

SIXTH ANNUAL TEXAS 200: A REPORT

What began six years ago as a wild-west variation of the small boat “raid” concept, the Texas 200 has become mainstream and semi-respectable. It’s been featured in WoodenBoat magazine. My report in MAIB on the 2009 edition of the Texas 200 (TX200) was half-incredulous at what I was seeing. I returned in 2013 to a matured, but no less eccentric event, and it all felt “normal” this time.

Wind and heat are the variables that determine the pleasure-to-pain ratio of the TX200. These were relatively benign in 2013, by local standards. About 25 boats and crews participated. The years of 30% of the fleet dropping out are thankfully past. Sailors are generally coming better informed about what they are getting into, and better prepared. Nevertheless, three crews still withdrew.

The course varies a bit from year to year. 2013 was the longest TX200 yet, 211 miles by GPS reckoning; more than that if you had to tack a lot. Half of the overnight stops were new. Some sailors probably missed the former third night stop at the Padre Island Yacht Club, with its air conditioning and showers. They probably did NOT miss the bottomless, gooey black mud at the primitive camp at Hap’s Cut.

Home-built boats traditionally have dominated, but fiberglass production boats increased this year. The “bargain” orientation remains the same. With an exception or two, the fiberglass boats are either long-time family companions, or recycled “classics,” bought cheap and restored to life. Participants are a mix of hard-core returning veterans and first-timers. Some continue to travel great distances to attend; sailors came from South Dakota and several west coast cities this year.

2013 was the first year that founder Chuck Leinweber (of “Duckworks” fame) did not sail. We missed his cheerful personality and deep knowledge of the coast, but it’s a positive sign that the event has matured and can stand on its own. The “Texas 200 Sailing Club” (with officers and everything) now runs the event,

only slightly more organized than it ever was, and intentionally so. The event now has an entrance fee (“club dues”) to pay for insurance, and a liability waiver that all participants must sign. Its language borrows heavily from the Everglades Challenge waiver, which ditches polite legalese in favor of bluntness and clarity. It’s a document that pokes you in the chest and challenges you to back down. A brief excerpt of a two-page waiver form reads:

“ . . . all people, agents and companies associated with the event owe you nothing, nor do we owe you duty of care, or any other duty. We promise you nothing. We do not, and will not even try to make this event safe for anyone. This event is not safe for anyone. . . We won’t even try to warn you about every known danger . . . If we do decide to warn you about something, that doesn’t mean we will try to warn you about everything . . . We and our agents may do things that are unwise and dangerous. Sorry; we’re not responsible. We may give you bad advice. Don’t listen to us. Enter and participate in this event at your own risk. And have fun!”

I crewed for Chris Breaux of Houston, owner-builder of the 31 ft. Bolger folding sharpie-schooner, named ELSIE B. Chris put out the call for crew on the Texas 200 Facebook page a few months in advance, and I applied for the job. Because of a business obligation, Chris couldn’t start until a full day after the rest of the fleet on Monday. I flew in from southern California on Monday, and we embarked on Tuesday, with the goal of sailing 90 miles and catching up with the fleet the same day at “Camp 2.” The speedy schooner might have done it too, if the wind had held. It went light for several hours mid-day, so we settled for a 75 mile run, and caught up with the fleet the next day. I received an education by my first experience with either a schooner or a gaff rig. The rules of sail trim seem to be different from what I’m accustomed to.

The TX200 works partly because the prevailing winds on the south Texas gulf coast in June blow steady and strong from the south to southeast almost all the time. It typically makes for a reliable downwind run. Otherwise, a bunch of little sailboats probably wouldn’t make 200 miles in five days. Sometimes,

however, nature must assert its will, and this year the wind went off-script for a day, with the result that there was (gasp!) considerable windward work to do.

While TX200 sailors hope for consistent following winds, there is otherwise much variety. The course weaves through a succession of bays and channels of changing character. A speedy overview would go something like this:

Day 1: Embark northbound from Port Isabel, Texas, with the high-rise hotels of tourist-mecca South Padre Island on the horizon to starboard. Some, with appropriate boats, skills, and preparation take the “outside” route on the Gulf of Mexico. Most, however, take the inside route via the broad, shallow Laguna Madre, which quickly leaves civilization behind. Boats in the ICW follow the channel markers in a near-straight line, or risk going aground. There are miles of open water around, but almost all of it is under four feet deep. The shorelines, when you can see them, are vacant barrier islands or salt flats. Other boat traffic is light. Later, hints of civilization appear in the form of private fishing shacks, built on pilings over the water or tidal sands. ELSIE B’s performance shines under ideal conditions. We surge ahead on a broad reach, consistently at seven to eight miles per hour with little effort and no drama.

