

A CHEESEHEAD ROOKIE TAKES ON THE 2017 TEXAS 200

As I write this several months after completing my first Texas 200, the bruises on my legs have long disappeared. Also, the almost constant feelings of heightened anxiety and fatigue, as well as, the state of being sweaty and stinky are fading in my memory. These have been replaced by a sense of accomplishment and golden memories of sailing serenely over sun-sparkled water. Maybe, that is just the way our brains are wired to focus on the positives and minimize the negatives so we are ready to take on the next adventure.

In January 2017, I decided to attempt the Texas 200. I have been following this event, as well as the Watertribe's Everglades Challenge, for several years, so I had a realistic view as to what to expect. Although I have sailing on and off since I was a boy, my experience was largely limited to fresh water day sails – I had zero experience navigating. But, I had five months to prepare, so this 60-something year old rookie was going to give it his best shot. As a plus, it looked like there was going to be a small armada of a half dozen or so Hobie Island trimarans attempting the 2017 T200 .

Early on, I read every account/write-up of previous T200's I could get my hands on. I paid special attention to accounts of those who had to drop out and Chuck Pierce's ominous "10 Indications You are Not Ready...". I also emailed fellow Milwaukeean John Hippe, who provided some excellent tips. One common theme I found among rookies was running out of time for preparations. Hoping to avoid this, I made a spreadsheet of things to do and buy. The goal was to get everything crossed off my to-do list by May 1.

THE BOAT.

My boat is a 2014 Hobie Tandem Island (TI). Being three years old, it is in that sweet spot where it is still a relatively new fresh water boat, yet has been tested in high winds (or at least, so I thought). I transport it on a Trailex aluminum trailer that is also in like-new condition. Boat & trailer weigh only about 400 pounds combined, so it is a breeze to pull. In many ways, the Hobie is an ideal boat to single-hand the T200 with its shallow draft, 10' wide stability, a furling sail that can go from 90 square feet to 0 (or any size in between) in a flash, and its efficient Mirage Drive to aid in getting in and out camp sites. On the downside, it offers a relatively wet ride with limited seating positions, the boomless rig is inefficient (meaning slow) downwind in light air. Finally, this rugged roto-molded "Tuperware boat" simply lacks the charm and panache of wooden boats.

I freely borrowed boat mods from the Watertribe and Hobie forums. They focused on “hardening” the boat and making the controls easier for single handling. As a minimum, I recommend two inexpensive simple mods that greatly minimize the chance of capsizing a Hobie Island in an event like the T200;

- Ama arm retention (lines or pinning) to insure the arms do not become “unplugged” from their socket joints.
- Ama “keepout lines” to keep the extended amas from folding in completely should the sacrificial plastic pivot pin break.

NAVIGATION

As I mentioned earlier, I lack navigation experience. Here, I followed the Watertribe’s recommendation and bought a Garmin 78sc which is preloaded with BlueCharts. When the Garmin is plugged into a PC with Homeport software, a very detailed chart displays. Creating a daily route is simply a matter of choosing the waypoints and “connecting the dots”. I developed routes for each day with multiple routes for days 3 and 5. Once the routes were completed, I checked them on Google Earth to make sure everything looked right. Also, followed the Watertribes recommendation and “bagged” the GPS and VHF in clear Dry Sacks to protect them salt water intrusion. The Garmin 78sc and my Standard Horizon HX300 VHF operate with alkaline batteries which I plan to swap out each evening. For navigation backup, I had a Garmin 500 bike computer (inadequate & dumb) and Hook n Line paper charts.

As I live in Wisconsin and would not be able to get on the water here until sometime in May, I set up hiking routes on the Garmin so that I could practice with it. By early April I had become quite familiar with the Garmin 78sc operation and had customized the map, compass, and trip computer pages to what the thought would work best.

PRACTICE SAIL #1 MAY 16

The forecast called for the first 80 degree day of the year in Milwaukee with winds of 20mph, gusting to 30. Perfect – sounds like a day off work to get reacquainted with the boat (it’s been over six month since my last outing. Welcome to the Midwest) and to try out the new boat changes. Still a newbie on navigation, I plotted a route on the GPS and headed out to Nagawicka, a local inland lake. It should be noted that water temps were still in the mid 50’s.

