

The 2016 Texas 200

By Ken Ford

Given a choice of being smart, experienced, prepared or just plain lucky, I'll take lucky any day of the week.

Only twenty minutes into the first leg of the Texas 200, I was tooling along nicely in my Saturday Night Special under power of my 4HP Yamaha in the very shallow water of Port Isabelle's bay at the most southern tip of Texas. I was thoroughly enjoying two Bottle-nosed Dolphins having a lot of fun with Bernadette's bow wave. I had seen a rather large dorsal fin on the starboard side coming straight at me and I was startled at first because I thought it might be a large shark. With it headed right at me I couldn't see much of the side profile so at first I couldn't tell what it was. When the animal passed rapidly underneath me on a perpendicular course the water was clear enough to see it was a friendly just coming over to check me out. I think there were two of them but the one that I saw the most of was very dark with lots of spots – it was a very beautiful and athletic animal. It circled back and began riding the pressure bow wave and that put a huge smile on my face. This was a good omen I thought and the antics of this particular porpoise were certainly entertaining. I was having one of the best times of my life. He or she surfaced and dived gracefully a couple of times during the ride and then as quickly as it had started they were gone.

I am very glad that I didn't get a picture or a movie of the porpoise playtime because that would have made the pain of losing my camera later on even worst. I'm very sorry that I don't have any pictures to share of the event because I fell overboard while being towed to the safety of Port Mansfield. Here's the story on that... In coming into Port Mansfield the evening before the wind was crazy strong and Bernadette and I were surfing down long swells as well as crashing into standing waves formed by the combination of strong wind and shallow water. It was by far the most exciting sailing of my life! In fact it was beyond exciting – it was white knuckle time for me. I tried to make the turn to get out to the Mansfield jetties where camp one was but it was just too dicey for me so after a couple of close calls I abandoned the board reach to camp idea and returned to the more controllable downwind course.

At first I didn't know what to do so I went much further up the Texas coast while trying to review my options.

There were several self-inflicted problems with my boat. First and foremost was that I had overburdened Bernadette with way too much camping gear, tools, water, two coolers of ice, ten gallons of gasoline, fishing gear, and yes I even brought two full-sized pillows with me. She was so loaded down that the aft end of her inboard motor well was dragging in the water even though it was three inches above the designed water line. Fortunately, I was even carrying two rudders in case one broke. My primary rudder was supposed to be the high performance rudder off my SCAMP. It had 012 NACA profiles and a bungee-loaded downhaul that allowed it to kick up if need be and also return to full deployment automatically all without me doing anything. The problem was that even with its tiller extension I couldn't get far enough forward to keep the aft end of the motor well from

dragging up lots of water. My backup rudder was just a barn door rudder that I had slapped together in about five hours. Luckily I had fitted that one with a push/pull Norwegian style tiller that enabled me to get much further forward in the boat and that helped with the transom dragging problem but didn't completely solve it either.

I had brought my 4HP outboard with me in case any of the smaller boats needed a tow due to equipment problems. I had imagined Bernadette and I being heroic in rescuing some unfortunate sailor with a busted rudder or broken mast. My plan had been to motor the entire first day to get an idea of fuel consumption and to get a feel for the boat because it was completely new to me having just finished the build. Never take an untested boat to such a strenuous event unless you are part crazy or just plain lucky. I think I was both but I got away with it.

After about two hours of motoring, much to my surprise, my motor quit and was heat frozen hard. The wind was blowing so hard that I never lost steerage. I simply aimed for a little cove. Ghosting into the shallow water fish were jumping and hitting the surface all around me. No time to fish as I had much work to do. I had to repack the boat about three times in order to get the motor clamped forward, step my birdwing mast that had been stored along the gunnel outside the boat, and then rig the sail with both reefs tied in. Not sure how long that all took but probably about two hours as there was just way too much gear on the boat so I was constantly moving stuff out of the way. Finally ready, I shoved the boat out into open water and dove onto her stern.

Sailing was wonderful! I was making better time than I had been with the motor because with the motor forward, boat trim was better and the transom did not drag as much. Things were going well. I managed to get a new much thicker application of sun screen on my white legs, line up ice cold water bottles to keep me hydrated, and had eaten a good lunch of ham and carrots. I had also stocked my life jacket with granola bars and breakfast crackers.

It was then that a large duffle bag of stuff (that I probably didn't need) fell overboard. I let out the main sheet and came about. My sail luffed violently but it gave the waterproof duffle bag time to be blown along ahead of me. I sheeted in and took aim at the bag. I successfully grabbed the bag but had one heck of a time pulling it into the boat. I finally got mad enough and found some extra adrenaline to get it in the boat. I had no idea what was in the bag but I remember paying \$60 for the bag itself and I wasn't going to give it up without a fight.

