

2018 Texas 200 Puppy Dawg Learns to Rollover and Play Dead



Photo by Peter Lange

After I caught my breath and climbed on top of the bottom of my capsized boat, Puppy Dawg, in the middle of the Port Mansfield Channel, I reflected briefly on the day and how I ended up in this situation. I had left Port Isabel relatively early in the morning and headed Northeast down the Laguna Madre with the wind directly behind me. I set up my sails for downwind sailing and relaxed as the wind began to build. I was jybing back and forth from port to starboard tack. At

some point, I looked up and noticed that the storm mainsail had come completely out of the track on the mast I assumed from all of the jybing. So, I had to dump it to the deck, and instead of raising the main again, I just kept on sailing with only the screecher.

The wind continued to build even higher, and at some point, I realized that even the screecher had to be rolled up. I went to roll it up, and it wouldn't budge. I knew the roller on the roller furler was jammed. So, I didn't have any other option except to bring the screecher down from the halyard. When I dumped the halyard, it fed through the cam cleat and came out the top of the mast. So, that was an issue I'd have to deal with later.

Puppy Dawg slowed down dramatically without a mainsail or a screecher. At this point, I was down to just my little roller furling jib. I decided to head out of the ICW at day mark 83 on a starboard tack and point as high to the wind as I could get. My goal was to reach across the flats in the middle of Laguna Madre and see which spoil island on the Port Mansfield Channel I could reach under jib alone. As it turned out, I was able to reach the second spoil island coming from the West in the Port Mansfield Channel. It was good to set my feet on land again and just get stabilized.

After the rocky morning across the southern Laguna Madre, I pulled the boat around the western tip of this channel spoil island and got into a position where I was on the windward shore of the channel with the boat relatively calm so I that could raise the mainsail again. Once I got the mainsail up, I got underway. I immediately noticed that the jamb cleat on my Harken main sheet block had come loose, and I could not lock the sheet down. I figured it was a short way up the channel, and I would sort it out when I arrived at camp 1. For now, it was all right arm muscle trimming!

I was actually making pretty good way coming up the channel, and it was a situation where I had a long starboard tack, a short port tack, and then another long starboard tack. As I approached day mark 14 on the leeward side of the channel, I wasn't sure whether I should tack before the day mark or just after it? I decided to tack after it, and that ended up being the wrong decision. In order to clear the day mark when I was doing my port tack, I needed to get far enough past it in order to not tack right on top of it. By doing this, I sailed to close to shore and hit bottom with my centerboard.

Given that the wind was in the high twenties and gusting into the 30's, I didn't think I could successfully get going again from the lee shore with main and jib. So, I dropped the main, and I sailed on a port tack back to the windward side of the channel to get things sorted out. It was at this point, that I briefly considered just stopping and figuring out what to do with the main sheet before raising the main again. However, I was not far from camp 1. So, I decided to just keep pushing on.

When I got the mainsail up again and got back on the boat this time, I forgot to attach my tether. I was sailing at maybe six to seven knots up the channel. A large gust of wind hit, and I leaned back instinctually to balance the boat, and I just kept going overboard. However, I still had the main sheet in my right hand. So, in the moment, I decided I should probably hang onto the boat. However, that was the wrong decision because once my weight was off the ama, but my weight

was now fully applied to keeping the main sheet pulled in, the wind filled the mainsail and tipped it over to leeward because there was no weight to counterbalance the wind on the sail.

After I got oriented in the water, I noticed I was surrounded by a pod of dolphins who must have heard all of the underwater commotion, and I knew everything was going to be fine. Then, I saw Kyle on Angry Mullet coming up the channel. He motored by and asked if he could help. I said, "Sure, throw me a line." He got prepared and circled the boat to throw me the line. However, the line wasn't heavy enough line to reach me, and as he got blown towards the leeward shore, the line got caught in his prop, and he drifted off to the leeward shore of the channel.

In the meantime, I was starting to remember the video I had watched on how to right an upside down Weta. The only problem was the Weta wasn't completely upside down! Because of the shallow water in the channel, the mast was stuck on the bottom. So, the bow was up in the air and the stern was underwater by a few feet. The problem with this orientation was that the port opening tool that I needed to flood the leeward ama was underwater. So, I dove for the opening tool which was bungeed to the stern and was very careful not to drop the tool when I un-bungeed it from the boat. Once I had the tool in my hand, I wrapped it around my wrist so that I couldn't drop it. Next, I had to loosen the port on the starboard ama stern because the righting procedure requires flooding of the leeward ama.