In all, I sailed a little over 20 miles and it was a very worthwhile practice session. However, in hindsight, this single sail was insufficient to fully test the boat in T200 configuration, especially

since I did not fully load it with gear. And, due to unusually cool weather in May and work demands, it turned out that this was the only practice sail I was able to get in before the T200.

TRIP FROM WISCONSIN TO PORT MANSFIELD

It is 1500 miles from Milwaukee to Port Mansfield. This represents my longest road trip since college. Plus, I'll be pulling a boat. I left very early on Thursday and drove 950 miles to Marshall, TX. Friday, I drove to Raymondville, 25 miles short of Port Mansfield. Launched by boat mid-morning Saturday. I met Pat Rohde, a fellow Hobie sailor (and T200 veteran) and we had lunch and waited for the condo to be available at 3 PM. Pat is very experienced in expedition events, having successfully completed several Everglades Challenges and T200's, so I listened carefully when he said he had some important advice regarding the T200. He looked at me very seriously and warned; "The bus tomorrow will be very cold. Bring some warm clothes". While good advice, it was not quite what I was expecting.

In addition to Pat in his yellow Adventure Island (AI), during the afternoon I met most of the rest of the Hobie fleet; Rob in a yellow TI, Chad in a yellow TI (with a jib), Greg in a yellow AI (with jib). All of these guys had experience sailing in these waters, while Monday would be my first, so I was not only the oldest, but the least experienced salt-water sailor.

At Sunday's skippers meeting, we saw another TI (hmm, a gray one, didn't they get the memo on yellow being the official color of T200 Hobies?) – still on top of a truck roof. It was Tim & Jimmy, who had just signed up in the past week or so.

I believe the six Hobie islands made it most numerous boat type entered in this year's T200. Cool, but not as cool as the "Mayfly Armada".

DAY 1

The first day should have been easy, but my rookie mistakes made it a bit more eventful than needed to be. A little background -- the Hobie is steered with a small handle connected to the rudder via 700 pound test Spectra lines creating a "pull-pull" system. The lines are attached to rudder by simply wrapping around a screw head. As I approached the Land Cut, I noticed increasing slop in the handle as I try to steer to port. This slop increased until I could no longer turn to port at all. I correctly determined the Spectra line was slipping under the screw head on one side of the rudder. Fortunately, I made it to the Land Cut and was able to make a semi-out-of-control beaching at a nice sandy spoil island and pulled the slack of the line, tighten the screw firmly and off I went. Not so fast, newbie. When I beached the boat, I probably damaged the sacrificial plastic rudder pin, because about two miles later, the pin broke and now the rudder was flopping behind the boat, totally useless. As best I could, I steered by the sail and made another unscheduled stop at a spoil island. When I hopped off the boat, I was expecting

a solid bottom, but it was soft muck. I did sort of an ungraceful dismount from of the boat (remember no steering) and in doing so, I somehow knocked off the steering handle which had loosened. It sunk into the muck, never to be seen again. Luckily, I had a spare handle, but I forgot to pack the small hex wrench to tighten it down. So for the next couple of hours, I would need to hold the steering handle down firmly with my hand while steering until I could borrow a hex wrench at camp and Loctite the handle securely. I replaced the broken rudder pin, and set off again, steering very gingerly the remainder of the day.



In the Land Cut Just Before Rudder Pin Break Steve Romeis Photo.

DAY 2

I sailed most of the day with Rob in his Tandem Island. As we neared camp, there was bit of commotion just offshore. Tim & Jimmy's TI had swamped and now waves were lapping over the hull (note: this would not have happened if their boat was official yellow color). Once the boat was brought to shore, it was disassembled and checked for a crack in the hull. None was found. The best theory is that with two men and a lot of gear, the boat was pushing its 600 pound capacity and being essentially a big kayak, the heavily loaded boat started to have hatches exposed to the sea. Eventually, there is enough water in the hull that the rear hatch goes below the waterline and it is "game over". After the first day, the boat wasn't checked for water in the hull, so this was the accumulative effect of two days of sailing. Greg generously loaned the guys his bilge pump, with vigilant monitoring of water intake, they did successfully complete the T200, but this was a costly lesson as some electronics were ruined.

