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Why The Bucket?



You may know of the biannual Bucket superyacht regatta that has been welcoming good-spirited racing and banter for 23 years – you may even have taken part. But do you know how it started or the reason for its unusual name? Veteran Bucketeer Alessandro Vitelli shares the regatta’s history and why the inimitable atmosphere brings contenters back year after year.

The search for the significance in the name Bucket Regattas leads us, not surprisingly, to the dictionary, and so to this:

buck.et (buk'it) n. 1. a vessel, usually cylindrical, with a flat bottom and a semi-circular bail, for collecting, carrying, or holding water, sand, fruit, etc. 2. anything resembling or suggesting this.

One could, with some accuracy, argue that the concept of carrying and holding – as in ice – does indeed apply, particularly when that concept is expanded to include a bottle of, say, Dom Pérignon (a not uncommon sight at Bucket Regattas, actually). But still, it does not get us to the roots of the name. For that we need a time-warp leap back 23 years when two or three yacht captains and owners were doing what yacht captains and owners do best over their rum – namely, circular arguments to the effect “My boat is faster

than your boat,” to which after the third rum they might add “...any day of the week including Sunday.” At which point someone will snort derisively: “Why, that old bucket can’t (supply your own dismissive comment)”. This is getting closer. What does make sense (to the sailors involved anyway) is that the above discussion did take place, by a felicitous coincidence of assonance, on the island of Nantucket.

And so it happened that someone produced a battered champagne bucket, declared it a trophy, and all agreed to go sailing and settle it among themselves like gentlemen. The Nantucket Bucket, progenitor of all Bucket Regattas and other forms of superyacht racing, was born. Conceptually speaking, it was an idea that was overdue. I think there may have been three or four boats the first summer but after that there was no stopping it. More and bigger boats were

being built everywhere, and the Bucket addressed the unformulated but lingering issue of what to do with your 120-foot sloop other than just cruising around and keeping the bubbly chilled. Now you could actually race her. And, even better, have a gam with other big boats (and their owners, crews, guests, etc) for a few days.

In those happy early days, informality and spontaneity ruled. The event was generously sponsored by a few of the owners, ratings were determined empirically (if not somewhat arbitrarily) and the actual racing was, for obvious safety reasons, run in a pursuit format, ie start the slow boats first and try to catch up. Even then champagne was the Bucket currency (as, I might add, it continues to be to this day). You wanted a better rating? Your dialogue with the Race Committee would enjoy a far greater chance of success if you happened to be walking around with a canvas bag full of shaved ice and a few bottles of, at a minimum, Veuve Cliquot. You wanted to protest another boat? The Sailing Instructions stated (as they do today) that in order to file a protest you must provide a case of chilled champagne; the outcome of the protest >>



naturally influenced by the quality as much as the chill temperature. Insofar as the Race Committee was a nebulous body of sailors who, when actually confronted with their responsibility, tended to point the finger at someone else, the Buckets have been historically free of protests. That's champagne that is gladly passed up.

Anyone who has ever sailed to Nantucket and spent time at the dock there will understand the magnitude of the feat of holding a party and award scramble for three hundred or so sailors on a pier 12 feet wide and 300 feet long with no railings. Yet we never lost anyone overboard and managed, as the event grew, to remain faithful to its original spirit and maintain the commedia dell'arte atmosphere of improvisational theatre.

No one was surprised, then, when those same owners and captains found themselves at loose ends in the Caribbean a few winters later and, while gently rocking at anchor somewhere and confirming the quality of their rum supply, decided that what was in order was what eventually became the grandest superyacht regatta of them all: the St Barths Bucket. The beginnings were modest: five boats gathered off St Eustatius, the crews gathered together for a somewhat unusual dinner of rice and goat stew washed down by the usual rum and beer, then raced to St Barths the following day. It is no coincidence that owners of large yachts have achieved a measure of success in life by their ability to recognise a better deal when they see it. And to them it was very obvious very quickly that here, in St Barths, they had found their spiritual home; in other words, foie gras and good sauternes beats goat stew and beer. Another day of racing followed, the day ending with crews carrying ashore coolers of champagne and hampers of food. The ur-party ensued.

