

The 2016 Texas 200

By John Fisher

Someone more internet famous than I once said “Embrace the Suck” about the Texas 200. I didn’t really understand the meaning on my first 200 in 2014. In that event I was mostly overwhelmed and just intent on finishing. This time I had a little more time in the boat, almost 2 weeks vs 2 days and had a much better idea on what to expect. I now understand completely.

To fully enjoy sailing along the Texas coast in a small boat in the middle of June you have to accept the parts that suck and move on. It’s going to be hot and I mean hot along with lots of humidity. Heat index was over 100 for several of the days, maybe all of them. It also doesn’t cool down much at night. The wind also doesn’t let up much, unless it doesn’t show up at all. So it’s going to be windy at camp. Cooking can be hard, tents blow down and shade is hard to find. Once you accept the conditions the sailing can be quite good.

Day One Port Isabel to Mansfield Jetties

I thought it was going to be uneventful, I was wrong. The day started out simply enough, push the boat out of the slip so we can rig the main sail. In my haste to leave, I didn’t look at the forestay closely. I should have as the halyard that tensions the stay got jammed. This resulted in the forestay being a little longer than normal, thus not much tension on the jib. I didn’t notice this until half way to the jetties to get out into the ocean. It seemed to be holding so I left it alone. We started with two reefs in the main since the wind was forecast to be 20+ by the afternoon. A good decision as putting in a reef outside would have been a challenge.

Sailing, we left the dock and joined up with a large group heading out, John G, Matt S., John A, Brian, Brian’s dad, Pete with his son, and a few others. 4 of those boats headed outside. We were able to lay the bridge on the first tack, but it took a few tacks to get through as there was a strong current right under the bridge. It was a little exciting to have to tack between the bridge pilings. We headed to the island once through the bridge as there is the old bridge? that was now a pier that we had to go around. My crew was concerned that the chart said it was shallow that way, so we went back toward the mainland. The chart was wrong and we quickly hit bottom. A quick gybe and back to deep water. Also some frantic waving to Matt who was following us, don’t go that way. After a few more tacks we go to the exit and heard on the radio that John A had some issues. We got close to Matt to see what the plan was and he said that they were going to go outside and wait for John. I didn’t like the sound of waiting outside so we headed north. As we entered the ocean the swells got a lot bigger. They were supposed to be 2.5 to 3 foot which is big in a 17 foot boat. We could not see over them when in a trough. The trip north was pretty uneventful with the wind dropping a bit for the middle third of the trip. We saw another boat maybe a third of the way to the jetties. We stalked them for hours, finally catching them before the jetties.

When the wind let up a little I wished I had more sail, but once it picked up again I was glad to have the 2 reefs in. We were hitting 10+ when surfing and even saw a 12 mph on one wave. As we got close to the jetties the wind was blowing hard. My plan was to come around the south jetty and get into the calmer side of the channel. It worked, but

was still a bit unnerving as I don't like sailing in breaking waves. I just kept the boat straight and aimed for the calmer water. Once inside we headed to camp. We got the boat situated when we got Matt's call on the radio about John going in the water. We were unable to help as our little motor could not safely push us through the waves. While sitting around on the beach my brother and nephew arrived. A complete surprise as the original plan was to stay inside to avoid the long row out and back. They are bad asses. We left at 6:30 and arrived 2:30, first boat to camp.

Day 2 Jetties to Haps cut

Today was picture day. We decided to take a photo of every boat we could pass. To help our cause we left a little later than usual at about 8 ish. The sail down the channel was a bit slow because of the current, but was enjoyable. We again had the 2nd reef in for the same reason as day one. It's not a race and the wind was supposed to pick up.

We passed a lot of boats and took a lot of photos. Once we made the turn to the ICW the wind picked up a little and we enjoyed surfing waves. I found that I could extend a surf by overtaking the next wave. So much fun. We did get passed by one boat "Cowabunga". They were not any faster in the bay, but once in the flat water they speed away.

In the land cut the wind picked up a lot and we were a bit overpowered in the gusts. I went to roll up the jib and it would not. So we beached and I realized the problem with the jib. The attachment at the top to the wire in the jib had ripped out. No way of rolling it up on the water, so we took down the main and sailed with jib and mizzen only. We were still doing low to mid 6's but not as fast as with the main up. We arrived at camp 2 and found we could not point well enough without the main and ended up on the leeward beach. The motor was marginal at getting us across the channel so we just anchored the boat in a foot of water. I was able to fix the jib and we were ready for day 3.

Day 3 Haps Cut to Bird Island

This was the rest day for the rowers. Only 27 miles or so. We stayed with 2 reefs for the day. The trip down the icw was pretty uneventful. It did pick up a little as we got close to camp 3, but with 2 reefs it was easy sailing. We did pass Blu Bayou with a bent mast and under engine power. Something about reef early and reef often or that they had not done so. We also watched the Strike 18 blow out a main sail, shorten sail and continue. So the wind was fairly strong.

We realized that the charts John made and the current channel marker numbers were not the same. So as we were trying to figure out where to turn we passed the Tractor. They almost beat us today. We turned a bit late, marker 91 and tried to pass above an island. It didn't work as there was a bar extending far above the island. We quickly regrouped, headed back to the icw and went below the island. Phil was following us and was able to make it through, but I wasn't going to chance it with our bigger boat. Once we went around the island we sailed right up to the beach and with good board work on the part of my crew we sailed all the way to where we anchored.

