

2024 Texas 200

by Milton "Skip" Johnson

Fourteen years ago when I wrote something about the 2009 adventure the first comment was about a sore butt. Silicone gel seat pads arrived in the interim and this time my butt doesn't hurt. However the rest of my body now fourteen years older is still recovering.

I had intended to go on the 2023 T200 but got started on the build of QB later than intended due to some supply snafus ("I know we show it on our web site but we don't have any and don't know if and / or when we'll ever get any"). Once some material was at hand months late it was quickly apparent that it would difficult to impossible to build and trial the boat in time. Besides building at a breakneck speed takes a lot of the joy and pleasure out of what is an old man's hobby. So I'll do the 200 in 2024.

Still took some doing to be ready, a combination of an older builder, choice of materials and procedures and all the unexpected hiccups of everyday life. But we are done. Boat's been tested and trialed, I'm comfortable, barely, that it will do ok; dues and bus ticket are purchased and we are ready to go.

One last hiccup, I had planned on camping at Fred Stone Park as I had done three times previously but found out at the eleventh hour that camping at park was no longer allowed. Oops. A quick round of emails and we are good to go. A reserved condo was cancelled and available, Another boat, Precarious Cat with Captain Dan Wesp and Damon Hay as crew also needed accommodations and could share in the cost of the condo. I've always been comfortable especially on the water with going solo but there is something to be said to starting from an air conditioned space with shower. With the extra special bonus of a couple of roommates that were very pleasant company, both educational and entertaining.

*Precarious Cat with Captain
Dan Wesp and Damon Hay*



Long drive from the hills of Oklahoma to Port Mansfield, one long day to Beeville and then a short hop to Port Mansfield. Susie follows me as far as Austin to pick up any loose pieces then peels off to visit friends there and outside Fredericksburg and then on to Lake Houston to our son Mike's place. Susie and Mike are planning on meeting me at Snoopys on Wednesday.

Once in Port Mansfield I find a spot to rig the boat and it happens to be next to Captain Dan and Damon setting up Precarious Cat. I'd not met the fellows yet so was a pleasant surprise. Followed by another pleasant surprise visit with long time friends Chuck and Sandra Leinweber whom I hadn't seen since a canoe trip to Lake Powell in 2018.



Once boat is set up, takes about an hour usually, it's time to unhook the trailer and checkout the condo and check in with Susie. My phone is sitting on the passenger's seat and is stone cold dead, probably heat stroke. Dang, I'll need to get a phone tomorrow on the way to Magnolia Beach, would be imprudent to tempt Murphy by wandering off into the wilderness with only a short range VHF to connect with the outside world. This is double aggravating since last year when I couldn't make the 200 I went down to San Marcus to follow the Texas Water Safari one more time as it has been a big part of my boat design life for a long time and my phone died there also, a battery problem. Always been an aggravation that both events happen at the same time but there is a reason; schools out and hurricane season hasn't begun. Once in the condo Dan offers me a ride in Precarious Cat as they want to get a feel for the area so I put the phone in the refrigerator and go for a pleasant sail. After the sail phone is still dead and I borrow Dan's phone to call and update Susie about phone situation.

Sunday Morning. Captains meeting, I turn in my waiver, get my tickets and excuse myself to boogie early to get a phone and make Magnolia Beach on time. Wal-Mart in Kingsville has phones, buy one, Verizon store aka Russell Cellular doesn't open until 11:00 AM; no surprise there, I'm not a fan of the franchise. Back to Wal-Mart and get a prepaid account and head down the road. Gas stations quit selling road maps some time ago and I'm a little frazzled to try and get a map app downloaded and installed in a hurry in a strange town on an unfamiliar phone. As I drive down the feeder there's a Loves truck stop up ahead, maybe they would have maps. About that time a vehicle goes by on the freeway pulling an unusual trailer. Good odds it's going to Magnolia Beach so I pull up on to hiway 77 and follow same. Great relief when he turns off US69E and continues towards Sinton rather than going on to San Antonio.

