

Remembering Nelson Roltsch

In April of 1983, thirty-eight vessels began the 200nm course of the New Orleans Lightship Race that would take them from Gulfport, MS to the mouth of the Mississippi River where the competitors would pass the New Orleans Lightship to port. They would then return by way of passing the Mobile Sea Buoy to port and subsequently follow the southern edges of the Gulf Islands westward until turning back north at Ship Island to finish just outside Gulfport Yacht Club.

Out of the diverse classes of sailboats that started the race, only six boats managed to finish. According to everyone, turning past the Mobile Sea Buoy is when things really started to hit the fan. The combination of the cold front carrying with it 50+ winds and the shallower waters near the Gulf Islands created an irresistible formula for disaster.

Around this point, on a J29, a 20-year-old Tulane student, Nelson Roltsch, climbed from below deck. The stories vary, but he was apparently wearing a lifejacket and a harness. He was unclipped and moving to another point but did not have a chance to hook on when a wave hit. He was washed overboard and once he was off the boat, "there was no way to get to him, and no way for him to get to the boat."

Tragically, Nelson Roltsch was never found. An accomplished sailor, well-liked and with fiery red hair, he had won a national scow championship at age 16. He had entered Tulane in 1981 and had spent the summer as a charter captain, having earned his US Coast Guard Captain's License at age 18.

Today Tulane University is proud to continue to remember Nelson by having renamed the annual Windjammer Regatta to the Nelson Roltsch Regatta. It is well attended and very competitive.