

COLD, WET & HELL-BENT

FOUR TEAMS OF LIFELONG WATERMEN BLAST 1,300 MILES
AROUND THE FLORIDA PENINSULA TO RAISE AWARENESS OF
THE STATE'S BATTLE FOR CLEAN WATER.



The massive electrical storm and torrential downpours did not let up for the first 12 hours of the race. Right: Florida Governor Ron DeSantis speaks at a pre-race news conference.



Flashing blue lights atop a Florida Fish & Wildlife (FWC) police RIB bounced off a slate gray Old River pockmarked with raindrops. I stood on the foredeck of a 36-foot center console and watched as a quartet of skiffs maneuvered into a position that more or less resembled a starting line.

“Give the boats a bit of a head start, or your wake will swamp ‘em,” Captains for Clean Water (CFCW) Executive Director and cofounder Capt. Daniel Andrews told our crew just before he boarded another chase vessel. We sat just off the skiffs’ stern as the FWC loudspeaker cut through the sound of idling outboards, thunder and a steady downpour. A kind of call-and-response followed.

“Key West, are you ready?” Brothers Mike and Jesse Marlowe hollered and gave a thumbs-up.

“Yellowfin, we good to go?” Competitors Chase Daniel and Heath Daughtry shouted “yes” in unison.

“Team Sea Pro, how about it?” Their outboard revved a retort and Toby Hansen and Chris Kalinowsky appeared to nod sagely.

“And Hell’s Bay, all set?” The team’s howl was lost in a massive thunderclap. “Here we go,” someone said next to me as the FWC boat sounded its horn and the four skiffs blasted out of the hole in unison. The Florida Skiff Challenge was on.

We followed orders to wait a hot minute and then held on as the vessel’s triple 350s screamed alive; in a blink we were slicing through the wash at 40 knots. Even at that speed we couldn’t catch the competitors’ nimble vessels and were left to watch as their silhouettes grew fainter in the swirling fog and all at once disappeared like smoke into an indecipherable frontier of mist and river. This is the closest the entrants would run together over the course of the next 1,300 miles.

A few hours earlier, the Gulf and sky were indistinguishable hues of a baleful gray when I pulled into a sprawling

gravel lot in a steady, midday rain. Judging from the time it took me to secure a parking space, the gloomy weather didn’t seem to be a deterrent to Panhandle denizens. Florida-Bama—the two-state straddling, infamous watering hole of song and prose—was jam-packed.

It was the tail end of spring break and the massive honky-tonk was abuzz with revelers. Groups of parents ate lunch shoulder-to-shoulder at large picnic tables while kids played nearby. Bars and decks were occupied by retired couples and coeds downing buckets of beer and Bushwackers, a chocolate shake-like concoction with a Clydesdale-size proportion of booze. Stepping through a canvas enclosure I spotted a man in foul-weather gear, holding a Camelbak hydration pack and chatting with a semicircle of patrons including a few shirtless gentlemen (never mind that the temps hovered around 60 degrees and the soaking rain was relentless) who appeared to have enjoyed a few of the aforementioned libations. The loquacious Hell’s Bay CEO Chris Peterson was holding court; the raconteur was talking strategy.

“You can go farther and faster or slower and straight,” Peterson told the assembled about the long run from Marco Island to Key West. “I thought I was smart and shot straight across and we got the heck beat out of us,” he recalled and the shirtless dudes said something about the “stones” it takes to run 50 miles or so offshore in a boat with virtually no freeboard. Looking at the skiffs beached on a spit of sand just behind the bar, I had to agree with the Bushwacker twins: this race borders on madness.

This year’s Florida Skiff Challenge is the fifth iteration of what started with a few boatbuilders talking trash and sharing tequila at a post-Palm Beach boat show gathering. “Chris and I agreed to do the race over a handshake [and] decided to run it between March and April to challenge [ourselves],” Daughtry told me, as this time of year just about any sea or meteorological condition can pop up over the 1,300-mile



The teams maneuvered their skiffs into a position that more or less resembled a starting line.

journey. As he spoke, he layered up over a spring wetsuit and watched the rain build in intensity. Daughtry gestured toward the foul weather and deadpanned “You can’t plan on anything.”

