mexican Race using the Posada Vallarta as the race headquarters. Almost overnight, DRYC became an ambassador of sorts to Mexico, creating a social atmosphere among Mexico City, Puerto Vallarta and the yacht club. The Mexican government was excited to work with the club to build a new tourist base and was completely amenable to almost a of our many ideas at that time.

The DRYC officers and officials of the Mexican government traveled extensively between locations and grandly entertained each other, adding to the festive feeling leading up to the race. Today there are still fiestas and parties in both locations, ending with the parade of the Mexican Naval officers at the awards night, when the racers and the club thank them for their assistance as an escort while in Mexican waters.

On Feb. 6, 1971, S/C Gerry Blankfort proudly became the official "Father of the PV Race" when he took the center stage as General Chairman of the inaugural race. He purchased the first race trophy, a sculpted statue of Neptune holding up a ship, and soon the DRYC trophy chairman had collected some of the most original and beautiful trophies awarded anywhere, putting them on display in the Yacht Club before the race.

During the early years, these trophies would be carefully packed and shipped down to P.V. for the Saturday trophy presentation. Today, because of the enormous cost of insurance

and the risk of loss, this tradition has been modified and only the exquisite take-home trophies and valuable watches are awarded in Mexico, although the names of the winners are engraved on the perpetual trophies still prominently on display in the trophy cabinets at DRYC.

It was during this time, the local American colony, led by "self proclaimed mayor" Phil Ober, a retired movie star living in the sleepy village, involved itself in the race's social festivities. They helped to greet the racers as they arrived in the primitive harbor where the race boats docked Mediterranean style, while hoping to avoid the very active Cabo San Lucas ferry boats making their way in and out of the port. This was well before the current modern marina was built and it was not unusual to view alligators or even snakes along the shore. It was also a time when chickens and donkeys freely walked down the narrow streets of town and local women washed laundry in the river.

Our first "follow me" boat was a leaky dugout with a small outboard motor run by the race port captain. And although the Race Committee used amateur (Ham) radio to communicate with boats, the idea of a well-stocked radio room suite was still years away. Early communications were coordinated by Gordon West, who pioneered the use of multiple radios, portable antennas and rotating beacon lights and, of course, worked out ways to avoid the Princess Cruise liners that tried to anchor in the middle of the finish line.

The race was always a huge draw for the DRYC membership to band together and fly down to the finish line, landing in what was then a fairly small Quonset hut-lined airport, and catching rides to the many different host hotels. As remembered by some who were there at the beginning, it was not unusual for the hotel owners to set up a bar in their pool and watch guests walk a plank in order to get drinks. But over time, these social activities evolved into well organized parties led by what is today a coordinated hospitality committee, centrally located in the main lobby of the host hotel which was the Westin Regina for over ten years and is now that Marriott for 2011.

What began as a simple idea in the heads of six tourists to Mexico evolved into one of the most recognized sailboat races in the world, bringing together hundreds of sailors, club members and guests for a fiesta awards dinner on the Saturday night before leaving Mexico. What continues to make this race stand out among other seemingly similar events run by other yacht clubs is DRYC itself, its race organization and the continuous efforts to listen to competitors' suggestions and provide innovative solutions. The P.V. Race was the first of its kind to schedule the start around a full moon. Later, when Americap handicapping became popular, the race committee responded by adding it to their scoring system. They also provided continuous assistance to skippers including pre-race seminars, escort boats during the race and help with immigration issues when entering and leaving harbors to enhance a safe and easy return delivery.

This attention to skippers' desires resulted in attracting some of the most famous blue water racers in the world. Such well known yachts as *Ticonderoga*, *Windward Passage*, *Ragtime*, *Pyewacket* and *Sorcery* took turns vying for the elusive elapsed time record. In 2007, Doug Baker broke *Joss's* 20-year old speed record by skippering his Andrews 80, *Magnitude 80*, to victory in 3 days, 15 hours, 51 minutes and 39 seconds almost beating the Race Committee down to Mexico. The room was ready for the finish just hours before the magnificent boat crossed the line.

When skippers voiced an interest in a more leisurely race to Mexico, the DRYC P.V. Race committee designed a race for this "Cruising Class" and created the Salsa Division. The race course for this division consisted of three legs whose finishes were at three beautiful anchorages and racers were scored using a power offset, thus skippers could use their engines for propulsion

when the wind was unusually light. This allowed for all boats to be at the next leg's starting line at the same time. This popular division now includes both spinnaker and non-spinnaker classes, making it one of the best ways to race a well-equipped boat down to Mexico with other similar boats at a time of the year to enjoy the best Mexico has to offer.

In 2009, this ever evolving event was the first long-distance Mexican regatta to offer a SERIES of four separate races stretching from Marina del Rey to Marina Vallarta. An adjusted course in 2011 will have the first race from Marina del Rey to Turtle Bay (422 nm), the second from Turtle Bay to Santa Maria (224 nm), the third from Magdalena Bay to the new marina at Puerto Los Cabos (176 nm) and, finally, the last race across the Gulf of California to Puerto Vallarta (286 nm). Parties and awards will be held at the end of each race, culminating in the Gala Awards Fiesta in Puerto Vallarta. This new format gives skippers a chance to test their competitive racing skills, while still being able to enjoy some of the most beautiful sights that Mexico has to offer.

The P.V. Committee secured a major sponsor with CORUM in 2005, and awarded an incredible *Admiral Cup* Watch to the winners of each class in the Spinnaker and Non-Spinnaker Division in 2007 and 2009. For 2011, we welcome TUTIMA WATCH as our sponsor and again award a beautiful watch to the winners.

The P.V. Race Committee is committed to listening to those who race as it strives to build innovation into its scoring and race management programs. Further, it continues to focus attention on the competitors and their guests by providing unexcelled support and hospitality at the finish with parties and social gatherings all week, along with free docking and hospitality at the well appointed Opequimar Yacht Club adjacent to the boats.

And so, the Race that was merely a dream in 1966 continues to evolve. The baton has been passed from the "intrepid six" to today's hard-working race committee. Their dedication and the support of DRYC and all its members assures that it will be a welcome fixture in the world of international yacht racing for many years to come.