The ama access ports get very pressurized from the heat of the day. So, you need the port opening tool to actually get the port open. The port was on so tight, I had to dive down for about a dozen tries to get the port open. Once I got the port open, I was able to flood the starboard ama. In order to completely flood the ama, I had to walk forward and stand on the bow of the ama to get the stern of the ama to raise up and release the air inside.

At this point, Kyle from Angry Mullet had walked up the leeward shore and started talking with me. He was maybe 150 feet away, and he asked me if I wanted him to call the Coast Guard. I said, "No. Do not call the Coast Guard. If you want to call anybody, call Chris Tomsett, who has a 25-horsepower motor." He understood, and as he was walking back to his boat, I climbed up and stood on the centerboard to put my weight out as far as I could. At this point, I could feel the boat starting to come up just like in the instructional video. It flipped over so fast, I didn't really have time to get on the net, so I just hung on as the boat got dragged over to the leeward shore. I felt great at this point because the boat was back upright!

Puppy Dawg was now wallowing in the mud of the leeward shore. Once I saw the boat was secured in the mud, I walked down to see if I could help Kyle get Angry Mullet underway again. He filled the gas tank, got the air out of the line, and secured the anchor. I helped push him off and get back out into the channel while thanking him profusely for standing by and offering assistance.

At this point, I walked back to Puppy Dawg and collected items along the way that had gone overboard and blown to the leeward shore – sunscreen, my Tivas, a side tie pad, and my sunglasses band. I was ready to get underway again and see if I could make it to camp 1, but as I pulled the boat into the water, I noticed that it was sitting fairly low in the water and surmised that there was water in the main hull. I opened the access port that sits in front of the centerboard

and behind the mast, and to my shock, I saw that the main hull was about halfway filled with water! The troubling part of this situation was I didn't have a pump! I thought for a moment about what I did have and realized I had a sponge. So, I grabbed the sponge and started sponging out the main hull that was half filled with water. I started around 5:00pm and ended around 6:30pm - an hour and a half of sponging to get the main hull clear of water!

Given the time of the day, I was wondering if I could still make camp 1, and ultimately, I just decided to sail under jib only across to the windward shore and camp for the evening. I found a nice sandy spot and pulled up on the beach. This was important because I had lost both anchors in the capsize event. So, I had to be up on the beach. I still had a dock line available, and I took that and tied it off to a rock that was sitting on the side of the channel. That was going to be my anchor for the night. I was finally in a position to assess the full damage of the capsize to the boat and to my gear.



Photo by John Bratton

I knew that the boat stern had been underwater for close to an hour. So, I first opened the dry bag that I kept in the cockpit with my sleeping gear. Sure enough, it was full of water and all my sleeping gear was completely wet. I got everything (air mattress, sleeping bag, pillow, and tent) out and set it up in an attempt to dry it out, but honestly it was too late in the day for the heat of the sun to have any real impact or drying power. I resigned myself to a night of wet sleep. Then, I went back and checked all the other dry bags, which most of course had taken on water too. My new name for dry bags is “splash bags” because that is all they are good for! Here is a full accounting of items lost to the capsize:

1. On The Bottom of the Port Mansfield Channel East of Day Mark 11 (if you want to dive for it)

- a. 2 x small anchors plus rode (one was over 20 years old!)
 - b. 21-year-old, handheld VHF (which didn't work before the start. I was thinking about replacing it, but a wire brush on the battery contacts did the trick)
 - c. Fishing rod with spinning reel
 - d. Small box of fishing tackle
 - e. 5-year-old, prescription Oakley sunglasses
2. Lost to Water Damage
 - a. 2 x rechargeable power packs for iPhone recharging (fortunately, I had 3 and 1 survived!)
 - b. 8 x AA batteries
 - c. 2 x USB charging blocks
 - d. 2 x USB charging cables

In addition, all of my clothes and sleeping gear were wet and smelled of sea water the rest of the week. Lovely! The good news in all of this was that my food was all good because I had packed everything in zip lock bags before placing them in the dry bags. So, even though water got into the dry bag, the food was in good shape because it was double packed.

Once I ate and got everything sorted, it was after sunset and it was getting very dark. I decided I had done enough for the day and it was time to go to bed.

About 2:00 AM. I heard some rustling on the deck and woke up to find a raccoon getting into my food bag, So, I yelled at him to get off the boat, which he promptly did. I got up, packed all the food in the dry bag, put it back inside the hull, and locked the hatch so that no animals could get at my food.