But try they do. Peterson’s crew planned to avoid as many no-wake zones as possible (“It’s like a caution in NASCAR,” he said) and to run fast and loose with the route, going outside or inside depending on conditions. Peterson’s son and copilot JC recalled the danger—and adrenaline-fueled excitement—of running inside last year on a pitch-black, middle-of-the-night sortie. “I put our draft at under one foot on my iPhone’s Navionics app and was yelling out our location and directions like a rally car navigator,” he said, remembering shooting gaps less than two boat lengths wide at 30-plus knots.

Along with Yellowfin, team Hell’s Bay has previous races under their belts. Case in point: Chris tells me that only the engine runs off the house battery, with everything else—lights, GPS, etc.—hooked to lithium-ion powerpacks that can be swapped out three at a time at a pit stop. JC mentioned that they’ve rigged a dry brake on the fuel fill for lightning-fast results, and the chase truck that will meet them at fuel stops about every 100 to 130 miles is full of redundant equipment. “Have a backup to the backup to the backup, then you don’t have enough,” the elder Peterson remarked.

If there was any anxiety or apprehension among the new competi-

tors, they certainly weren’t tipping their pitches. Key West’s Marlowe brothers have been following the race since its inception and built their skiff specifically to compete in the Challenge. Like the other teams, their chase crews were loaded up and ready to meet them with food, 5-hour Energy drinks and whatever busted since the last pit stop. “The conditions are going to dictate this entire event,” Jesse Marlowe told me. “We’ll sleep when we have to, and in a perfect world, see you [at the finish] in Jacksonville.”

The Sea Pro team, along with their chase crew, looked composed and loose. Hansen and partner Kalinowsky were thrilled to be the first team from outside Florida to compete in the race, and equally excited to have their fellow South Carolina natives Key West join them in the Challenge. “Do we make the cut from Marco to Key West and before that, run inside from Apalachicola to Cedar Key?” Hansen posed the rhetorical question that his teammate quickly answered. “Whatever we do, we’re gonna go fast and run like hell.”

With that, Andrews took to the stage and briefly spoke about race safety and rules, calling each team up to receive Garmin inReach Mini satcoms (for racers and crew) and an EPIRB in a beefy Pelican case. “We’ll have race visitors in the tens of thousands following [the racers] on our Facebook page and at our website. There’s a lot of info on the site that’ll educate them,” Andrews said about CFCW’s mission to get the

message out about the myriad water issues in the state.

Both Andrews and CFCW cofounder Capt. Chris Wittman are lifelong watermen, native Floridians and well-renowned hunting and fishing guides who watched as massive mismanagement has significantly altered Florida’s nationally recognized estuaries. For many years, the fresh water from rivers like the Kissimmee has been dammed in Lake Okeechobee, where it stagnates and collects a witch’s brew of pollutants from a variety of sources (many cite agricultural runoff as a significant factor) and then is released, untreated, into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers and the Everglades’ sea of grass. The algae blooms and salinity imbalance have put the delicate ecosystem in a chokehold, now on the verge of a complete collapse.

The subsequent die-off of scores of marine life impacts much more than just Florida’s mammoth angling industry. The state’s fishing, boating and tourism industry supports 1.3 million jobs and adds \$109 billion to the state’s economy. Residents, tourists and snowbirds are angry that they cannot walk out of their coastal homes without being struck down by the awful smell of a concoction borne from the vast flow of dead marine life and toxic algae blooms.

For far too long, poor resource management has pervaded the state that is so reliant on the outdoors, Andrews told me. But that’s changing. “All of the businesses in South Florida are rallying behind [our cause.] Guides, commercial fishermen and realtors, these are the voices that Gov. Ron DeSantis is listening to.” He added: “The governor has a really good understanding of how the economy and environment come together.”

