

10 indications that you should NOT do the Texas 200. At least, not this year.

By Chuck Pierce

This is in response to 2016's high dropout rate of over 50%.

First, let me say that I am not on the Board of Directors nor do I have any official capacity of any sort with this event. These observations are my opinions and mine alone, as someone who has successfully sailed this event 8 times in 3 different boats. If you disagree you are welcome to flame me for all the good that will do. ☺

In no particular order-

1. You have just finished building/acquired a new boat.

You should be very familiar with any new-to-you vessel before you try to sail this event in it. Especially if it has a different rig than you are used to ie: you have sailed sloops all of your life and your new boat is a sprit rig/balanced lug/Chinese junk etc. This is not the time to test experimental sails or foils. There are some exceptions to this item involving very experienced skippers, but if you are not familiar with the rig, how will you get the boat to go to that upwind camp, or miss that reef up ahead when the channel turns into the wind? Don't damage yourself or lose your boat due to unfamiliarity with it.

2. You don't know how to deal with the sun.

Wearing shorts and a t-shirt in an open cockpit boat without some type of sunshade guarantees that you will be badly sunburned by lunch time. People have dropped out of this event on the first day because they were so badly burned that they couldn't continue. Take the money you would spend on this years' trip and instead head to Academy, Cabela's, or Bass Pro Shops for some non-cotton, SPF rated clothing. Long pants, long sleeve shirts. Don't forget a wide brimmed hat, neck gator, and gloves. I have had my shoulders burn even through clothing down here, so get some SPF50 or higher sun screen, too.

3. You cannot reboard your boat from deep water by yourself.

To know if you can do this, you have to try it in benign conditions. In those conditions your reboarding method should be very easy, so that when you are in 3 feet of chop and 20 plus knots of wind you can still pull it off. Rope ladders with very few exceptions will not work and should not even be considered. Find a hard ladder that works for your boat. On some small boats ladders may not work at all. You may need to rig boarding lines, or even push the rail under the water and roll in. This all takes practice, and should not be learned on your first Texas 200.

4. You and your crew cannot right your capsized boat without outside assistance.

This is something else that you cannot know unless you try it in benign conditions, preferably with the person(s) who will be crewing with you on the event. In the interests of full disclosure, I have been in this situation on the event. It was not fun. Be sure that you do not overload the boat and that the hatches in the waterproof compartments are in good condition. Anything that's in the cockpit needs to be tied in so you don't lose anything critical. Be aware as always that requiring rescue doesn't just put you in a dangerous situation-it also puts whoever is trying to help you in danger.

5. You don't have options for reducing sail.

The winds on this event can be high enough that they will bend or break masts, break shrouds and stays that are undersized or in poor condition, and rip or tear apart sails. Most of these scenarios happened again this year (2016). I know of at least 3 pitchpoles by catamarans on this trip over the years. This can all be avoided if the sails are reefed by an appropriate amount in a timely fashion. Practice it. You should be able to take in or let out a reef in just a couple of minutes even on a big boat. On a small boat it should take less than a minute. Look at the many pictures of reefed sails on the website and the Facebook group and note how small they can be made. Reef early and be able to reduce sail to the point that your boat is comfortable in 25 plus knot winds.

6. You cannot navigate with a chart and compass.

Following someone else is not a navigation plan. What happens when you are not in sight of land or any other boats and your phone app/GPS/chartplotter quits? If you don't have charts and a compass and the ability to use them, you will not even be able to find a good drop out point, let alone finish the event.

7. You don't have a VHF radio with enough batteries to keep it on and operating every minute that you are on the water.

The tug captains you will encounter throughout the trip will thank you if you monitor Channel 16 so that they can let you know what they are doing and what you need to do as they pass you. This also allows you to hail other boats that are doing the event, and to hear calls for assistance from those who may need it. It lets you verbally communicate with others on the trip instead of relying on hand signals that can be misunderstood. Miscommunication due to a turned off VHF radio has been responsible for several dropouts over the years.

8. You haven't sailed your boat in 20 knot winds.

Afternoon winds in South Texas in June are typically 15-20 knots. Sometimes higher. Sometimes much higher, with gusts that can add 40 or 50 percent to the sustained windspeeds. In June, on most days there is a small craft advisory on the bays. Chop in the bays runs 3-4 feet due to fetch that can be 10 miles or more. When you sail in this stuff for the first time on this trip, you are jeopardizing your boat, yourself, your crew and anyone who attempts to rescue you after you have issues. This trip should not be your first experience in these conditions.

9. You don't know how to sail your boat upwind.

The assertion that the Texas 200 is a downwind sleigh ride is simply wrong. For a large chunk of the trip you are indeed on a run or a broad reach, but there are many times when you must be able to get to windward. At the very least, a lack of windward ability will keep you from making some of the camps. You may find yourself blown onto a spoil bank or stuck in the shallow water that is ubiquitous down here. Worst case, you may find yourself unable to avoid commercial traffic, or on a reef that will damage your boat and require rescue and repair before you can continue or drop out.

10. You can't repair any and all possible failures that occur on your boat.

If you don't have a basic toolkit with spare parts, oriented towards the hardware on your boat, get one together. You should be prepared to fix torn sails, broken fittings, shrouds, small hull breaches, rudders, leeboards/centerboards/daggerboards, and anything else that can break. You should be prepared to improvise a jury rig if the mast comes down, bends, or breaks. Making sure that the boat is in good condition before the trip is a great thing, but failures can still happen, and you must be ready to deal with them.

The Board of Directors has done a great job of making sure that the Texas 200 will continue for the foreseeable future. It is important to understand that inexperience or incompetence on the part of the participants may eventually bring about Coast Guard intervention and cancellation of the event for the year. This actually happened to the Everglades Challenge in 2015. An incident in which someone is seriously injured or even killed could end the event altogether.

Before entering this event you have a responsibility to look at yourself critically and dispassionately, and to consider whether you, your boat, and your crew (if any) are prepared for the conditions you may find yourself in on the trip. There is no shame in realizing that you are not ready. Take a year, study the accounts on the website and Facebook group, get it together, and successfully do the Texas 200 next year.