

Swiftsure: a Victoria Tradition

By Ron Kirstein, Edited by Lisa Cole

Photos Courtesy of Ron Kirstein



The race is set to begin at 10 am on Saturday morning. I can only imagine how tired the crews are, especially those who had to sail many miles just to get to Victoria. The boats had all hunkered down in the Inner Harbour last night. Everyone was up early today, getting ready. The wind is light (darn, it had been blowing for weeks), so the boats have to motor out to the starting point. Most line up about 20 minutes before starting time.



And They're Off!
Photo Courtesy of Ron Kirstein



Moving Down the Strait

On shore, the crowd is pouring in. We had come at 9 am, anticipating limited parking. To my surprise, there had been ample parking near Clover Point at that hour. We had parked, walked to the water, and found a choice place on the rocks to sit - right at the starting line.

The sails begin to rise on the boats. The crews know exactly what to do. There will be four races, altogether. The longest will go to the end of Juan de Fuca Strait, some 136 nautical miles. This will be the first wave to cross the start line.

The shoreline is now covered with people from Clover Point to the Dallas Road Breakwater. Thousands turn out each year to watch the Swiftsure.

Ten minutes before the first start, all the boats move back from the line. When there are just a few minutes before the first wave, the boats entered in the long race move closer to the line. By now, the adrenaline is pumping and the crews are champing at the bit. We hear the countdown on a nearby shortwave radio. The horn sounds and the big boats - with precise timing - power over the line.



Clover Point the Start Line



The Crowd at the Start Line

It looks like the Strait is full of sailboats. At points, it's difficult to see the Olympic Mountains through all the sails. It's a sea of sails, a beautiful sight. The sun pops out from behind the clouds and the sky begins to clear. There is just a slight breeze blowing on the water now. I'm sure that the sailors would have preferred a heartier wind.

The race is on. The larger sailboats, in the longest race, fly across the Juan de Fuca Strait in search of stronger winds. They will be sailing through the night and will arrive back in Victoria sometime on Sunday, depending on the wind. Many of the other racers will finish the shorter races today and be back in Victoria's Inner Harbour tonight.



Along the Victoria Waterfront - Olympic Mts. backdrop



Passing Race Rocks on the way to Cape Flattery

The party will begin later on this afternoon and go well into the wee hours of the morning. This is a fun time for several hundred sailors and lots of volunteers. It is for sure one of Victoria's biggest and best parties of the year. The Swiftsure International Yacht Race is put on by the Royal Victoria Yacht Club and this is the 65th year. It consists of three offshore courses and one inshore course. The race is spectacular to see. If you missed it this year, come next year in late May.



Party Time at the Inner Harbour