Enough preliminaries, a little bit about the boat before I diary out the trip. QB, aka Questing Beast, is a "conventional" Pacific Proa that always sails with the wind on the float side of the craft, which means to be able to sail to windward the boat must be able to sail in either direction. There are advantages and disadvantages to the approach but the major appeal for me is it is mainly unexplored territory and I really enjoy that type of journey to the extent that QB is the sixth such craft I've designed and built. Also the last camp cruiser type I'll ever build, getting too old for the build and use of same. QB is 21' LOA, designed dry displacement 320#, probably fairly accurate, QB weighed 260# without masts and sails. Two cambered panel staysails 65 s.f. each roller reefed onto the booms with a winch handle clipped into the end of boom. Originally had a ratchet assembly incorporated into booms but one busted a week before the 200 so reefing is tied at grommets at each batten location. Battens are pultruded carbon fiber tubing. Sails 4 oz Dacron with a leading edge of seat belt webbing. Construction is fiberglass over Gpet foam. Auxiliary is an AD style scull which works well, I can move the boat at 1.5-2 mph easily in a calm and possibly quicker with some practice. The end mounted rudders are the most unconventional part of the design and have worked well. Bidirectional rudders slide up and down in a cassette at the very end of the hull that rotates against a vertical trough built into the hull. Cassettes are held in place with dyneema cordage that goes around a pair of spring loaded blocks inside the hull. Rudders have been tested on this and a previous boat intentionally and unintentionally and seemed to be up to the task.

Saturday afternoon Dan helped me launch QB and drove my vehicle back to condo and then took Precarious Cat with motor out to tow me to our slip. I probably could have sculled there but I forgot to remove the trailering locks from the rudders and had limited steering ability with just the scull.

Monday morning I saw Dan and Damon off about 8 AM and waited until about 9 to leave myself. QB slid out of the slip and we sculled out to middle of the channel to get a little (literally) wind. Two reefs in at this point, not as a matter of caution but rather that we can tack with two reefs in as the lowered

sail will clear the rear stay just barely. Sure enough the wind is gnarly at the end of the condos and we short tack once and with a little sculling to help we clear the condos.

Once out in the open we unroll the two reefs and join the parade up the Laguna Madre. It's a slow parade, little wind. In this parade of snails at least we are a fairly quick snail. We eventually pass a couple of boats and none of the sails behind us appear to be gaining on us. In these conditions we are quickest (?) with my weight as far to leeward as possible sitting on that blessed foam pad on the food box. Rudder is also deployed about halfway also to further reduce the wetted surface.

Even slow good things must come to an end; the thunderstorm approaching from the NW finally arrives. Sails are quickly rolled up on the booms and the drogue deployed. The drogue is actually a fisherman's drift anchor and intended to keep the boat headed into the waves. Doesn't quite work, as we are about 45 degrees to the waves which is at least better than being beam on. I then let out the anchor which also holds us at about 45 degrees to the waves and wait for the storm to pass.



Once the storm has passed we raise the sails. Take in the anchor and continue towards the Land Cut. There's a little wind now so we've got a little more boat speed so the rudders down and we are making some miles. There is more sea grass than I had expected but it is easy to raise the rudder to shed the grass once there's enough to start making some noise. Close to the Land Cut I misjudge things and start to turn to port thinking that all the grass had all been shed and the extra force pops the rudder out of socket; the rudder and cassette are at almost 90 degrees from vertical. Oops. I decide to drift up the spoil islands to starboard to analyze the damage and make repairs. Chuck Pierce swings by to check on me, thank you, as well as the big trimaran. I tell them I'm OK and what my plan is. The drifting to the spoil islands is taking too long so I decide to clamber out on the deck to see what's busted besides the carbon fiber pushrod that's wrapped over the gunnel. Short note; the c.f. pushrods aren't really an extravagance, there are 10 c.f. battens in the sails and they come cheaper by the dozen so the 2 two push rods cost about \$1.70 each. Since there are boats coming by I figure there's help if I fall off the boat. As Phil Bolger once said he had no desire to join the short list of designers that had perished on craft of their own devising. Nothing else appears busted, I pop the rudder/cassette back into place and all seems well but I'm leery of steering with a busted pushrod so I deploy the AD scull and continue our journey. Steering with scull works but it's a different feel and technique; while fiddling with the scull I fail to notice we are actually into the Land Cut and we are also in the shallows. Oops. I can make headway parallel to the channel but the scull doesn't have enough blade area or depth to work in to get to windward so we end up on the shore.

