**J/24 Midwinters…Where the Black Flag met the Bow Numbers in 1984**

The J/24 Class has to win the prize for the best regatta stories. One of the greatest might be the first effective use of the Black Flag. Back in 1983, Coral Reef Yacht Club’s (CRYC) Mario Bustamante was working the pin boat for the J/24 Midwinters when they had 30 recalls in the regatta. It had become nearly impossible to get a race off. Too many boats were crowding the line pushing others over.

Following the regatta, Mario became CRYC Race Committee (RC) Chairman so he now had the chance to make some changes with 8 months to prepare for the 1984 J/24 Midwinters. Mario and the RC felt that they needed to change the rules and improve how they identified early starters (and punish them!). Mario came up with a pirate flag, the black flag with the “Jolly Roger” as the Black Flag which changed the rules to not only disqualify an early starter in an individual recall but, if there was a general recall, you would not be allowed in any restarts for that race. Violators were also ordered off the course. The Race Committee posted the bow numbers at the first weather mark and sent a crash boat to get them off. The key to the whole thing (and the most innovative idea) was the bow numbers since that made it possible to identify a lot more boats.

While some people had used a Black Flag in a more humane way in the past, Mario can assure you that bow numbers were first used in the 1984 J/24 Midwinters. “We joked that if we had 2 general recalls in a 50 boat start, there would only have 5 boats left for the third start and so no more general recalls”.  Mario would like people to know that he had a lot of help with this plan. He consulted with the top sailors and best race management gurus in Miami including Ding Schoonmaker, Augie Diaz, Stig Wennerstrom, Tom Bremen, Frank Zagarino, Bill Smoak and Skip Ryder before he got them to let him try this new plan. He says that “their input was very helpful.” The regatta ended with a big victory for the Race Committee with a well run regatta.

Besides the J/24 being the most competitive keelboat racing in the world at the time and Miami's great weather, another draw for the J/24 Midwinters, according to Olympic Silver Medalist Morgan Reeser, was the cutting edge race management at CRYC.  “While Mario Bustamante may or may not have been the first to use the Black Flag, he was the first to use one with skull and crossbones on it.  Mario always warned the competitors at the Skippers Meeting not to think that the start line belonged to them.  ‘No’, Mario said as he held up the Jolly Roger, ‘the start line belongs to me’.  With the hyper competitive fleet, there was always a mass of sailors in front of the results board to find out who got Black Flagged” said Reeser. “Unfortunately, I was one of them, losing first place in the 1986 Midwinters with a Black Flag in the final race.”

This year’s 2014 J/24 Midwinters will give everyone a chance to see the real pirate, Mario Bustamante, who will grace us with his Hatteras 53 *Goldilocks* as Signal Boat. Maybe PRO Jaime Ramon will pull out the pirate flag instead of the plain black one. Meanwhile in Miami, the excitement is building, the sun is shining and the weather is warm. Coral Reef Yacht Club is the host, Bacardi is the title sponsor, and the planning is complete for the February 19-23 event. Check out who is registered (27 boats so far). Regatta Chair Mark Pincus reports that you can still pay the early entry registration fee if your application is received by February 6.

J/24 Skipper Skip Dieball will also be there. He says “Let me preface this by saying that although I have sailed in the J/24 class for the past 20 years, I am not as seasoned as many who spend more time with the fleet.  That said however, I really enjoy the vibe that exists socially in the J/24.  You can always count on a great party, which is why many keep coming back.  The racing is extremely close and having a polished team is paramount to getting good scores.  So, if you work hard and play hard, the J/24 is the class for you! Biscayne Bay is my favorite location to sail in North America.  I've been saying this for 15 years. There's a reason all these successful classes continue to choose Miami as their winter destination.  The weather is spectacular, sailing challenging and there's plenty to do in the grove! Of course, Bacardi is my favorite Rum.  They, after all, have such a history with Miami sailing!”

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