There are two options for the first night’s camp: 1) the public docks in the small town of Port Mansfield, the first civilization since leaving Port Isabel, or 2) the “Port Mansfield jetties,” a primitive camp ten miles east, where a dredged channel meets the Gulf of Mexico. The former is best for ICW sailors; the latter is preferred by those who go “outside.”

Day 2: The groups that diverged on Day 1 re-converge in Redfish Bay, again confined mostly to the ICW channel. The Bay ends at the entrance to the “land cut” where the ICW becomes a dredged canal through the coastal dunes and sand flats. The land cut gives refuge from the waves of the open bay, but the wind is unobstructed. Here is often the fastest sailing of the trip. Numerous dolphins approach your boat, but the speedy ELSIE B. leaves them behind. The tower-turbines of vast “wind farms” appear to port and continue for miles. We catch up with tail-end boat of the main fleet. It is the Prindle catamaran team, stopped on the lee shore. We alter course and come near enough to learn that they have

recovered from being “pitchpoled,” but are undamaged, and will soon be underway again.

The land cut gives way to Baffin Bay, bisected again by the marked navigation channel, though with more turns, variety and frequent small islands. Just out of the ICW, in the middle of the bay, one of these unnamed islands is Camp 2. For the first time, the entire fleet is assembled (except drop-outs and late-starters), allowing for unlimited socializing. The evening meal ranges from ultra-spartan to fairly sophisticated, depending on the crew’s priorities. The night is dark and windy. The heat and exertions of the day take their toll, and most sailors retire early. Deeper-draft boats, unable to reach the shallow beach, bob and splash at anchor, keeping their crews awake half the night.

Day 3: Crews are wise to embark as early as possible. High winds, if they come, are worst in the afternoon, so it’s prudent seamanship to start early and arrive at the destination as early as possible. The catboat CUPHOLDER discovers the downside of a keel in this area, when it goes hard aground before it can reenter the ICW. Tide and wind direction are making it worse by the minute. The fleet is gone and there is no one around to help. After standing in the water and pushing to the point of exhaustion, the crew tries to radio for a tow service, but the location is so remote, none can be reached. After several frustrating hours, the successful solution is the ancient practice of kedging off, using an anchor to pull on the masthead at an angle, and thereby pry the keel out of the sand. They rejoin the northbound fleet a few hours late.

Baffin Bay eventually narrows. Sportfishing traffic increases as the course skirts the fringe of the Corpus Christi metropolitan area. The channel appears to be wider here, but it is an illusion. A quarter mile from shore, boats pass near a group of birds standing in inch-deep water. The first commercial barges are seen. A housing tract appears, and then a highway bridge, tall enough for barge traffic to pass underneath. Some boats stop at the Marker 37 marina for ice and supplies. Some years, but not this time, sailors withdraw here because of equipment problems, or because it’s not what they expected.

Passing under the Highway 99 bridge is the gateway to Corpus Christi Bay. Most of the fleet veer away from the ICW here. For the first time, the bay is deep enough (four to six feet) that following channel markers is unnecessary. A keelboat might be taking chances here, but not the centerboarders and leeboarders of the Texas 200 fleet. The illusion of wilderness is gone. The shoreline is partly developed and industrialized. There are abandoned or inactive gas and oil platforms scattered around the bay. If you're willing to unstep your mast to get under a low bridge, there is a potential shortcut. Otherwise the fleet's next target is a gap between two islands, called Stingray Hole (love that name), through which the fleet enters the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, and turns to starboard. For five miles the busy Channel is shared with oceangoing vessels, car ferries, and everything else. This is made more challenging by the need to sail a close reach. The town of Port Aransas passes to starboard, but most are too busy dodging the ferries to notice.