The entire CFCW team on hand at the race were still in awe of the previous day’s visit by Gov. DeSantis and this year’s proposed \$625 million budget for addressing water issues in South Florida, part of a massive, \$2.5 billion investment in clean water initiatives. “I want to thank Captains for Clean Water for their activism and support of my initiative. Being good stewards of our water and our environment to me is a linchpin of those efforts,” Gov. DeSantis told the assembled and added, “the people of Florida want this taken care of.”

Well before the governor was sworn into office in early 2019, Yellowfin and Hell’s Bay were actively involved as conservation partners with CFCW, leading to the group’s management takeover of the Skiff Challenge. Using their marketing acumen, CFCW got more partners involved and steadily increased awareness of the race among the small boatbuilding community and inshore fishermen.

It’s one of the chief reasons that team Sea Pro entered the race. Hansen grew up in Florida and guides for a living and Kalinowsky is a marine biologist for the state of Georgia. “I saw a trífecta and we had to get involved,” Hansen told me, referring to him and his partner’s occupations plus the fact that Sea Pro sells about

HELL'S BAY



Toby Hansen of the Sea Pro team, one of two new teams to compete in 2019.

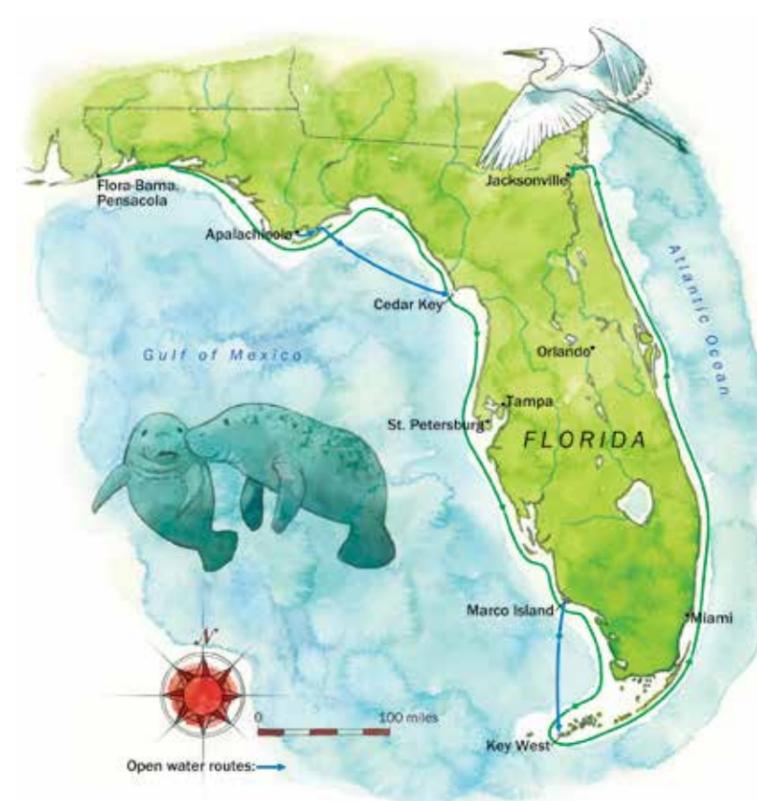


Team Hell's Bay finished in second place, destroying a jack plate along the way. Below: Hell's Bay CEO Chris Peterson collects himself before the next race leg.



HELL'S BAY

STEVE STANKIEWICZ



Florida Skiff Challenge Rules

The skiffs ran for between 46 and 63 hours straight, with the racers I spoke with catching an average of less than an hour of sleep during their 1,300-mile voyage around the state.

How teams get from start to finish is up to them and their chase crew. They are only required to stop at Gilbert's in Key Largo to check in for 30 minutes and carry a VHF, EPIRB, PFDs and some other safety equipment. Otherwise, the rules for the Florida Skiff Challenge are as follows:

- **Racers:** Two per vessel.
- **Boat:** No larger than 18 feet LOA.
- **Fuel:** Maximum 22-gallon capacity.
- **Power:** Maximum 70-hp outboard.
- All team members must be present at race start: two captains, two-person chase crew.
- Once skiff enters the water, it cannot be removed for any reason. Any repairs must be made in water.
- All supplies must be received from chase crew.
- Skiffs must return to land to refuel. Fuel must be provided by chase crew or gas dock. Only team members can handle refueling.
- Racers must step onto land at finish line before boat goes onto trailer.

half of its 1,200 boats manufactured per year in the Sunshine State.