While I was still on deck, a high-speed boat was coming up the channel and slowed when he saw Puppy Dawg. I heard him say, "That boat doesn't have lights on." I turned on my light on and said, "I'm camping here." He left me alone and continued up the channel.

I went back to sleep and not long after I heard the raccoon getting into things on the deck again, I yelled and scared him off again, and he never came back after that.

Here's a quick summary of days 2 through 5:

1. Day 2 / Tuesday – fast downwind sail to Camp 2 – no drama! Great afternoon relaxing and drying out after the capsize, but I should have taken the time to drop my mast and rerun the screecher halyard – too tired!



Photo by Peter Lange

2. Day 3 / Wednesday – expected high winds again. So, I only put up the storm main. This made for a slow, under-canvassed day without the screecher. I contemplated stopping to change out mainsails, but in the end, I just decided to go slow for a change. Honestly, my average speed for the day was 6 knots in a 14-foot boat. So, not bad. When I got to the Padre Island Yacht Club PIYC, I knew I would need to short tack up the channel to get to the dock. It took about a dozen tacks, but I made it to the spoil shore across from the club and dropped the main. Then Cookie Craft Too offered me a tow across the channel – thanks guys! Later in the day, I finally had the time and energy to resolve the screecher furler issue and dropped the mast to get the screecher halyard rerun.



Photo by Peter Lange



Photo by John Hippe

3. Day 4 / Thursday – got a ride from Rob McDaniel to Walmart to pick-up a replacement paddle for the one I broke during mooring maneuvers on Wednesday afternoon. As a result, I was the last boat out of the harbor. The plan for the day was to head across Corpus Christi Bay, up the ICW by Corpus Christi Bayou, across Aransas Bay, and up the ICW to Rattlesnake Island. I had fun drag racing a tug up the Corpus Christi Bayou ICW (I won). When I entered Aransas Bay, the wind had built significantly into the high teens with gusts into the 20s. I roared across Aransas Bay and up the ICW with average speed around 8 to 9 knots! I arrived around 5pm and thought I would see other boats since I was the last one to leave PIYC. At some point, I thought I was going to be spending the night alone again, but I saw some sails on the horizon that finally dropped anchor at around 7pm. Something was off about Rattlesnake Island, but I couldn't put my finger on it for several hours. Then it came to me – ALL of the big trees I remembered from last year had been stripped from the Island by Harvey! This was going to be my last night out, and it was the best! The temperature was great, the breeze was cooling, and the stars / Milkyway were AMAZING!



Photo by Peter Lange

4. Day 5 / Friday – on Wednesday, I decided to skip Army Hole and get home a day earlier than expected. It was directly upwind into San Antonio Bay from the anchorage. So, I asked the Crosswinds crew for a short tow, and they obliged which helped avoid short tacking in shallow waters. Once into San Antonio Bay, it was clear it was going to be a close reach or close haul all the way to Matagorda Bay. San Antonio Bay was mostly 5 to 7 knots of boat speed, but as I approached South Pass the wind was building quickly. I was averaging 8 to 9 knots of boat speed coming into South Pass, and I knew I needed to slow down quickly. Bumping bottom or having my rudder kick-up at those high speeds would have been challenging at best and damaging at worst. So, I rolled up the jib, eased out the main, and slowed down to 3 to 4 knots. As it turns out, I did run across a small shallow spot that kicked the rudder up. At least in this instance, I listened to my intuition! The sail up the ICW past Port O’Conner was quick. As I turned into Matagorda Bay and got on course, it was yet another high wind, dead downwind passage. I made the best of it and made quick time the last 10 miles with boat speeds ranging from 5 to 11 knots but averaging about 8. As I approached Magnolia Beach, I noticed that there were 2 to 3 foot breakers crashing on the beach. So, I pulled around the West side of the boat ramp breakwater into a calm anchorage. However, in this location I couldn’t pull Puppy Dawg out with the trailer. So, I stripped everything off the boat and recruited 3 fellow sailors to

help carry the main hull up the short beach to my trailer. After packing everything up, and a quick shower, I was on the road by 645pm – another Texas 200 DONE!