DAY 3

The day started with an easy sail to Snoopy's, where we arrived around 10. We waited around until the restaurant opens at 11 and had a tasty lunch. Immediately after leaving Snoopy's, a group of three Hobies started crossing Corpus Christy Bay. It was choppy and we reefed down to about half sail. We made one minor mistake by turning right to enter the Port Aransas channel about one mile early, causing us to ground the centerboard in a small bay with no access to the Port Aransas channel. A brief discussion and we were quickly back on track. The Port Aransas channel is almost a due east sail. The Hobie Islands, with their boom-less sails, are not the best pointing boats, so we needed to fight for every inch to windward to avoid tacking in the channel. Just as we cleared the ferries, an ocean freighter was bearing down on us entering the channel that goes to the Gulf of Mexico. Fortunately, the GPS indicated that it was time for a hard turn to port and we entered the Lydia Ann Channel turning well in front of the freighter. As soon as I made the turn, I saw the Lydia Ann Lighthouse and knew I was going the right way. What else do I see? – a giant pirate ship in the middle of the channel (must be one of "hard way" guys). My GPS routed me down the middle of the channel, but in the middle there were a bunch of wooden pilings. I picked the left side of pilings (correct choice) and made it to Mud Island without fuss.

DAY 4

Day 4 marked the return of the dreaded rookie mistakes. The first half of the day went smoothly enough. As I approached Ayres Dugout, Greg, who was in the lead Hobie, sailed out from the island saying he was grounding on oyster beds. I started to tack back and forth in a sort of holding pattern until I could figure out what was going on. On one of these tacks, my troubles began. I had my cooler located behind me with secured with bungies and every time I tacked the mainsheet whacked the cooler – the trick to preventing this to reach above your head, grab the mainsheet, and guide it past the cooler. On one of these tacks, the cooler got knocked off the boat, dangling by its tether. As I kneeled backwards on the boat to reposition the cooler, I compounded my problem by snagging a fishing buoy which folded in one ama. It took a while to get everything situated and Pat on his AI was good enough to sacrifice some hard-earned distance to windward to check to be sure I was OK (sorry about that Pat). On another tack, the cooler got knocked off again. This time, the tether somehow got unhooked and cooler started floating away. I seriously thought about leaving it because plucking it out of the ocean in a 10 foot wide trimaran is no simple task. After two or three passes, I finally was able to grab the cooler, but in doing so, I pulled a chest muscle which would hurt the remainder of the event. By this time I was so sick of the cooler, so I decided to relocate it to the front seat area, so I set it on top of a dry bag and fastened down with a cargo net. As soon I set the cooler

down, I heard the “whirl” of a fan and knew I had turned on my air mattress inflator inside the dry bag. With no easy way to get at it, I listened for the next half hour until the batteries went dead - I would be sleeping on hard ground the that night.

I got back on my GPS route. Fortunately, there were two Mariner 19's just ahead of me exactly on the same track. Since I knew that the Mariners had a deeper draft than my Hobie, I followed them through Ayres Dugout. The Mariners then veered east, while my GPS route was more direct across San Antonio Bay. For the next 12 miles, I did not see a single sail in front of me, which for this navigation newbie, was a little disconcerting. Eventually, I caught view of the magnificent Elsie B in front of me, full sails out & heeled to the max, and knew I was on route.

Something else happened on day 4 that I didn't anticipate – I ran out of ass. Somewhere short of Army Hole, I got a blister on my behind. Now, I bicycle 2,000 miles a year, so I thought my rear end was bulletproof. Evidently, not so! The combination of this along with the sore chest muscle and no air mattress made for a tough night of sleeping.

I parked my boat at Army Hole in area with tall grass, unloaded the boat, pumped out about a gallon of water. I left the hatches open overnight, which made for a day 5 surprise!

Day 5

Day 5 was a screamer of a day. From Army Hole, I headed northwest. The wind and the sea were up. What I did not expect was the need to dodge small oil and natural gas platforms and fishing buoys. After about four miles, I turned north to make a bee line to the entrance to the ICW. This stretch was even harrier as I now had a directly following sea and surfing the waves was a bit tricky. Imagine my surprise, when I was sailing this section with a 50% reefed sail and Greg went screaming by me in his AI with a full mainsail and a jib. Once in the sheltered waters of the ICW, it was a nice time to relax and enjoy the scenery. After sailing past the jetties, I made a hard turn to port for the run to Magnolia Beach staying about a mile off shore. The Hobie was in its element letting out a happy hum as the speed often exceeded 10 mph in this section. All the Hobies made got to the beach in quick succession and we started unloading them. Upon opening my middle hatch, I was startled when a rat scurried out, an unintended stowaway from Army Hole. The guys helped each other carry our boats to the trailers, avoiding the launch ramp. After a shower, it was still quite early, so Pat and went to JT's to get in the AC and a have little pre-lunch. We headed back to Maggy Beach. The shrimp boil was excellent, just a tad messy.

