"Fast talk, fast boats, fast tempers are the meat of the Pontchartrain Racing Circuit V, a three-weekend regatta racing for the finals Saturday. The biggest ocean-racing regatta on the Gulf Coast and one of the largest in the country, 125 boats test the best in Southern racing circuits.

John Wilgen, professor of political science weekdays, charts the race course for eight classes of spinnaker and non-spin maker, single-hulled cruisers. The 22- to 68-footers like the Saga and duck-boggers like the Cynus (equipped with microwave, freezer and hot tub) "campaign" the waters. In large regattas, the military analogy applies in crew training and morale, boat preparation and racing logistics.

From bow to stern, ocean challengers stress size, design and manpower. Boat names embody dreams — Nemesis, Peerless, Idyllic, Destiny.

"Names are whatever you can imagine," says Allen Casool, retired geologist and circuit runner of a 25-foot midget ocean racer. "You identify with it. You want it to represent something that means something to you."

His own boat, the Hiatus, represents "an interval in time of which there is no record."

"And that's true. Out here on the water, you're not watching a time clock. You're not rushing or reporting to anyone. It's a break, a weekend break," he says, "an appropriate name for a boat."

The break ends when the race begins. Sailors climb masts, rig halyards, trim headsails from early light until a cannon's blast marks the start. Then, the real work begins.

The first leg of the Lake Pontchartrain Racing Circuit V sets a course close to the wind — an "Olympic triangle," combining every possible point of sail in three upwind legs, two spin maker reaches and one downwind leg.

"At one point boats will round the mark into a windward beat, packing all the way up to the mark, popping spinnakers as they come around," says John Cramer Jr., racing committee member and 15-year member of Pontchartrain Yacht Club.

Cramer, a Kansas native who sailed the lakes of the Midwest as a sea scout, picked up sailing again 25 years later. Houston-based, he keeps a house in Mandeville and a boat on Pontchartrain.

"Sailing's always competitive here," he says. "I just go to Houston to get my paycheck."

Southern regattas draw boats from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, the Florida Panhandle, even Arkansas and Texas, to sail the Gulf and Southern Offshore Racing Circuits. The majority compete within the Gulf Yachting Association, attracting skippers and crews from the Sabine River to Panama City, Fla. The more advanced compete in California and Southern Florida.

"To take on the heavies in these circuits, boats are top campaigners — much larger and more expensive," says Casool.

The annual budget for sails alone is estimated at $160,000 for Buddy Friedrichs' 41-footer, the Gauntlet, out of New Orleans, a strong contender on ocean-racing circuits for years.

The stress of ocean racing is not on boats alone. Little or no sleep isn't uncommon the night before a regatta.

"It's like that year after year for some," says Wilgen. "Some never get used to the tension."

Rounding the mark, above, E.A. Rainolo's Celebration (at right) celebrates a competitive lead several boat-lengths ahead of its closest competitor, Oscar McMillan's the Banshee. Left, race committee members from New Orleans Yacht Club, Pee Wee Herman at left, and John Cramer Jr. of Pontchartrain Yacht Club in Mandeville drop temporary racing buoys for the first of five courses on Lake Pontchartrain. Below, Lake Pontchartrain Racing Circuit V, the largest ocean-racing regatta on the Gulf Coast for 22- to 68-footers, draws 125 boats from the South.