We had a nice afternoon lounging on the boat with the crew from the Tractor. It was a good day to rest and rejuvenate. This anchorage/camp had no beach this year and it was a bit on the jungle side on shore. So we offered our cockpit benches to them for sleeping. I think they used them, but they were gone in the morning. Must have been my snoring.

Day 4 Bird Island Basin to Quarantine shores

The wind started light so I knew I had a chance to run the spinnaker. We put it up right away and it worked well. Since we had not had a chance to shake it down prior to the 200 I opted for mizzen and spinnaker only.

We had to dodge one island on the way back to the icw. It looked like we could make it, then as we got closer there was an obvious bar extending way out from the island. We were watching Phil who was again following us and he too had to quickly correct course as even he could not make it over the bar. With the spinnaker and a nice breeze we were able to make good time. We dropped the spinnaker once we were consistently hitting mid 6's as we were not sure how far we could carry it. Better safe than sorry. We got to Snoopys at about 10, got ice, and had lunch with half the fleet. It was a nice break. Once back on the water we saw dolphins. A couple even followed us from the icw to shamrock cove. They were surfacing right next to the boat. We caught the Tractor at stingray hole, but they went straight across to the bayou while we took the channel past the ferries. The beat up the channel ripped the bottom stitching out of the jib. Argh. Another problem with the jib. Also the wind shifted more east making it a hard beat up the channel. We even had to do a tack to make sure we made it.

I had always wanted to sail the bayou to quarantine shores, but since we had issues with the mast all week I didn't want to take it down on the water to get under the fixed 8ft bridge. Instead we took the long way and headed down the ship channel next to the road. It was a DDW run and the jib was flopping. Since we couldn't roll it up we had to beach the boat and roll it up by hand. We then arrived at the bayou which was not what I expected. It was a big wide open swath of water. With a few stick or markers. Luckily the light was just right and we could see the channel without any problems. One part required a course above what we could point so a quick blip of the motor fixed that. We sailed into camp at about 5pm. Our longest day so far. Also the first day that the tractor came in before we did. They earned it.

Day 5 Quarantine Shores to Hidden pass

This is the day for all the navigating. The wind was really light so the trip around Mud Island was scratched. We ran the spinnaker and started with 3 reefs in the main.

Because it might pick up in the afternoon. We quickly got tired of the slow going, roughly 3 mph. So I put up the main, that helped, but still slow, so I took out the reefs. Now we had the main all the way up along with the spinnaker. John Goodman took a video of us in one of the dugouts. We caught a few other boats right at the first dugout and using a hand held GPS made quick work of the navigation.

Once we got to Ayers dugout I noticed that the tide must be in as I could not see most of the reef. Last time we could see the reef clearly, this time you had to know it was there. The approach to Ayers was a close reach from Cedar? and right of the point of the island. Probably the easiest of the dugouts to find.

From there we headed out to the cut in panther reef and noticed a few of the other boats heading along the shore. I was not sure we could get around the end of the reef so I went with the tired and true route. I should have gone the other way, next time. John and Rosa were just behind us in Haps Cut and going along the shore. We headed out into the bay and had a few boats behind us and the sea pearl tri in front of us. The wind shifted more

east and I was concerned that we would not make hidden pass. Once through the cut we saw the tri stopped. It turned out they had stopped at a shrimper and bought fresh shrimp. It was a beat to hold course for hidden pass as the wind had shifted more. The wind also picked up and was at the limit for full sail. I decided to play it safe and put in the second reef. Then I found we were a lot slower. Should have left it alone. I was concerned on making the pass so I threw in a couple of tacks to make sure we made it. About then we could see the boats that went around the end of the reef. One of them was Haps Cut. We met them right before the pass and followed them through. So after several hours of sailing and different routes we were together again. This theme would be repeated on the last day as well.

Hidden pass was not where the GPS and charts showed it to be and after talking to some local fisherman they said it had moved in the last 6 months. This caused some excitement as Ellen had to lift the board and our rudder was dragging as we approached the pass. We were able to make it through and enjoyed a nice camp. The beach had a shelf so we had to anchor out quite a ways and were hitting bottom at low tide.

Last Day

With a forecast for more light winds we chose to get on the water early. We left with the Tractor at about 6. Wind was really light and we could only manage 2-3 mph with full sail. Also with wind was shifting more south which required gybing the spinnaker. That would not have been an issue, except I had only rigged the boat to run the spinnaker on a starboard tack. I was able to walk the lines around and we were able to sail a port tack. Again Haps Cut went for the shallow water and we went for the ICW and deeper water. They went off to chase the Tractor who was easily out pacing the sailboats.

When we exited the jetties Ellen checked the spot on the Tractor and we found them to be a few miles ahead of us. Haps cut was right behind us, so again two different routes and the same result. The wind had freshened a little and we were managing 6 in the puffs, but about the time we could see the Tractor the wind died. Nothing, water smooth as an inland lake in the morning. We were only 7 miles from the end and the motor was fired up. We can only make about 4 with the motor, so we followed the Tractor to the end. The wind filled in from the East at the last point before the finish, but it was too late to put the sails up and we finished under motor. The Tractor beat us to the beach by a few minutes. Not the best way to end the 200, but I guess that's why you bring a motor. Almost the same as 2014 except the wind only shifter 90 deg this time and not 180 like in 14.