I wondered if Sea Pro or the rest of the teams lamented their decision to enter the race after I watched them fade off like apparitions. The launch time was moved up 30 minutes in an effort to get ahead of the weather, to no avail. After I returned to shore and dried off a bit, I took a look at the radar map on my laptop. A gangrenous yellow and green with the deep reds of severe lightning—over 10,000 strikes per hour—enveloped the course, with the competitors given no choice but to run right into the tempest. For 12 hours, there was no escape from torrential downpours and sporty seas, the pitch black illuminated only by the copious lightning strikes.

Along with thousands of others who followed on social media, I tracked the racers on Facebook with updates at pit stops and used the inReach Mini map on CFCW's page that showed the racers' and crew's location. The chatter on social media was that Apalachicola to Cedar Key was going to be hairy and if the wind didn't lay down, running outside from Marco Island to Key West would be inadvisable. I woke up twice on that first night and immediately grabbed my laptop to get updates. Was Hell's Bay ahead a bit? Rumors swirled that Key West had hit a submerged log and was making repairs.

By 0700 on Friday, Yellowfin was near Honeymoon Isle just north of Clearwater Beach, 80 miles ahead of the nearest skiff. Sea Pro was just behind Hell's Bay, with Key West blasting down the coast, making up for their untimely repairs. On their run that first evening, Peterson remarked that "they spent more time in the air than we did in the water" and when asked why they were stopped for a bit offshore, he said they were popping Advil.

It was on the second day that Hell's Bay—after having to run back inshore the first evening and put on wetsuits as they were concerned about hypothermia—were again forced to stop and replace a cracked jack plate, the burly metal bracket that holds an outboard on a skiff's transom allowing for vertical lift. Not allowed to touch land, the racers and crew jerry-rigged a ratchet strap around the chase vehicle's front axle to first lift the outboard up to remove and replace the jack plate.

They dropped the motor back on and were on their way.

But no one could catch Yellowfin. And 46 hours later, I watched as Daughtry and Daniel pulled into the City of Jacksonville marina and right onto their boat trailer already in the water, but not before pulling off a few donuts and touching feet on the dock, per race rules.

"Without a doubt, this was the hardest Challenge yet," Daughtry said as he was greeted by his chase crew and the Yellowfin faithful. "We both wanted this one bad. This year we had tunnel vision; we felt Hell's Bay on our tail even though they weren't." When I asked Daniel about the conditions he just said, "You have to be stoic and push through it all. [The conditions] were one of the biggest things I've ever been through." Someone produced a few bottles of cheap champagne, which were cracked open in celebration.

All four teams completed the race, with the final competitor coming in about 15 hours after Yellowfin took home the trophy of a vacuum-keg, metal beer growler emblazoned with the dates and Skiff Challenge logo. The trophy is merely a remembrance of the hellscape the winners faced to get to the finish. It falls back to a test of wills, a desire to push oneself and go mano-a-mano with whatever nature throws at you.

The solution to Florida's water problems are within reach and the public and state government are on board. The competitors agreed to enter the race not only for the challenge: There had to be a reason, a call to action, a massive push to bring a clean water initiative to the forefront. With the CFCW vision starting to take shape, the cause looks to stay an evergreen topic on the 24-hour news cycle.

Next year's race is ready for new blood. And Yellowfin wants another W. I won't romanticize the Florida Skiff Challenge—the in-race footage and weather conditions can deter even the most hardcore challengers. But for those builders out there looking to take on the race, the cause is there and I believe that the wildness to complete the race lies inside all of us.

Who's ready to step up? I'll be cheering you on from Flora-Bama, Bushwacker in hand. 🍀