

# The 2016 Texas 200: The Year of Carnage

By: Matt Schiemer

It was 6:15am on Monday morning, the first day of the 2016 Texas 200. The sun wasn't even up yet and already we had a problem -- the outboard wouldn't start. We decided to give it a few minutes to rest, so I grabbed the VHF and tuned it to the weather channel to get the latest marine forecast. The previous night's forecast was for 10-13 knots; it had since become 15-20 knots with a small craft advisory. This was standard fare for the Texas Gulf Coast in June though -- no big deal. I tried the outboard again, this time getting lucky. Chris quickly threw off the dock lines and we were underway.

As we were backing out of the slip, the computerized voice on the VHF radio continued, saying something about an excessive heat warning, and then advising everyone to remain in air conditioning for the next several days. "Sure thing, no problem," I said, as we chuckled a bit. Within about two minutes the motor died, only a few hundred feet from our slip, and we stopped chuckling. While making no progress at all in convincing the motor to start again, the pull-cord ripped out right in my hand. That was enough. I tilted it up and decided not to touch it again for the duration of the trip. We were going to do this thing under sail power alone.

For those who are unfamiliar with the Texas 200, it is a cruise-in-company of small sailboats that takes place each June along approximately 200 miles of interconnected bays along the Texas Gulf Coast. It is not a race. With strong winds, shoal waters, abundant oyster reefs, child-swallowing mud, and the oppressive Texas sun, the primary challenge of this event is simply making it to the finish line.

The event has no chase boats and occurs primarily in large bodies of water in very remote areas. Therefore, it is extremely important that participants be experienced sailors, on well-maintained and properly-equipped boats. The ability to self-rescue and make repairs along the way is important if you want to ensure you have a safe and successful experience.

I sail a 19-foot O'Day Mariner. Fully loaded with gear and crew, she has a "cruising weight" of a little over 2,000 pounds, so she's on the large and heavy side of what would be considered the ideal boat for the Texas 200, but not by too much. This was my fourth Texas 200, so I knew what to expect and how to prepare myself and my boat to have the highest chance of success (there are no guarantees on the Texas 200, even if you've done it many times).

After the first two years in an open cockpit under the oppressive Texas sun, I installed a bimini for the 2015 event. I have since come to the conclusion that I'd happily give up my cooler, motor, crew and probably a handful of other items before I'd let anyone take my bimini. It's a game changer.

I have also obtained a spare set of sails, added an obscenely deep third reef in my mainsail, reinforced my rudder, built a spare rudder, obtained a second GPS, and planned for redundant power supply for my handheld VHF radio. Like many other participants, I also carry a fairly comprehensive set of tools, hardware and spare parts, so as to minimize the chances of finding myself marooned on a remote oyster reef, 30 miles from nowhere. I was ready – I hoped.

We made it out of the marina under sail without wreaking much havoc, and headed out into the Laguna Madre along with the other 56 other boats that started this year's event. After a quick discussion, Chris and I confirmed our decision to sail the outside route on this first leg (in the Gulf of Mexico). So, as most of the fleet headed north in the Laguna Madre, we turned to the east, hardened sheets, and started tacking

our way toward the inlet along with a few other boats who were also taking the outside route.

It was about 8:00am when we cleared the jetties and sailed out into the Gulf, close-hauled, in about 15 knots of wind. There were whitecaps everywhere, but the seas were still relatively small, in the 3-4 foot range. We made the turn to the north, which put the wind over the starboard quarter. I put a reef in the main and doused the jib, lest we do a little too much surfing and broach. We fell into a reasonably comfortable corkscrew-like pattern, and settled in for what would be about seven hours of sailing to get to the Mansfield inlet, 35 miles up the coast.

We sailed about a mile off the beach the entire day, and had a great sail with a nice sea breeze blowing through the shaded cockpit. By early afternoon, the wind was definitely up in the 18-20 knot range and the seas had built to 4-6 feet. The Mariner looked after us quite nicely though.