So, what did I learn this year? A lot! Here is a summary of lessons learned:

1. Listen to Your Intuition – on Monday, I had several opportunities to stop sailing for the day and get things back in order, but I kept pushing on because my ego wanted to get to camp 1. Not listening to my intuition and being tired led me to forgetting to tether into the boat and ultimately to capsizing! On Friday, listening to my intuition to slow down as I was hurling towards South Pass at 9 knots probably helped avoid some damage to the boat. Listen to your intuition!
2. Weta Capsize Recovery Procedure – While you always think that you hope you never need the information, I'm glad I watched the YouTube video on how to recover a capsized Weta. Without having watched this video, I doubt that I would have thought to bungee the port opening tool in a place where I could easily get to it when I needed it. Also, I'm sure I wouldn't have ultimately righted the boat without that simple knowledge of the proper procedure. It is really an elegant design and makes me wonder if it would work on larger trimarans?
3. Dry Bags (aka "splash bags") Don't Work – dry bags are really splash protection bags. They are not meant to be submerged. If you are using dry bags and your boat could potentially capsize, then put everything inside of the "splash bag" into zip lock bags or other waterproof containers to keep the contents dry.
4. Strap Down Everything – I lost gear in the capsize (see above) because I failed to secure it to the boat. At least I had the sense to strap down my Yeti and my cockpit "splash bag". While these two items would have floated, the fact that they were strapped to the boat saved me the effort of chasing them down wind.
5. Main Hull Leaks – I knew I had a few small holes in the aft deck of the main hull from some old fittings that had been removed, but I didn't have time to repair them before the trip. As it turned out, these two ¼" holes ended up filling the main hull with a significant amount of water during the capsize. If water can get in, it will get in. Make sure your hull is water tight.
6. Dewatering Plan – All I had was a sponge, and that almost floated away while capsized as well! As fellow sailor Brian Graham pointed out later, I also had a Yeti mug that would have helped get the bulk of the water out and sped up the process. If you have a hull that can hold water, have a dewatering plan. I will carry a small pump going forward.
7. Halyard Stop Knots – When I dumped the screecher halyard on day 1, it ended up being out of commission for two more days. If I would have put a halyard stop knot in the halyard, this would have been avoided. However, this experience also reminded me that I need a better way to lower and raise my mast. I am working on a plan for a pivoting mast base that should do the trick.
8. Sleeping Configuration – Last year I just slept on the nets which was uncomfortable and at an angle. This year I carried an air mattress and slept half on the net and the other half on the side deck. This was much more level and comfortable! PS – I'm not a fan of shore camping.
9. Too Much Food – I went shopping on the last night before heading to Isabel, and I loaded up my cart with what I thought was the right amount of food. However, I found that about ¾ of what I allocated per day was plenty. So, maybe next time I'll look at the

calorie counts and get closer to what I need. Because I am single handed, I like to pack snacks in my life jacket and eat when I am hungry throughout the day because I do not like to stop for lunch. Some of the things I like include Laura Bars, nuts, Chia squeezes, and snack packaged olives. Things that do not work well on this type of trip for me are any grain-based products like bread, bagels, chips, and crackers – too many opportunities to get crushed or wet!

10. Vitamin A & D Ointment Works! – The Weta is a very wet boat! In 2017 the skin on my hands and feet shed for weeks due to too much salt water exposure. So, this year I endeavored to keep them dryer to start with, and then I applied Vitamin A & D ointment from Walgreen's before sleeping and when waking up in the morning. I continued to do this for 3 days after the event as well, and I'm convinced that this made a big difference. No skin shed at all!
11. Better Off Sleeping Outside! – At PIYC, there was an opportunity to sleep inside in the AC. I was attracted to that option less by the AC and more by not having to set-up and break-down my tent since there was a chance of rain. In the end, I would have been better off sleeping outside. It didn't rain, and inside was like a college sleeping dorm crowded with snoring people!
12. Weta Can Easily be Carried to Trailer – as noted above, I enrolled some fellow sailors to help carry the main hull of Puppy Dawg to the trailer at Magnolia Beach. This was easy with four people and could probably have been done with 2. Good to know for future adventures!
13. Simplify Gear and Lighten the Load – I have a habit of being over prepared. That must come from my Space Shuttle Mission Control experience of observing the preparations to be off the planet for days. Sometimes this strategy pays off like when I have 3 battery chargers and 2 of them fail. However, most of the time, it does not. I'm resolved to review my gear list and trim the fat.
14. On Your Knees! – Being on the Weta for days at a time is hard on the knees. You forget how many times you are kneeling on a boat to get things done. I learned this lesson in 2017, but I failed to write it down. So, I forgot to procure some quality knee pads. Not next time!

That's it for this year. I trust this has been informative and will assist in your future adventure preparations!