

2018 Texas 200
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NICE TRI: Adventures in Ultralight Craft

My goal was to sail the Texas 200 any way I could. I was tired of waiting around for the "right" year (right timing, right resources, right friends to go with), so I spent 9 months preparing for the 2018 trip with what I had: a roof rack, a few tools, and a couple hundred bucks. My idea was to make the cheapest, most stable, and most easily transported/single handed vessel I could. I bought an old 13.5 ft Kevlar kayak made in the 70's off of Craigslist, and spent most of my time designing and reinforcing the hull to become a seaworthy trimaran. Using some tips from the Michelak book and the collective wisdom of the Texas 200 Facebook forum, I created NICE TRI.

What went right: The boat was indeed stable, with fiberglass on foam amas that were 12' long and could support over 300lbs each. The rig was solid: I listened to the advice "make sure you can reef your sail down to the size of a postage stamp", and "balanced lug is probably best". All akas, spars, leeboards, and mast were meticulously laminated and stood up to gusts over 30 mph. The boat was light: I could car top in with no problem. I planned well: I had just barely what I needed to survive (and barely what the boat could hold), and my route was charted fairly well (except Day 1, just South of Mansfield Cut, where I encountered miles of 3" deep water. My boat sits 4" in the water with me in it. I had to trudge 1.7 miles tugging my little boat behind me, floating around like a dog on a leash that keeps wrapping around your legs). I also prepared by arriving a day early to test the boat in the kinds of conditions that my local lake doesn't offer.

What went wrong: On day -1 (practice day) I was sailing along in some pretty heavy chop, when I notice something didn't seem right. Looking astern, I notice a white object bobbing around, about 20 ft behind me. Is that my starboard ama? I remember an old black and white film, maybe Charlie Chaplain, with a stunt where a car loses a tire and the driver hikes it up on two wheels while his co-pilot changes the tire out. It was like that. I had decided when building the boat that one of the ways to keep it strong was to allow it to flex. I lashed the akas and amas like the natives do, rather than bolting them on. With the constant slapping of the waves, one had worked itself loose. I stayed on a starboard tack, turned back to retrieve it, and lashed it back on to get back to shore. Lesson learned, I modified the lashings and didn't have an issue with them for the rest of the trip. Mistake number 2: the way I planned to keep water out of the cockpit was a spray skirt. It was homemade, and didn't keep water out. It was cumbersome and distracting. Mistake 3: I spent too much time building the boat and not enough time sailing it to prepare. I worked feverishly, but still only finished a few weeks before it was time to go. I had never sailed with a 4 sided sail, and didn't understand it's complexities. This and my design (amas very wide apart for stability) meant I couldn't point well AT ALL. This eventually led to mistakes 4 through 28. On day 5, the course and the wind became more Easterly. Frustrated with my lack of upwind progress, I decided to cross San Antonio bay, rather than stay protected along the leeward edge of the barrier islands. The cockpit slowly filled with water as wave after wave washed over the craft (that had only about 8" at most of freeboard, by the way).

Watertight chambers fore and aft kept me above water, but it was time to head for shore and empty the boat. Instead of aiming for a landing that promised an easy exit, in my frustration and panic I simply headed dead downwind to the nearest beach. What I didn't realize was that beach was tucked in a little bay that would take me a couple of hours to get out of, just before sundown. I knew I couldn't make Magnolia by afternoon the next day, so I sailed back towards San Antonio Bay, camped near Swan Point, and pulled out in Seadrift, 175 miles from the start at Port Isabel.

Lessons learned: Practice more if it's a new boat. That's pretty much it. With more tiller time, I could have realized the limitations and adapted accordingly. If I use this same boat again (and I will), I will: 1. Seal that damn cockpit up, and just sit on top. 2. Have a better cushion (I couldn't sit for 3 days after I got home). 3. Remove the slop from the rig, and read up on Storer's advice for balanced lugs. Maybe also bring the amas in a bit, and a few other adjustments to get me pointing a few degrees higher.

I will absolutely do it again.