

## **The 2018 Texas 200 Aboard “Guppy”**

**By Rachel Doss**

**August 2018**

### **Quick Lesson Learned**

Thoroughly examine your boat and check for any weak points before participating in the Texas 200. Pay close attention to your rudder.

I had read many accounts and received substantial advice regarding the Texas 200 before heading out on this adventure. I believed that I had completed a fair assessment of my 13 foot sailboat, Guppy, before the event. However, I now realize that I didn't know how or what to look for to properly prepare. As recommended, I dutifully examined my rudder before the event, and I saw what I *assumed* to be stainless steel plates holding the tiller to the rudder that appeared to be in overall good condition. The assumption that the metal work had to be stainless steel blocked me from observing the reality that the metal pieces holding the tiller to the rudder were made of only two thin (1/16 inch) pieces of aluminum. Consequently, I also learned that different metals actually *look* different and that stainless steel is preferable for its strength. These aluminum plates started to split just a few miles from Port Mansfield, which was our first (and last) stop. This breakage was the main reason that we pulled out of the event after the first day and only completed 40 of the 200 anticipated miles.

### **The Full Account**

Morning alarms went off well before sunrise on that first day. After consuming the all-important coffee, Jacob and I headed down to our slip to load up Guppy with the last of our gear. Jacob is a friend of mine who I met through the Aggie Yacht Club, and we were both eagerly excited to set sail on the infamous and our first, Texas 200. We saw our neighbors, Eric and Mike, on the Chloe Alyssa (a 22 foot Chrysler) already up and preparing to head out on the trip with us. They are members of the Brazos Sailing Club, which sometimes participates in combined events with our Aggie Yacht Club. Eric and I had messaged some before the trip

regarding preparation and expectations. It was a wonderful surprise to have them next to us at both the marina and the hotel, and I could not have imagined how significant they would later become to us.

We were finally ready to depart, when we encountered our very first challenge. As I was opening the fuel valve to start the motor, the valve and hose popped off spilling gas everywhere. Luckily, we moved quickly and were able to stop the leak, repair the clamp, and get the little 1.5 horse power Cruise 'n Carry motor started all within 10 minutes. The Chloe Alyssa waited for us patiently in the channel and stayed behind, watching us like a mother hen. As we motored slowly through the small basin channels, we watched other T200 participants prep and head out as well.

Jacob had a fun idea for Guppy to have some music playing to energize us for our impending adventure. He turned on and up (to hear it over all of the motors) *He's a Pirate* from the Pirates of the Caribbean. We were pumped. We then started to set up our sails; we planned to start with a reefed mainsail and the working jib due to the high winds predicted by the afternoon. As soon as the mainsail was set and raised, I turned off the motor and the music shuffled randomly. I was unaware of how to change the song or at least turn it down. So there we were: with all motors off, sailing down the channel in the very quiet early morning, with the *Twelve days of Christmas* blaring.

Once the jibsail was properly hanked and raised, Jacob climbed back into the cockpit and got the music turned down to a more reasonable volume. We then turned out of the basin and into the bay. The beauty of the open bay took my breath away. The sun was rising warmly and in the distance, we could see the bridge that connected Port Isabel to South Padre Island. There were several T200 boats sprinkled all across the open water. What a beautiful sight and exhilarating feeling! The air was fresh, and the adventure had begun!

We sailed alongside our mother hen towards the ICW. We planned to stay in the ICW for the majority of the day due to Guppy's 18 inch draft. Chloe Alyssa had only her mainsail up, and we scooted along together nicely. When we turned into the ICW, Jacob offered to take over the tiller, and I happily accepted. We had planned to have 2 hour shifts at the tiller to reduce fatigue. Sailing in the morning was a dream. We were sailing directly downwind with

her sails wing on wing while making a comfortable 4 knots. We even encountered a friendly and curious dolphin who swam up close to Guppy.

We began to notice a steady wind increase, and it had become more strenuous at the tiller. We decided to call the Chloe Alyssa for advice. This was my first time to use a marine radio, and despite multiple reminders not to use channel 16 (which is only for true emergencies), it escaped my memory for the moment, and I used it to casually chat with the Chloe Alyssa. Then, we got professionally kicked off by the Coast Guard! After that embarrassing moment, we switched to channel 68 and stayed there for the remainder of the trip. After discussing sail changes with our mother hen, we decided to drop the mainsail and sail under the working jib alone. She handled very well downwind with only the jibsail, and we didn't lose any speed.