GOING HOME

I left Maggy Beach around 4 PM. After driving for an hour or so, I realized just how fatigued I was and how I didn't feel like going through Houston during Friday Rush hour. I saw nice

Holiday Inn Express in Harvard, so I stopped. As a bonus, it had a Whataburger right next door. Set the AC to 63, took a proper shower, and went to bed early. Got up early and drove just past St Louis. Made it to Milwaukee by noon Sunday. My lawn needed mowing.

CONCLUSIONS

- For being an event where “you are on your own”, T200 is very well organized. The skippers’ meeting, lunch at JT’s, bus to Port Mansfield, and shrimp boil were all well done and ran like clockwork.
- This year was supposedly in relatively benign condition. It seemed plenty windy and wavy to this fresh-water guy. I had bruises on my legs as evidence. I have sailed in windier conditions before, but usually for only an hour or two. The T200, with its combination of wind, waves and length of time required sailing, make it “a whole other animal”.
- Although in hindsight, any problems I had on the boat were minor. At the time, they didn’t seem that way. In fact, I found it hard to relax on the boat. It seemed you always had to be on your toes dodging fishing buoys and abandoned oil platforms, etc.
- For the first-timer, the T200 can be an expensive vacation, especially for someone who lives in the Great White North. The cost of GPS, VHF, dry bags, appropriate clothing, etc. add up quickly.
- The Hobie Islands are great boats for the T200. They have been around for a decade now and the current versions are far more capable (and a little dryer) than the early models that Andrew and Stephanie piloted in 2009 – those models had less hull volume and the problematic “twist and stow” rudder. Just be prepared to be wet (from my knees to my feet were wet all day, every day). They are a bit speedier than the bulk of the T200 fleet due to the fact that you can instantly fine-tune sail area so even with my rookie mistakes I got to camp relatively early each day.
- I was really impressed with the wooden boats. The Mayflies, in particular, seemed to shine in this event. The fleet of 3 or 4 looked sharp and sailed sharp.

WHAT WORKED

- Bagging the GPS and VHF worked great. I thought there may be issues with them getting overheated, but with the splashes over the Hobie, they kept plenty cool. I had both on all the time while sailing and changed alkaline batteries each night at camp. The Garmin 78sc was on a RAM mount on the left side of my cockpit and generally it was on the “compass page”. Confession Time: If my GPS had failed, I probably would have been in “follow the boat” mode. I just don’t think I could have sailed via Hook n

Line chart and a compass while single handing the boat. In fact, I never pulled out the paper charts once the event started.

- Earth Pak dry bags. On Amazon, excellent value.
- Umbrella Bimini: A Procella 62" golf umbrella with a Scotty 241L mount and Scotty Rocket Launcher Rod Holder (all on Amazon for about \$50) make a "poor man's bimini" that can turn & tilt in any direction and can be taken down in a hurry. Works well in winds up to 15 mph.
- Otentik Sun Shade: Pricey, but effective camp shelter. You'll need to replace the sandbag anchors with stakes. (In hindsight, I think I would rig the umbrella to a chair rather than bring the Otentik next time)
- Small soft cooler that I filled each day's food & water. This was positioned for easy reach. Eating can be tricky when going solo. Almonds, Fig Newtons, and Cheese & Cracker packs were plenty to keep me going during the time on the water.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Seat Comfort: The pre-2015 Hobie Islands have a seat bottom with minimal padding – OK for day sails, but lacking for the T200. I have since modified a couple of cheapie pfd cushions to snap into place over the standard seat bottom.
- My tent took a long time to set up. When you are tired and out in the sun, speedy setup in high winds is key. A different tent next time
- Cooler positioning. Although all Hobie Islanders seem to put their cooler behind the rear seat, the interference with the mainsheet will make me find a new place for the cooler.
- Span single packs. In hot weather, not tasty - enough said

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