At the first opportunity, boats exit the Ship Channel for the Lydia Ann Channel, the entrance to Aransas Bay. All are glad to put the Ship Channel behind them, and have the wind astern again. An historic lighthouse is passed to port. Follow the port side shoreline until arriving at an oyster shell beach called Quarantine Shore (love that name) to Camp 3. It feels like wilderness again, but when night falls, the lights of civilization are visible around us, though at a distance. Three days in, Breaux continues to produce delicious hot meals, morning and night, quite a luxury under the circumstances.

Day 4: The crossing of Aransas Bay can be intimidating in a high wind, which is common, but conditions this day are mild. At the end of the bay, a choice must be made between reentering the ICW, versus the infamous "back bays" route to San Antonio Bay. The latter means following a narrow, unmaintained, vaguely marked channel through shallow bays bounded by shell islands and crisscrossed with shell reefs. Breaux knows the way, so we opt for a little adventure. This area has a fearsome reputation and history in the Texas 200, so most boats take the other route. Did I mention that we don't have a motor aboard ELSIE B.?

Breaux's memory conflicts with the chart, and we soon go softly aground. Fortunately the wind is mild and we recover quickly. Thereafter, we keep a sharp lookout for little stakes driven in the mud that mark the channel. We "touch" from time to time, but we don't stop again. We're grateful for an overcast day that keeps the heat down. Other boats are out of sight.; it feels remote and isolated. We cross Carlos Bay, Carlos Dugout, Cedar Dugout, Cedar Bayou, Ayres Bay, and Ayers Dugout (dugout: a dredged opening in a reef). Finally, sailing clear of the shoals and reefs, we embark across the unaccustomed freedom of San Antonio Bay. The five to seven feet of water under us is as deep as it gets around here, even miles from land.

The wind shifts a bit east. What in other years may be an easy reach is not this day. We begin tacking to windward, attempting to make South Pass, and failing, settle for Steamboat Pass* (*a naturally navigable gap in an island or reef), the entrance to Espiritu Santo Bay.

The schooner doesn't like beating to windward. In fairness, the schooner hasn't been asked to do much windward work, and so lacks the rigging refinements to make the best of it. It never mattered before. With the day waning, we begin a struggle to gain seven or eight miles to windward to make Camp 4 at Army Hole (love that name). The prospect of sailing in darkness on an overcast night in an area I know nothing about, trying to hit small target is unnerving to me. Breaux seems confident and he's the skipper, so I keep my doubts mostly to myself, and hike out like a dinghy racer, trying to help the sails squeeze out progress to windward. Darkness falls. Aided by GPS, Breaux's memory, teamwork and bit of seamanship, we make our destination at Army Hole on Matagorda Island, about 10 pm. This boat-access-only, primitive state park and wildlife preserve was formerly a training base and bombing range for the Army Air Corps in WW2. It is the final camp of the Texas 200, and there's a party going on. They see us coming, and we are welcomed at the water's edge with smiles and help securing the boat. Food and drink is ready and waiting. It is a fine moment after almost 15 hours on the water. We are not the last to arrive.

Day 5: Even in a light breeze, it is only a half-day sail to the finish at Magnolia Beach. The previous focus and seriousness of getting an early departure for a challenging passage give way this day to sleeping late, casual preparations, and relaxed conversations among crews. There seems a reluctance to leave, knowing that, at the next stop, it will all be over. The route is across Matagorda Bay and Lavaca Bay to the finish at the small town of Magnolia Beach. We abruptly reenter civilization and the ICW at Port O'Conner, past lavish vacation homes, private docks with shiny yachts, a Coast Guard station, and heavy boat traffic. The landscape has turned semi-tropically green, versus the desert of Day 1. After the previous day's drama, it all feels anticlimactic. We welcome a diversion, stopping briefly to help push a fellow sailor off a sandbar (a sneaky one protruding into the navigation channel). What would be difficult for the solo skipper is easy for three of us.

Upon arrival at Magnolia Beach, first-timers can be spotted with a huge grin of satisfaction and relief on their faces. Veterans are happy too, but the thrill of the first time can't be matched. Chuck and Sandra Leinweber are there to welcome the arriving sailors. Vehicles and trailers are retrieved from nearby, where they were parked six days before. Boats are loaded up and prepared for the trip home, some a few miles down the road, some a few thousand. Most participants have paid in advance for a celebratory, catered "shrimp boil" on the beach, with cold beverages, including a local favorite, Shiner beer. The boat-talk flows freely, as it has for at least a week. Reluctantly, finally everyone leaves. Half of them are already making plans for next year.