I took over my tiller shift, and Jacob took a break to reapply sunscreen to his legs, take some video, and rest. I could definitely tell that the winds had increased and that the tiller work was more strenuous to keep Guppy pointed straight. We were making well over 4 knots by the afternoon, and at one point, we actually hit 6.1 knots. I had to screenshot this record speed, because I just couldn't believe it. Guppy's hull speed is about 4 knots, so this was incredible. We were flying!

The whole time we were sailing, the Chloe Alyssa stayed nearby. They would often sail ahead of us under jib alone, then drop all sails, and under bare poles, wait for us to catch up. We would pass them, they would give us some time to get ahead, and then they would raise their jibsail and catch up. It was lovely sailing in such good company. It was so nice to see and admire all of the other boats on the Texas 200. Each person and boat that partook in the Texas 200 was impressive to me. Just all around great group of people and the coolest sailors.

As we approached Port Mansfield, the winds were continuing to increase, and it was becoming somewhat alarming. We were making plans to sail up to the jetties for Camp #1, and I was to take over the tiller soon. We could see Port Mansfield and were probably less than 2 miles from where we needed to turn, when potential catastrophe struck. Jacob looked up at me and said, "The rudder is out." The rudder was no longer in its gudgeons. It had mysteriously worked itself out of position! We lost control. I reactively popped out the jib

sheet and let the jibsail flap violently. Then, I started to lower the jibsail by dropping the halyard and pulling the sail down. I climbed up on the bow to work on that, while Jacob worked to get the rudder back in the gudgeons. It was all very exciting. There is nothing like being on the bow of a boat with the wind and the spray to make you feel really ALIVE. As I climbed back into the cockpit, Jacob had gotten the rudder back into working position. It was an exhilarating feeling to stop something that could have been a disaster. We celebrated our teamwork for a moment.

Then, we raised the working jib again (looking back, I think we should have stayed under bare poles, until we were ready to sail upwind), and I took over the tiller. No more than 5 minutes later, Jacob said very calmly to me, "We have another problem." He had observed a crack growing on the tiller bracket that held the tiller to the rudder. It had started to break from the enormous pressure it had been under all day. We could see the Chloe Alyssa not far behind, and decided to drop our sail and give them a call. The crack was growing quickly and would not hold for much longer. If the bracket broke completely, we would have no way to move the rudder or steer the boat. I dropped the jibsail and hailed the Chloe Alyssa on channel 68. Jacob finessed the tiller keeping us pointed as best he could while we waited for our mother hen's arrival. The Chloe Alyssa was to approach our port side, and I was on the bow ready to catch and secure the tow line. Jacob held our course steady as the Chrysler 22 went screaming closely by. Eric threw me the tow line, and I tied a quick and dirty cleat hitch; it was messy but held strong. We were officially under tow. Eric and Mike had already told us their plans for staying at a hotel in Port Mansfield, so we knew we were headed to the city. Eric took a nice jab after we were securely being towed by calling over the radio and stating his observation that "Guppy was going the fastest now, under tow, then she had been all day." "Ha ha", I responded. Both Jacob and I felt a sense of relief and security with the Chloe Alyssa towing us. We still had some control over the rudder and steered as best we could behind.

When we entered into the more protected channel of Port Mansfield, I called over to the Chole Alyssa to see if they would want us to untie and start up our motor. Eric answered back that we could do what we wanted, but he thought the winds were going to pick up ahead.

So, we stayed tied. We were blissfully unaware of what was about to come. The winds did pick up, and we watched in horrific amazement and disbelief as our mother bird struggled to keep pointed into the wind and to stay off the rocks. Then, it happened: the Chloe Alyssa hit the rocks. Still under tow, we were on the rocks less than one minute later. I brought out my handy boat hook and used it to keep Guppy off of the rocks as best I could. We watched as Mike got out onto the rocks and tried to push the Chloe Alyssa, while Eric started up the motor. The positioning of the boat combined with the very high winds made it impossible to make any headway off the rocks. Luckily, the Black Opal, a beautiful Pearson Ensign, was nearby helping out fellow TX200 boats in need. They were planning to tow us first and come back to help the Chloe Alyssa after. Jacob threw them the borrowed tow line that was already in place.