As we approached the jetties at the inlet, I was a little concerned about the potential for breaking waves across the entrance. My plan was to hug the south jetty as we entered, since the SE wind would provide calm water in the lee of the jetty. We could already see that the center of the inlet contained breaking waves, and the far side was essentially a lee shore with waves breaking onto the rock jetty. We'd need to execute our entrance perfectly to stay safe.

As we got closer and started lining up for the south jetty, we watched another Texas 200 boat head into the inlet. Very soon after they entered it appeared that they suffered a near capsizing near the north jetty. Within a minute or two, it seemed clear that they survived the incident and were successfully making their way through the inlet.

We entered as planned, hugging the south jetty, in relatively calm water. At one point, Chris pointed out that there were dolphins in the water ahead of us, but we

both quickly realized they weren't dolphins -- it was a person in the water! The captain of the other Texas 200 boat had apparently gone overboard and was now swimming over to the south jetty where the water was calmer. As we approached him, still very much focused on our own safe passage through the inlet, I could see that he was wearing his life jacket. Although he yelled out that he was fine, I threw him a couple of Type IV PFDs out of instinct. Given the conditions, I couldn't do much else, so I just sailed by him and headed for camp a few hundred yards away.

Over the course of the next 45 minutes or so, there was a flurry of activity to see what we were going to do to help him. In the end, he was assisted onto the south jetty by a few fisherman. His crew brought the boat through the inlet under sail and made his way safely into camp. They had been through a pretty hairy ordeal, but captain, crew and boat were all fine, and they planned to carry on.

As the day began to wind down, the stories were starting to circulate as we all socialized on the beach. Several boats had capsized in the Laguna Madre, and at least one lost some important unsecured gear in the process. Two boats wound up on the rocks on a lee shore, and several crew members cut their feet and legs badly in the process of self-rescuing. One would require a trip to the hospital to treat his wounds. There was also a blown out sail and several boats whose kick-up rudders failed continuously due to seaweed buildup. One participant in shorts and a t-shirt received a bad sunburn. A single-hander had a series of groundings and sail issues that pushed him to the point of physical exhaustion. Two recently completed boats didn't fare well in their maiden voyages in high winds. One of the catamarans had only limited reefing capability and could not control his boat speed. There was also a bad cut from a rusty nail on a dock; a badly broken rudder head; and a small open-cockpit boat with very low freeboard that was getting swamped. The captains of all of these boats made the call to exit the event after the first day -- 13 boats in total. We were off to an eventful start.

We woke up on Tuesday morning with the sun, around 6:30am. We decided that we'd be the last boat out, since it's such a nice camp. Plus, the next camp was known for its knee-deep, child-swallowing, foul-smelling mud. With no reason to rush to the next camp, we took our time making coffee and eating breakfast in the shade of my beloved bimini.

As the last two boats were getting ready to head out, the drama began. A Wayfarer 15 was making its way out of camp while the captain and crew of a trimaran were off in the bushes tending to some "business", when their boat sailed off the beach without them. One of them came running down the beach and did a beautiful Baywatch-style dive into the water and swam like mad toward the boat, but he clearly wasn't going to catch it. We still had two anchors out, clothing drying over the boom, and had no working motor, so there wasn't much we could do other than sip our coffee and enjoy the early morning show. The Wayfarer was right there though, and they fired up their motor and headed over to assist in reuniting the runaway trimaran with its crew. Crisis averted.

Our sail to Camp 2 was uneventful, even with winds that were still fairly high, in the 18-20 knot range. With one reef in the main and a doused jib, we had an easy day and a relaxing sail. Most of the day was spent in the Laguna Madre, where we surfed the 2-3 foot waves with the wind over our starboard quarter. We pulled in to camp at Hap's Cut around 5:00pm and got an immediate introduction to the infamous mud. It is indeed fairly off-putting, but with care you can make your way to and from the beach without losing your shoes or falling over. I had heard that the shade trees more than made up for the mud, and they did not disappoint. With strong winds blowing through the trees, it was quite a comfortable way to relax and socialize as the late afternoon sun blazed down just a few feet away.

