

T200 post cruise

First of all, kudos to Kevin for finishing the Texas 200. It was even more windy than last year; and out of 3 proas starting, he is the only one finishing the event. To put it in perspective, there were 47 boats at the start, and 28 at the arrival... From now on, at least for a short while.... I will call Kevin not simply "Kevin" but Proa Master Kevin...



When reviewing my boat, he had 2 comments:

- are you sure that those aluminum rudder pindles will be strong enough? Don't you think you should switch to stainless steel?
- you should bungee down your mast foot to the hull, so it cannot pop out of the pin it sits on, that happened to me once.

I should have listened; I sheared off a rudder pindle right above the lower rudder support and I popped the mast out of its pin...

What really happened on that f@#\$ing first day:

My bungee system to hold the rudder blade down was not tight enough; when sailing above 8 knots, the blade would slightly kick back, generating a lot of load on the rudder pindle; I was trying to hold the blade in place with one hand on the

bungee, but I should have stopped and put together a fix to limit the extra load on the pindle.

I sheared off the pindle right above the lower support, where I had drilled a small hole to install a cotterpin to lock the pindle in place so it does not fall down. I have taken a few pictures and will post shortly. It was a typical case of bad engineering on my part with a "cut following the dotted line" weakness point....

When the bottom section of the rudder head was not held in place any longer, the rudder was swinging in all directions, with the top support of the rudder twisted in all directions.... BAAAAD.

I stopped the boat, secured the rudder and was in the middle of the forced shunt trying to figure out where I would end up on this new shunt, compared to where I wanted to go. The sea was really choppy and my mast popped out of its step at that point. With the wind in the sail, the mast foot fell into the water, without touching/damaging the hull.

A few seconds of panic followed...

I am now with a one rudder proa, and a mast horizontal in the water (I wanted to test before the race if my mast was floating or not; I know, now... it does...). The whole rig is still attached with the 2 stays and 2 shrouds, and the strut. The top of the strut is bending alarmingly, with its foot still attached to the boat. This is the first line I cut to free the strut. Carbon windsurfer masts are tough...

I then pulled the whole thing, mast, mainsail, strut back on the boat; not a small feat. In the process I damaged the main sail in several places, against the spreaders, and cleats and rudder extensions on the main hull. The main is now covering almost entirely the trampoline, so I removed all the lower battens and try to limit windage by tying the mast and the sail without the battens to the boat. I then got my paddle out and started paddling to the shore, on a beam reach. Dan and Brian passed by on their Tamanu catamaran with Hobbie 18 rig, under jib only. (I was on main, with one reef; I had to go upwind from the ramp in Port Mansfield to get into the bay and could not have done it without the main). I contacted them on VHF and they passed by, proposing to help, which was nice but not really practical. They proposed to tow me to the beach but I was not sure this was really safe, especially with my mast sticking out so much from both ends of the boat... I did not want to jeopardize either their boat, which was assembled for the first time the day before....

In any case, I was not in immediate danger; I was in the middle of the bay, the wind would push me against a shore, even if I was not paddling.

After 1 1/2 hrs of paddling, I reached the shore. During that long paddling time, I was able to come up with a plan.

I have to fix the rudder first; if I cannot sail on that same tack, I cannot continue

the trip, even only to camp 1. If I continue to camp 1, I have to go to camp 2, since camp 1 is on a small island, in the middle of nowhere, with no access from the continent, no permanent inhabitant, marginal cell phone coverage, etc...

Camp 2 is a marina, where I can leave the boat, get a rental car, recover my car and trailer at camp 5, come back and pick up the boat, etc...

If I cannot repair the rudder, I have to walk back to the starting line, (10 to 15 miles on the beach), get someone with a power boat willing to come back to my boat to tow it, etc... Big mess, long, and expensive solution. More over, I landed on the shore of King Ranch, one of the biggest ranch in the US. The ranch is the whole county, King County!!! The personnel on the ranch is well known not to tolerate trespassers... Leaving my boat on their land is not very appealing... This part of Texas is a desert, in the sense that there is NOBODY; no road, no trail, very bad cell phone coverage, etc... I have to expect to be on my own. If I can repair the rudder, then I have to remast the boat, the 30 ft of it and sail under jib only to camp 1. And then to Camp 2.

When I arrived at the beach, I removed all my stuff from the boat (food, tool and clothes bags, mast, mainsail, jib in its bag, wishbone, strut, broken rudder) and I checked the rudder support, that were made of carbon toe wrapped around the rudder pindle. The bottom support was intact; it did not see any "weird" load due to the failure of the pindle, as the pindle sheard off above it. The top support had been twisted in many directions but (almost) all the carbon fiber was still in place; there was some separation between the fibers, but a pindle, well guided with the bottom support would not break it any further. Carbon fiber is TOUGH!!

In the mean time, 2 guys on a powerboat, out on a fishing trip, stopped by and ask if I needed help. One of the guys tried to call a towing company out of Port Mansfield (starting point of the Texas 200)... but got only an answering machine... He left a message, saying that a sailboat needed some assistant at such and such location, but I was not very sure of seing ever any tow boat coming for me... The communication was also really bad. They left, going fishing, and proposed to come back check on me when they returned to Port Mansfield. They were going out and did not really want to waste their fishing day by towing a crazy sailor with a weird accent to their starting point. Once again, I was not in real immediate danger, and did not want to impose this on them.