The Black Opal dropped us off at a boat slip by the restaurant, Pelican Cove. Both Jacob and I were in shock and trying to process everything that had just happened, and at the same time, relieved to be safe. Immediately, other Texas 200 participants were trying to help us fix the broken tiller piece. The Chloe Alyssa also found a slip nearby and were safely off the rocks. We all went to sit down and cool off on the patio with ice water and beer. Brian, another Texas 200 participant, who had suffered forestay issues on his boat, knew a local friend that had a shop who might be able to help us with the broken tiller. We waited until he was ready. We sat down and had some good food and pondered our next move. We finally met up with Jeremy, Brian, and Eric who were all trying to help fix up the tiller bracket. We had the stainless steel pieces needed, but just not the right tools for drilling. It was 9:00 pm, and after destroying one drill bit and still needing 4 more holes drilled, I pulled the plug. Guppy would not be continuing on. The tiller bracket was not fixed, and winds were predicted to be up to 30 mph again the next day. It was the right call for us.

The next morning was sad. We saw off the other T200 boats and said our goodbyes to Mike and Eric. The winds were fairly light in the morning taunting me to question my decision to not continue. Jacob and I then motored Guppy to a nearby slip next to a ramp and awaited my mother, who so graciously offered to come get us with the trailer.

That was our adventure. Short but powerful. I loved every second, and I hope to try again soon. Maybe next time, I will complete 2 days!

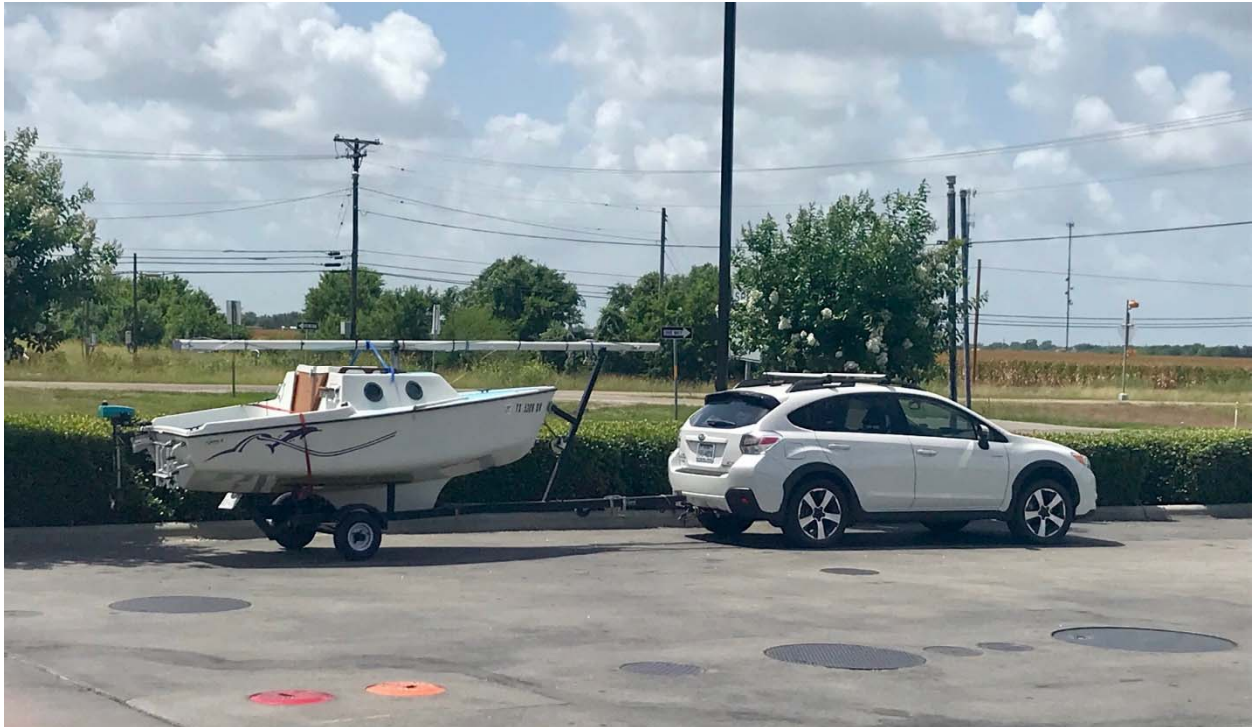
**The Boat:**

Guppy 13 by Melen Marine, 1976, hull #277

13' pocket cruiser with fixed keel

150lb concrete ballast

Draft 1 ½ foot





Jacob, Guppy and I





Record speed!





Broken tiller connector/bracket



Eric, Mike, and the Chloe Alyssa