Shortly after that a big fast and loud U.S. Coast Guard boat came up from behind me with its siren blaring. I thought I was about to be arrested for having too much crap piled up on my little boat but they roared pass me giving me quite a wake to deal with. Then after a couple of hundred yards they came about and buzzed me again. At least the siren was off the second time but I still got the wake of their boat again. Both times as they passed I give them a little wave so apparently satisfied with my situation they sped off from whence they came.

Things then got better and better. The wind got a little stronger and I was making great progress. I started taking pictures. Pelicans came flying right at me and I got a nice one of them. I took artsy pictures of all the cottages on pilings out in the middle of nowhere. I got

a great shot of a Great Blue Heron that had refused to fly off as I zoomed close by. Sure wish I had taken better care of my camera.

I finally passed beacon #83 and knew the Mansfield jetties were nearby but by then conditions were a bit extreme. I have done a lot of surfing on surfboards during my life but not so much in a boat. At one point I watched as my deck mounted bowsprit going underwater which was when my knuckles began getting very white. As I said I overshot Texas 200 camp one. This was mostly because it didn't look anything like I was expecting. A pile of rocks way the hell out in the Gulf did not look very inviting to me in the conditions I was experiencing so I edged closer to the shore knowing I could swim that distance if need be. I had a heck of a time deciding whether to keep going on the T200 or abandon the event at Port Mansfield. I really wanted to complete and eat shrimp and drink beer at the finish at Magnolia Beach but when I added up all my problems, it didn't make much sense.

My biggest problem was that in spite of greasing up my pale skin three times during the day, the sunscreen had a tendency to wash off and I was therefore badly burnt. I knew I was asking for a load of hurt if I continued so I finally made for shore after about four miles of deciding what to do next.

Made camp on a lonely stretch of the King's Ranch. I was well prepared for camping. My Yeti cooler still had plenty of ice. I had LED lights, a luxury bed roll, a netted one person bivwack tent and all kinds of fishing gear so I knew I was safe and it sure felt good. I took lots of pictures of Bernadette at anchor while the sun was setting. She had done really well in the rough stuff and I was very impressed with her design – well done John Welsford!

I slept like a rock and suddenly it was morning. I had unloaded most of my crap off the boat the evening before so she would lie at anchor more comfortably and not take on water during the night. I was truly delighted to find my missing wallet floating in Bernadette's bilge water that morning – a good start on the day. After getting fully loaded again I took off just as two small lug rigged boats were passing by. I wanted so much to follow them but the South Texas sun had gotten the best of me and I knew I would burn badly if I were to continue. I went way out far from land and tacked but it became obvious that windward was a losing proposition in the howling southeast 100°F wind and my weakened sunburned condition. I set a course for a fisherman in his skiff near the shore. I tried to tempt him with cash to tow me in to port but he said he was fishing a tournament, had just spent all morning getting bait, and didn't want my money. He did say that if I was still there in a few hours he would give me a tow in.

So I anchored near shore, put up my Protech Mantis Sunshade and got out of the sun. The fisherman had seemed to be a man of his word so I relaxed in the shade, ate, drank lots of water, and took more pictures. Sure enough, Mike came back and began towing Bernadette while I sat in the forward seat of his boat. But my adventure was not over yet. It was very tough going against the wind even for a boat with a 175HP outboard. His boat was self-bailing but Bernadette was not and against the wind and waves she began taking on more and more water. We stopped a couple of times for me to bail her out with my 5 gallon bucket (will not ever leave home without it). The second time when I stepped out of the tow boat to bail my boat I was thinking it was about three feet deep but it was more like five so my foot just hit nothing but water and I went completely underwater and in fact most of me ended up under his boat. I guess that's when I lost my camera.

Mike, the fisherman, turned out to be a great guy and in spite of the major problems of getting me and Bernadette back to the marina at Port Mansfield, he wouldn't take any money from me. I even tried to get him to accept my fancy \$100 aluminum camp chair but he didn't want that either. He just gave me a firm handshake, a smile, and said he liked the looks of my boat. He did say I could take he and his wife out for dinner if they ever made it to St. Augustine, FL (not St. Augustine, TX) and we left it at that.

I had gone to Texas to look for adventure and had found it. The truck, trailer, birdwing rig and especially my Saturday Night Special had all done extremely well and I had had a heck of a good time hanging out with the guys and going somewhere so new and different and extreme. I believe I now have a much better understanding of what it takes to complete the Texas 200 and maybe someday I'll try it again. For now though, I have a brand new appreciation for Florida's milder sunshine and my little air-conditioned house. It is very good to be home.