

Search suspended for St. Pete sailor who went missing during long-distance race

Jim Slauson, 73, went off course in the Gulf of Mexico while taking part in the WaterTribe Everglades Challenge, according to the U.S. Coast Guard.



James Slauson, seen in this undated photo provided by the U.S. Coast Guard, went missing this week while taking part in the WaterTribe Everglades Challenge, a long-distance race from St. Petersburg to Key Largo, authorities said. The Coast Guard found Slauson's boat in the Gulf of Mexico on Monday evening but there was no sign of Slauson, 73. The Coast Guard suspended the search for Slauson on Thursday. [Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard]

By **Tony Marrero**

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ST. PETERSBURG — Jim Slauson set sail from Fort DeSoto Park on Saturday with an epic voyage ahead of him.

The 73-year-old St. Petersburg sailor was taking part in the WaterTribe Everglades Challenge, a roughly 300-mile race from Fort DeSoto to Key Largo. Alone in his 17-foot Core Sound, Slauson appeared to be making good progress, sailing south along the coast, according to a website that shows his GPS coordinates.

By Monday morning, something was wrong. Slauson had veered off course, farther into the Gulf of Mexico before his GPS device stopped reporting his location. Slauson's son called the U.S. Coast Guard and search crews found Slauson's boat more than 50 miles off the coast of Marco Island.

There was no sign of the captain.

On Thursday, the Coast Guard suspended a search that had covered more than 9,700 nautical miles by air and sea.

"Suspending a search and rescue case is one of the toughest parts of the job," Coast Guard Capt. Matthew Thompson, commander of Sector St. Petersburg, said in a statement released Friday morning. "Our thoughts are with the family during this difficult time."

What went wrong was still unclear Friday, but Slauson's disappearance happened during an event so difficult that only about 40 percent of the field finishes each year, according to the WaterTribe website.



NOTE: It is now known that despite this grim picture, the boat was in fact UPRIGHT when it was initially found by the helo and it was the downwash that caused the vessel to capsize.

This photo provided by the U.S. Coast Guard shows James Slauson's 17-foot Core Sound sailboat floating capsized in rough conditions in the Gulf of Mexico. Slauson, 73, of St. Petersburg went missing after veering off course during the WaterTribe Everglades Challenge, a roughly 300-mile race from Fort DeSoto to Key Largo. The boat was upright when the Coast Guard found it Monday evening but Slauson was nowhere to be seen. [| Courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard]

The site describes the Everglades Challenge as an unsupported, expedition-style adventure race for kayaks, canoes and small sailboats. The distance is roughly 300 nautical miles, depending on the participant's course selection. The time limit to the finish in Key Largo is eight days.

There are no safety boats or support crews to help during the race, and participants must carry their own food and water. Safety and communication equipment are required. That includes a

GPS tracking device and an emergency position-indicating radio beacon, or EPIRB, that must be attached to each participant's life jacket.

"If you are not an expert paddler and/or sailor, do not enter this race," says a three-page warning and waiver that participants must sign. "Even if you are a well-prepared expert you may DIE – yes, you may DIE."

An email sent to race organizers Friday was not immediately returned.