Previous page: Serious racing vessels like *Ranger* and *ICAP Leopard 3* also take part

Opposite page

Top left: Fancy dress taken to a new level on *Rebecca*

Top right: The distinctive Bucket logo

Middle left: The Chippewa Bomb

Middle right: *P2* at Newport 2009

Bottom left: *Chippewa* sounds a war cry to competitors

Bottom right: *Rebecca's* mascot is brought out for every Bucket she attends

There followed a few years of parallel Buckets, Nantucket in the summer and St Barths in the winter. While in Nantucket smaller boats were included (if you consider a 70-foot yacht "small", that is), in St Barths the minimum size was established at 100 feet. The Bucket concept was constantly evolving, as the ever-growing number of participants imposed a measure of organisation. A welcome imposition, I might add, since the somewhat ad hoc nature of the earliest regattas could no longer provide the contenders with appropriately fair racing. It was a challenge for the still nebulous Race Committee: how to maintain the Bucket's trademark spontaneity yet tighten up the structure behind the scenes. After all, even commedia dell'arte is bound by rules.

The 13th Nantucket Bucket, as it turned out, was the last time that event was held, for the self-evident reason that there was no more room for winners' names on the trophy's base. But the regatta had outgrown the venue as well, and since buckets as trophies are easy to find, the event was reincarnated as the Newport Bucket the following year, and continues successfully to this day.

I would not want to give the impression that, for all the amiable jollity and conviviality, the Buckets are unstructured events. As I mentioned, the organisers are forever walking the tightrope between providing the sailors a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere and making certain that the regatta itself runs smoothly and fairly. The original "rating" system, the result of empirical observation and accumulated performance records, has given way to a more scientific formula based on Velocity Prediction Programs, still tempered by a modicum of empiricism. This is fairer in more than one way: not only can the boats race with the reassurance that they have an even chance at the various (and whimsical) trophies but it is an acknowledgement that as the popularity of the event has grown exponentially, so has the investment of time and wherewithal on the part of the owners.

A particularly sensitive aspect of Bucket races continues to be, ever increasingly, the knotty issue of safety. We are dealing, after all, with more than 30 superyachts sailing around a course which, given the staggered starts (slow boats start first), brings them closer together as the race

unfolds. A great deal of very serious effort has been devoted to developing a Racing Protocol that addresses the particular safety needs of such large vessels in close proximity. Port-starboard, windward-leeward, room at the mark, all these rules become inapplicable in this company. The prospect of two 150-ton yachts converging at an aggregate speed of 25 knots is no joke. Clearly, this is not the moment to be hailing "Starboard!" or "Hold your course!" Common sense and impeccable seamanship are called for, and until this day have been applied in creditable doses by the helmsmen, tacticians and crews who race these impressive yachts. As I said, no champagne has been "filed" in protest yet. Perhaps an added incentive in promoting safe sailing is the clause in the Sailing Instructions that clearly reminds all contestants that the Race Committee reserves the right to "excuse" from further racing – or, if the problem is sufficiently egregious, from future Buckets – a yacht for sailing in an imprudent manner.

This applies to the racecourse. Ashore, the party continues unabated. With the discreet support of benevolent sponsors, shoreside events have grown apace with the size and quality of the fleet. In recognition of the benefits the island derives from the Bucket, the St Barths Government in recent years has cleared the docks for the Regatta, offering a truly awe-inspiring sight as 25 or more sailing superyachts nestle stern to the town quai. Also ashore, the Bucket Committee, still the same group – perhaps less nebulous these days – of sailors, devotes ever-increasing energy to resolving the myriad issues that an event of this magnitude imposes, without in any way losing their collective sense of humour.

Thus it was, a few years ago, that when a contestant revealed herself to be, well, uncompetitive to an unexpected – and unratable – degree, she was simply told to leave the dock whenever she wanted in the morning and start the race – just please inform the Race Committee of her starting time. Another performance-challenged yacht in this year's Newport Bucket was told to start under power (she was good for over 20 knots at full throttle) and set sail once she reached the first turning mark. The Race Committee clearly had not lost its collective sense of humour. Nor have the participants. Other than the Bucket itself, the two most coveted prizes awarded at St Barths are the Skullduggery Cravat, awarded >>



to the most original costume worn by a yacht's crew, and the coveted Escargot Cup, presented to the yacht displaying the most leisurely performance.

If the Bucket Regattas can claim to have been successful, it is mainly in this: that while responding to the ever-growing complexity of managing larger fleets of sometimes incredibly fast superyachts by the judicious application of technology and expertise, the organisers have never lost sight of the fundamental principle that made the events so popular. This has never changed: no matter how much more structure is required for the smooth running of the Regatta, the element of spontaneity and informality must prevail. And in the end, it is also one hell of a show. ■

Images by Esther Barney, Ellie Brade and Claire Matches (clairematches.com)

Top: Serious racing by day onboard J-Class *Ranger*
Middle: Jim Teeters, mastermind of the Bucket Rating System
Bottom: P2's owner and Captain Jonathan Kline took this year's Newport Bucket