To repair my rudder, I decided to use my other rudder pindle, knowing that if I installed it the same way, I would most likely shear it as well through the same small hole for the cotterpin. So I installed the pindle upside down, with the small cotterpin hole now in the middle, between the top and bottom supports of the rudder head; so not exposed to any shearing load. I installed some stainless steel wire clamp at the bottom of the pindle, right above the bottom support to avoid the pindle to fall through. I have some pictures, of this as well and will post shortly.

Once the rudder was repaired, and after untangling all the rig lines (none of them were cut; I was careful during the rig recovery to limit my line cutting to a minimum and to non critical lines, mainsail reef lines, strut attachment line at the strut's foot), it was time to raise the mast. I had already removed the shredded mainsail and rolled it into its bag...

The same fishing boat came back at about that time to check on me. They asked me again if I needed a tow. One of the guy was really friendly, the other was obviously bothered to have to stop for a f@#§g sailboat in trouble...

Nice guy: "so do you want us to ask for a towboat when we get back to Port Mansfield?"

Me: "thank you but it is not necessary, I am going to remast"

Nice guy: "....."

Strange look on his face; looking at me to guess if I have all my sanity.

Nice guy to the other guy: "he says he is going to remast?!"

Other guy: "let's go".

And off they went.

With the 4 rig lines (2 stays, 2 shrouds) attached, and the mast perpendicular to the mainhull, I raised the mast by pushing on the strut.

I took me 3 attempts to get the mast up; the strut has to be in the right position to be able to do this. It was the first time that I raise the mast by myself.

Once the mast was up, a primal scream followed...

I'll will post some pictures as well of "before" and "after".

I then reloaded everything on the boat, raised my jib and went on to camp 1. It took me about 6 hours to do the whole thing on the beach. I left King ranch's beach around 8:00PM. I could have waited for the following morning, but I wanted to catch on with the rest of the group for 2 reasons: first of all, after the account from Dan and Brian, I knew that a few people would have been worried. More importantly, being only able to go downwind on only one tack, I had no choice but to continue the route. If I wanted the reassuring company of the whole group for the rest of the trip (my goal was camp 2), I had to catch up right now, rather than sailing one day behind everybody.

Sun set was around 8:00PM so from 8:00 to 9:00, I had visibility. From 9:00 to 10:00 it was pretty dark... I was thinking: "I thought it was full moon for this trip?! Where is the moon???"

Then, at 10:00PM, I had a very beautiful and highly anticipated moon rise...

After that, it was easy to see the channel marks. I crossed 2 HUGE barges, with pusher tugboats. Those guys have a white beam light to see in front of them more powerful than anything else I have seen. I bet they can light up at least half a mile in front of them. They can scan back an forth the area in front of

them. It was somewhat funny to see that light beam passing over me, then stop, and come back on me and stay there. I could imagine the thoughts of the skipper "what the f@#k is this???".

I arrived at camp 1 at the opposite end of the land cut at 2:00AM, slept 4 hours and then said hello to everybody on the morning of day 2. It was funny to see the surprise on everybody's face and a warm feeling to see that people were worried. I did not regret to sail in the dark to get back to the group.

The following day was one long broad reach under my 70 sq ft jib only. I actually passed quite a few (small and boxy) boats on my way to camp 2.

10 guys then helped me to put the boat on the parking lot where I could recover it. Kevin asked me to crew on his boat, complaining that it was not fun to sail alone, and somewhat stressfull; all alone, you cannot let the tiller go for extended period of time to look at the GPS, or attend to any of the other tasks. I was more than happy to do so.

Lessons learned.

I was not well prepared enough. I had not sailed into so much wind by myself before the Texas 200.

My second reefing point was not ready yet. I should have spent the time to finish it before the start, even at the expense of other tasks: basically too much rush at the end of the preparation period, to get at the starting line. Do not start from the leeside of the harbor it at all possible. There were 2 ramps in Port Mansfield. I launched for the leeside ramp, as the other one does not have a big parking lot and fishermen get excited really fast if you block the ramp more than 3 minutes; they want to get on the water as well and they want to get on the water... NOW!!! The leeside ramp were actually 3 ramps side by side, so that was better. If I had launched the boat earlier and somewhat managed to have it tied to a dock on the windward side of the harbor, (not an easy task by itself as the wind was gusting at 20+ knots, head on), I could have started under jib only, I am not saying that I would have... but that might have been a possibility. I did not have this option from the leeside. I could have, should have, lowered completely my mainsail once out of the harbor

and raised my jib and sail only under jib. The feeling "I want to get there fast" took over from the more reasonable "I want to get there. Period." I had never lowered the mainsail, on the water, before; just to show my shortage on preparation. I did take a reef on the water; it was slow, but it worked. It was a first as well; another example of non-adequate preparation.

My mast is too tall (DUUHHH!!!). I have to start with a smaller rig first, and increase the horsepower if need be, rather than the other way around...

Last by not least; the comment below from Kevin on my seamanship is very nice, but not deserved.

If you have good seamanship; you don't drop the mast in the first place, or start the Texas 200 with so many shortages (see above).

I am just a bluddy hardnosed Frenchman...

Cheers,

Laurent