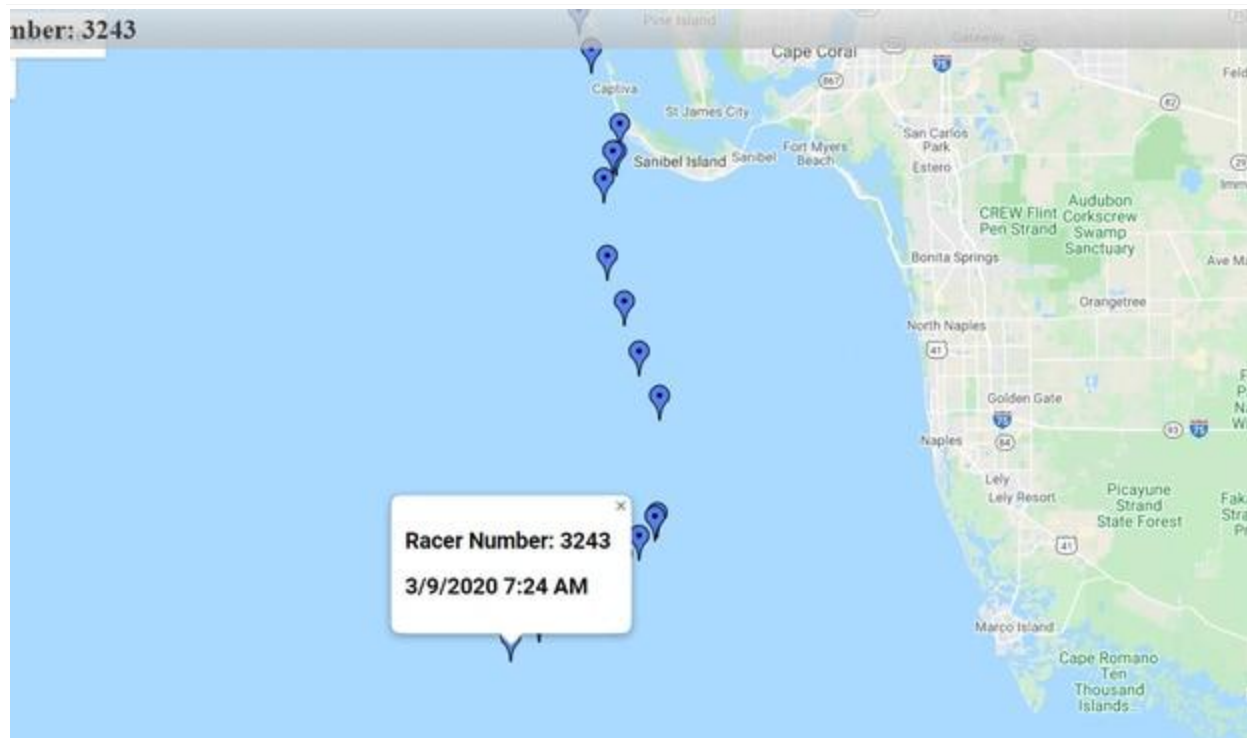
Slauson had a registered radio beacon with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and showed the beacon, attached to his life jacket with a lanyard, to a race safety inspector before he left Fort DeSoto on Saturday, said Petty Officer Second Class David Micallef, a public information specialist for the Coast Guard. The model features a built-in strobe light but required manual activation in the case of distress, Micallef said.

Slauson was also using a Gen3 SPOT GPS tracker capable of providing automatic updates to his location every 60 minutes. Slauson also used the device's "OK" button during his trip to manually log his location, according to the Coast Guard.

After leaving Fort DeSoto, Slauson stayed close to the coast until Sunday afternoon, when he reached Sanibel Island, the race tracking website [raceowl.com](https://www.raceowl.com) shows. At that point, his course began to stray slightly southwest. Slauson last spoke to his wife about 1:15 p.m. Sunday, Micallef said.

By 1 a.m. Monday, his course began to veer more sharply to the southwest, continuing in that direction for the next six hours until 7:24 a.m., when the GPS device logged its location for the last time. According to the Coast Guard, Slauson hit the device's OK button for that last update. There were no more manual or automatic updates after that.

By that point, the GPS device showed he was some 36 miles off the coast of Marco Island, Micallef said.



This image from the web site raceowl.com shows the course missing St. Petersburg sailor James Slauson took before his GPS device stopped logging his location. Slauson, 73, of St. Petersburg was participating in the WaterTribe Everglades Challenge, a long-distance race from Fort DeSoto to Key Largo, when he veered off course. The U.S. Coast Guard found his 17-foot sailboat some 50 miles off the coast of Marco Island on Monday but there was no sign of Slauson. The Coast Guard suspended the search on Thursday. [raceowl.com]

Searchers started in that area Monday after Slauson's son called, said Petty Officer Second Class David Micallef, a public information specialist for the Coast Guard. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Collier County Sheriff's Office assisted with the search.

“He did the right thing and alerted the Coast Guard and we immediately sent out assets to investigate,” Micallef said.

A crew on a Coast Guard plane spotted Slauson’s boat Monday evening about 53 miles west of Marco Island, Micallef said. The boat was upright at the time.

When a Jayhawk helicopter arrived on scene, crews were able to get a good look at the vessel and its contents and saw no sign of Slauson, Micallef said. In the process of deploying a rescue swimmer near the vessel, the rotor wash, winds and waves caused the boat to capsize. The rescue swimmer was able to bang on the hull and look under with a light but didn’t find Slauson.

No life jackets matching the one Slauson was wearing at the start of the event were located or recovered by searchers during this case. There was no evidence to indicate how he got separated from the boat, but the weather conditions were rough for a vessel of that size, with east winds blowing more than 20 miles per hour and seas of three to five feet, Micallef said.

Slauson worked in information technology and web design until he retired in 2007, according to his LinkedIn page. He also worked part-time as a sailing instructor, the page shows.

“I have had a successful professional career,” the page says, “and now I am going to be living my life long dream of long distance sailing and visiting exotic places.”