As we were chatting with other participants, the stories of challenges and carnage continued. One participant had broken his finger earlier in the day, but he just taped

it to the adjacent finger and was going to continue on. Unfortunately, others would face challenges that would cause them to end their trip. The number of boats that had exited the event went from 13 the day before, to 20 on the second day. Ouch.

Wednesday was to be a short day, only 25 miles to sail to Camp 3, mostly in the upper Laguna Madre and across Baffin Bay. The wind quickly built to a steady 25 knots, and was routinely gusting to 30, creating that anxiety-provoking whistling noise in the boat's rigging. We shortened sail, tucking in that deep 3<sup>rd</sup> reef in the main, and kept the jib safely lashed to the bow pulpit.

In spite of the small craft advisory, and breaking waves all over the bay, we had another very nice sail and were very much under control, due largely to the extremely small piece of canvas that we were flying. Some of the smaller boats and those with limited reefing capabilities had a tougher day, and the carnage continued.

One boat's mainsail suffered a massive tear from leech to luff, which required the crew to tape and sew it up to continue on. Another boat suffered a bent mast due to the high winds and apparently carrying too much sail. They had to unstep the mast and try to work the bend out on the beach. Another boat had issues with their main halyard, and were forced to sail under jib and mizzen all day. They also needed to unstep their mast and make repairs. One of the catamarans had developed cracks in the hulls and was leaking pretty badly. And these were the survivors, the boats that made it to camp on Wednesday and vowed to carry on. Others had not fared so well.

One boat dropped out due to centerboard and rudder issues; another due to physical exhaustion. Stories were also filtering in about several boats that had bypassed camp and dropped out about 15 miles ahead in Corpus Christi. One of them pulled out due to sun exposure and exhaustion; another boat's exit was due

to crew sickness and a mast-step issue; a third boat had an issue with their GPS and sailed right by camp without even realizing it. They wound up docked at a yacht club, getting a hot shower and sleeping in the air-conditioned clubhouse as a result of their mistake. I must say, that was a pretty sweet “mistake” they made.

On Thursday morning we woke to lighter winds, as the forecast predicted. We had a relatively long day of sailing ahead of us though, about 41 miles. For the first time all week, we would also be able to make a stop at a marina to replenish our ice. This was very good timing since we were now down to just cool water in the cooler, and that type of thing must not be allowed to go unaddressed.

After a few hours of sailing, with the jib up for the first time in days, we approached Marker 37 Marina. As we were docking, we learned that the bay-front seafood restaurant next door would be opening for lunch in ten minutes. Several of us even took this luxury break one step further, by walking next door to an ice cream shop after lunch.

After our extended “civilization stop,” we headed out toward Corpus Christi Bay to begin the second hundred miles of the trip. With moderate winds in the 10-15 knot range, we had a pleasant and uneventful sail across Corpus Christi Bay, through the ominously named Stingray Hole, and into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel. The wind was nearly on the nose in the ship channel, which made for a nice 5-mile sail, close hauled, in 15 knots of breeze.

As we approached the end of the ship channel, we turned to port, falling off the wind in the process, and entered the Lydia Ann Channel. With the wind at our backs, we flew the main and jib wing-and-wing and settled in for a pleasant downwind run. We also got treated to an impressive dolphin show, with several dolphins jumping clear out of the water only a few feet from the boat. Dolphin sightings are extremely common along the Texas Gulf Coast, but I had never seen a show like this, with the dolphins completely leaving the water and doing flips in the air.

We arrived at camp at Quarantine Shore around 6:00pm. We found a spot at the far end of the fleet in deep water and anchored about ten feet off the beach. This is a beautiful camp, consisting almost entirely of crushed shells, and everyone seemed to be pleased with it.

Reports were coming in of a few more boats who had exited the event though. One boat had a close call as they were crossing Corpus Christi Bay, when the turnbuckle on their forestay broke, leaving their mast supported entirely by the boltrope on the luff of their jib. They quickly doused their mainsail and rigged a few other lines to help support the mast, and motored back to the Marker 37 Marina. They were unable to find a spare turnbuckle at the local chandleries though, and by the end of the day made the decision to exit the event.

