

Royal Natal's Orion slips from Lipton lead

ALEX PETERSEN ^{monday} 31/8/2007

CAPE TOWN: Choppy seas and a good 12-knot breeze made for intensely competitive sailing in the Lipton Challenge Cup on Table Bay yesterday, but the gremlin that frustrated the aims of Royal Natal yacht Orion to retain their overall points lead was kelp.

In each of the two races yesterday, the Durban boat – skippered by Shosholoza skipper Mark Sadler – was just one place behind defending champions, the Theewaters Sports Club entry, Dalys Insurance, skippered by Greg Davis.

After two days of north-westerly winds, the bay was thick with floating clumps of the heavy weed. Wrapped around the keel of a yacht, it does not help boat speed, as Orion found to their cost.

“We picked up kelp at one point in the second race, and I think it cost us a couple of places before we could get rid of it,” said Mark Sadler.

Father-and-son team Dave and Roger Hudson, on the Royal Cape yacht Greenlight, saw lots of kelp, but “we had a guy on permanent kelp watch, so we managed to avoid it”.

On Dalys Insurance, Davis and his crew picked up kelp in the first race. “You just have to get rid of it as quickly as possible. We keep a special ‘flossing’ stick to do just that,” said Davis.

If Sadler was feeling frustrated at Orion's performance, it is with good reason. Going into the racing yesterday, Royal Natal were overall points leader, one point ahead of defending champs Theewaters. At the end of the first race, in which Orion placed second, Dalys placed first, so they were level-pegging at the top of the log.

At the end of the second tough race in choppy seas, Dalys were back at the top, just one point ahead of Orion, although in the race both had lost out to Royal Cape's Greenlight,

which claimed first place, with Dalys second and Orion third.

Zeekoevlei's Alexandra Securities, skippered by the Willcox brothers, Paul and Graeme, sailed consistently well to score a fourth place in both races. “There were lots of wind shifts, so timing was critical. It was very close racing,” said Paul.

Transvaal Yacht Club's “Bumbo” Saxum Insurance, skippered by another Shosholoza sailor, David Rae, followed in fifth place in both races, but their overall points position leaves them a hefty 15 points behind the leaders.

While the lead has changed hands through the regatta, despite consistent sailing, Sadler and Royal Natal have still to win a race, but have two seconds and three thirds to their credit. Even winning the race today, and there will be only one race, may not be enough to ensure Royal Natal take home the Cup. If Orion wins, with Dalys in second place – with the resulting equal points between them – Dalys will take the regatta by virtue of a higher number of first places.

But with the weather forecasts predicting winds of 15 to 20 knots tomorrow, this could bring an interesting twist to the regatta. Said Greg Davis: “If we have could strong winds, then that could separate the men from the boys, or maybe that should be the old men from the young men.”

Commenting on the level of sailing, Dee Siebert, sailing secretary of the Royal Cape Yacht Club, commented: “I think this is the closest Lipton Cup racing we have seen in a number of years.

“Maybe because Natal is challenging with Shosholoza skipper Mark Sadler fresh back from Valencia leading their team, but I think the level of sailing has clearly gone up a notch,” she said.

Race 4: 1 Theewater SC, 2 Royal Natal, 3 Royal Cape, 4 Zeekoevlei, 5 Transvaal YC
Race 5: 1 Royal Cape (15), 2 Theewater SC (12), 3 Royal Natal (13), 4 Zeekoevlei (18).