

Clash of the Clans

by Anna Tanneberger

The Caleta Cove Classic organised by the Western Province Inflatable Boat Club, was held on Clanwilliam Dam in October. The Longhaul on Saturday was won by Mike Watermeyer and Jonathan Basnett, followed by Rob Louw/Anton Mulder and Henning Blaauw/Albert Lombard in the P750 class. Winners in the P550 class were Brett Pagel and Glen McGillivray, followed by Steve Tripney/Francois du Plessis and Thomas Chowles/Jakkie Liebenberg.

It's a macho sport, though to their credit they don't exclude women or idiots. People get hurt and don't cry and quote statistics to prove that it is still one of the safest sports — as do the proponents of rugby, boxing, motor racing, powerboat racing, scuba diving — each proving beyond reasonable doubt that despite its recent casualty it is still the safest sport — compared to something as outright deadly as, well, one of the others.

It is as if there is a certain shame attached to being THE most dangerous sport, but don't let that fool you into thinking they're going to take that thought to its logical conclusion and take up ikebana (arranging flowers and twigs, Geoff). Is it a sport if there's no ambulance and doctor-in-waiting?

At the pilot's briefing the rules for the one and half hour endurance race were explained. Pilots were required to kill engines at each of the two checkpoints where the crew had to jump out and report the boat's number to a marshal. There being no long, wide beach at the dam, the checkpoint was a small area. Especially on the first lap or two a great number of crew would be wading or swimming for shore at the same time. Officer of the day Greg Williams promised that for safety reasons no clemency would be shown pilots who didn't kill engines. A lap would be docked for each transgression of this rule.

To facilitate lap-scoring, competitors in the P750 class (wearing pink bibs) would report to the marshal wearing a pink bib and competitors in the P550 class (wearing green bibs) report to the marshal wearing — a green bib. Some still got it wrong. It wasn't the only thing some of them got wrong. One competitor

said later that "if they showed us a video recording of what happens at these checkpoints we'd probably be ashamed — of the language used and so on." You'd be scared. I thought OOD Williams took in his breath at the start and only let it out when he dropped the chequered flag one and half hours later.

At the first lap the checkpoint was predictably chaotic. A crew landed under his boat. When he didn't reappear Williams ran in and lifted the boat's bow. The crew is reported to have said he wasn't in any real trouble, but had decided to stay under where it was safe. Yes, but stay for how long, one wonders — with 16 laps to go?

Are crews running up to the checkpoint required to touch the table? (Sorry, Greg, I wasn't listening). Most do, anyway, in awe of the statuesque Tanya Williams in charge of timekeeping, who might just decide to call them back. She has a withering glance that deals effectively with moans, whines and stupid questions. The kind of look that would have halted the charge of the Light Brigade in mid-stride.

Anyway, where does one draw the line — with competitors running all the way to touch the table, running only half way up, or could they simply shout their number from the boat? Some lap scorers waved competitors back, acknowledging their numbers before they'd reached the table — partly for reasons of compassion and partly concern for their own safety when several wild-eyed, adrenaline-fired competitors slithered towards them at full speed.

As the endurance race wore on the lap scorer in green became obscured by spectators who surged forward to see the crews fall on their faces on the aptly-named slipway. She thus moved out from behind her table and to one side so that she could still be seen by crews heading for shore. Yes, they saw her, but not the table (which had to be touched, remember). There was a marked hesitation. Was the new rule to touch the girl? Could it be true?

At the other end of the dam Tersius Swanepoel/Albert Fenske ran into the back of another boat and the prop burst Swanepoel's

bow-tube. This behind the brothers Jannie and Louis Visser (already feeling victimised because of their weight, height, age, the wrong engine), who thought they were being shot at. At the end of the race they also had nine laps docked from their score for failing to kill engine at the checkpoint. "But I'm 42 years old," said Visser —irrelevantly, I thought. Perhaps it is the 6-foot-four hulk's version of "But, I'm only little." Thus they dropped from seventh to stone last. "But we'll beat them tonight," (at the party) they promised.

Getting wet and muddy and niftily side-stepping slithering crews are the least of the marshals' worries as they smartly have to distinguish between "sixty-five" and "ses-en-vyftig" called out in voices getting fainter as the laps wear on. Steve Tripney thought his crew was doing "an impression of Jacques Cousteau," slithering, crawling, stumbling, swimming. Crew Francois du Plessis's comment was inaudible. The only exceptions were Sonja Moodie and Albert Lombard, who smiled as broadly on the last lap as the first and radiated thorough enjoyment of the sport.

As the chequered flag dropped at the end of the race Greg Williams again had to rush into the water, this time not to avert tragedy, but truculence after a collision involving the bow of one boat and the back of someone else's head. "South Africa's version of ice hockey," muttered Williams, but both competitors involved were there minutes later, arm in arm, to apologise.

Current longhaul champions Peter and Craig Bacon, racing in the PO class for unhomologated boats, said that the boats needed a bit of chop in the water to get air under them. In the same class was a semi-rigid flight-deck ship entered by Eugene Steiger and Leon van Niekerk, who taunted the rest of the field by throttling back just a little during the circuit races on Sunday. The class was won by Steiger/Van Niekerk, followed by Jerome Mattison/Zain Brinner and Ricus and Francois Lombard.

Mike Watermeyer and Jonathan Basnett (1) moving into the lead.