Two boats who did make camp informed me that they would be dropping out the following morning, one due to the continued excessive heat and general exhaustion, and the other for unspecified reasons. Although the carnage had certainly slowed in the more moderate winds on this fourth day, many participants were still facing challenges out there, not the least of which being the sun and excessive heat.

Friday's forecast was for more of the same: sunny skies and 10-15 knot wind from the SE. It would still be extremely hot, but the reality is that with a bimini and a decent breeze, it was very comfortable in my cockpit (have I mentioned that I love my bimini?). We had decided to again sail what's known as the "back bay" route, through Aransas Bay, Carlos Bay, Mesquite Bay, Ayres Bay and San Antonio Bay. This back bay route is an alternative to sailing in the ICW all day. It can be somewhat intimidating to first-timers, since it involves careful and continuous navigation to avoid a large number of shoals and reefs. But, it is infinitely more interesting than sailing in the river-like ICW all day, although I suppose dodging barges and tankers all day in the confines of the ICW could certainly qualify as "interesting."



We had another good day, and by late afternoon we came up on the last navigation challenge of the day, Hidden Pass, which is only about 20 feet wide. Passing through under sail is a very unique experience, with very little room for error. Camp 5 was located immediately adjacent to Hidden Pass, and turned out to be quite a nice camp, with loads of shells covering the entire beach. I spent some time socializing and collecting shells for my two young daughters, with my daily ration of one cold beer in hand, as the sun set over Espiritu Santo bay.

The forecast for Saturday called for extremely light winds in the morning, in the 0-5 knot range. I suggested to Chris that we leave early, even before sunrise. We didn't have a working motor, and paddling my boat any distance at all is not feasible, so we had to get out early if we were going to arrive in Magnolia Beach in time for the shrimp boil at the finish line. As we were talking that through, the crew of the boat anchored next to us announced they were headed out at sunset, to sail through the night. We got the idea to do some night sailing ourselves, and set the alarm for 3:30am.

We raised anchor at 4:15am on Saturday morning, under clear skies and a nearly full moon. I had never sailed at night before, and I must say, it was pretty cool. At about 6:00am the eastern sky started to brighten. Thirty minutes later, the sun peeked up above the horizon and I fired up a fresh pot of coffee to start the day.

We had made decent progress across the bay during our two hour night sail. The issue we had was that the wind basically died when the sun came up. We had to paddle a few times as we wound our way through the islands and marshes that separate Espiritu Santo Bay and Matagorda Bay. Once we got out into Matagorda Bay, the wind picked up a little, maybe in the 3-5 knot range. But then it suddenly died. Nothing. Nada. There wasn't a ripple on the water for as far as the eye could see. So, with no wind and the finish line still about eight miles away, we broke out

the paddles again. As we paddled along at 1 knot, three other participants passed us under motor power, their eyes focused intently on the finish line ahead.

After about 30 minutes of being becalmed, the wind did finally come back up. It wasn't much, but with the full main up and the genoa poled way out on the other side, we were making decent forward progress. We sailed straight onto the beach at the finish line, allowing Chris to jump from the bow of the boat onto dry sand, something we refer to as "sticking the landing."

As we socialized over the next few hours at the traditional shrimp boil on the beach, we pieced together the final statistics for the event: Only 28 of the 57 boats that started had made it to Magnolia Beach. For the first time in the nine-year history of the Texas 200, there was a drop-out rate in excess of 50%. The contrast between the experiences of the participants was significant. Like us, many participants had a really good, mostly uneventful week. Others had faced significant challenges, and many of them were forced to exit the event. There were no serious injuries or lost boats though, which was fantastic news. Everyone would live to fight another day (or sail another Texas 200).

As for me, I had made it. Four years straight of making all camps and finishing at Magnolia Beach. No carnage here. Or was there? As we were loading my boat onto the trailer on the beach, the trailer tongue made a snapping sound and promptly dropped into the sand. We weren't going anywhere anytime soon. The "Year of Carnage" apparently wasn't done with us quite yet.