



“A Great Tactical Challenge”: The Master of Faster on the Wirth M. Munroe Ocean Race – And More



SPOOKIE, Wirth M. Munroe 2017

When Steve Benjamin talks about sailboat racing, people listen. The man *Sailing World* magazine called “The Master of Faster” has a remarkable resume: He was College Sailor of the Year as a Yale Bulldog in 1978, a silver medalist in 470s at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, and he was named US Sailing’s 2015 Yachtsman of the Year. Steve won the Etchells World Championships in 2017, and is in Australia this month defending his title. For the last several years, Steve and his wife, Heidi, have campaigned their IRC 52 SPOOKIE, which has become a dominating force in big boat racing on the U.S. East Coast and in Florida. A veteran of more than 10 Wirth M. Munroe Ocean Races, Steve plans to enter SPOOKIE in this year’s race, as well as the other four events in the Islands in the Stream Series. The Sailfish Club of Florida caught up with Steve, aka “Benj,” at the Etchells World Championships in Brisbane last week to talk about the Wirth M. Munroe, the Islands in the Stream -- and more.

Sailfish Club of Florida: *What is the appeal of the Wirth Munroe Race – on its own merits, and as part of the Islands in the Stream series?*

Steve Benjamin: Both, really. We (SPOOKIE Racing) consider the Wirth Munroe a great tactical challenge to determine the optimum course considering wind direction, wind strength, wind shifts and perhaps most importantly current, given the proximity to the Gulf Stream. As part of the SORC's Islands in the Stream Series, which is a major goal for SPOOKIE this winter, every race of the series is important!

Sailfish Club: *Without giving away any competitive secrets, can you give us some strategic insight into tackling a coastal race like the Wirth Munroe – taking into account factors like the Gulf Stream, the December weather in South Florida etc. It's not always as easy as some people suggest, right?*

Benjamin: *Tricky for sure! We use computer simulation to optimize the route, taking into consideration the various weather models, and the best current model we can find. Of course, none of these are totally accurate and there is a lot of human interpretation that is necessary, along with a bit of luck...*

Sailfish Club: *Two years ago, in honor of the 60th anniversary of the Wirth M. Munroe Ocean Race, we reinstated the 60-mile course with the Miami start. As a race boat owner, how has that increased the appeal and challenge of the race compared to the short course we had run in the recent past?*

Benjamin: We're hearing the larger boats, SPOOKIE included, definitely prefer the longer course. And we still finish in plenty of time for refreshments at the Sailfish Club!



Tom Bowler, SFC Race Chairman with Steve Benjamin 2017

Sailfish Club: *Early entries indicate this will be a very competitive year among big boats, including a number of 52s like SPOOKIE. How excited are you about the growing fleet of grand prix entries?*

Benjamin: We have been supporting the race for many years. We love this race and are very excited that more fast boats are coming to race with us. The SORC is doing a really good job of bringing competitive racing to South Florida's East Coast, meanwhile keeping it fun!

Sailfish Club: *This year, we are introducing a two-course format, adding back a 40-mile course with a start off Fort Lauderdale in hopes of attracting more small racers, racer-cruisers and cruisers. So far, interest seems to be growing. What do you think of that idea?*

Benjamin: Well, SPOOKIE Racing is in favor of anything that gets more boats racing and can certainly understand the smaller boats prefer the start in Fort Lauderdale. All good!

Sailfish Club: *No conversation about the Wirth Munroe would be complete without a question about the Sailfish Club of Florida's legendary hospitality – the rum punch reception and buffet dinner. Some say it is one of the best regatta parties around. Thoughts?*

Benjamin: Yes, indeed. The race's nickname is "The Race to the Buffet!" The hospitality can't be beat and neither can the dinner ...

Sailfish Club: *How excited/encouraged are you about the traction we are seeing with Islands in the Stream series? Is it starting to feel like the old days of SORC? Do you think this series is the seed of a more active big-boat scene in South Florida?*

Benjamin: For sure. There's a new twist now, which is before 2000 the SORC took about a month and it was hard to go back to work (or in Benj and Heidi's case, also school). Now, we have one (or maybe two) major races a month over five months and it's much easier to plan a winter racing schedule in South Florida with work and vacation times.

Sailfish Club: *Storm Trysail Club has been a pivotal partner to the organizing authority of the Wirth Munroe Race and the Islands in the Stream. Can you give some insight into how important it is to have organizations like the STC, the SORC and Biscayne Bay YC involved in building the profile of such races?*

Benjamin: The partnership of major organizing authorities is vitally important to the success of the series and we totally support and appreciate it.

Sailfish Club: *Specific to SPOOKIE, how many crew will you be sailing with for the Wirth M. Munroe Race and the other races? What well-known crew members have signed up – other than you, of course? Will it be pretty much the same core group for all the races or will you be rotating talent throughout?*

Benjamin: SPOOKIE races with 15 crew on short races (such as Wirth Munroe) and 12 for the longer races that require life rafts (all the others). We have a crew pool of about 18 and rotate in a selected team for each race. You'll be familiar with many of the crew pedigrees!

Sailfish Club: *You are well known for promoting young sailors in the SPOOKIE program. Will your South Florida campaign continue that tradition?*

Benjamin: Yes. We invite the local youth sailors to our practices, please send applications to benj@usa1200.com.