Some dragging the boat and trying to get back to deeper water in a rising wind convince me that it's prudent for an old man to just camp here for the night and leave early in the morning to catch up with the fleet. A quick exam of the c.f. pushrod shows it to be splintered into about twelve strands in the middle third of the hollow tube, both ends are still good. I wrap the splintered area tightly with gorilla tape and decide it's good to go since there's not a lot of stress on the thing. Camp setup is quick, dome tent with the bottom cut out over the cockpit area gives me standing room in one spot and a quick rinse off shower feels quite refreshing.

First light in the morning the water level is down about 4" and QB sits in a bed of sea grass and mud. The anchor is set at the edge of the channel and a 3:1 tackle is rigged between the cleat on the boat and the anchor line. A couple of snatches with this rig has us pointed towards the channel and slid far enough forward that I should be able to pull us out to deeper water easily before the wind picks up and pins us again.

Sailing again no reefs and staying to windward side of the cut it's not too long before I see some sails ahead in the distance. Just before noon the wind starts to be erratic and clocks around to the North. I chicken gibe a couple of times to keep from getting back winded into lee shore. Then a bigger sustained puff catches me by surprise and we are back on the lee shore in a rising wind. Dang. I try several times to kedge off the shallows but in a rising East wind I just can't make it work. The scull won't work as a push pole in the soft mud and won't work as a scull in just inches of water. The anchor is set at the edge of the channel and we are stuck until the wind either dies down or changes direction. The wind picks up and QB roots back and forth through about a 45 degree arc. Our secondary anchor is a screw in device meant for shell or sand beaches but with enough scope digs in to almost dry ground to keep the boat from rooting around. The wind keeps picking up and while moving around in the boat the wind turns my umbrella inside out and I'm without shade. Hunkered down in the cockpit I can stay mostly out of the sun and there is a breeze, about 20 mph gusting to 25 per my anemometer. No tent tonight, wind will keep the mosquitoes at bay.

Once again first light and we are off. I managed to get a text message off to Susie that I'd be a day late to Snoopys and got a reply, but no further service. Down the cut further was a fellow fishing from one of the shacks and I asked him when cell service picked up and he said at end of the cut. At the end of the cut still no service but I did look over to Yarborough Pass where I had paddled in my 2012 canoe debacle. Far different today with mild breezes in lieu of 25 gusting to 30; that was the hardest paddle I ever did.



Baffin Bay was nice, fewer pelicans than I remembered but was surrounded by a pod of 12-15 dolphins for close to two miles, was afraid to take pictures with a non water resistant phone that was my only link to outside world though still no service. The wind freshened and one reef was rolled in followed by a second an hour or so later. Still later a few whitecaps began to show and two more reefs were rolled in, the drogue did help keep the boat stabilized though still at an angle. With four reefs in we were still making 5-6 mph and I wanted to make as many miles as I could so as to make Snoopys at a reasonable time on Thursday. Finally pulled up in the lee of a spoil island at about mile marker 85 and spent the night, tented this time.

Thursday morning off again finally contacted Susie, turned out she wasn't worried, having been in this situation before. Early morning this close to civilization there's a fair bit of boat traffic. I would never consider requesting any of these fishing machines slow down so as to not shake the wind out of my sails but surely deviating your course a few yards wouldn't delay your arrival by a significant amount.

Made it to Snoopys, met Susie and Mike, had a nice lunch, with ice water (!) and got ready to pull out. Susie stayed on the pier and read while Mike drove me to Magnolia beach to pickup car and trailer. Once back to Snoopys the afternoon wind had picked up enough that I couldn't scull into it and we moved the boat to the ramp with Mike and one of the staff members at Marina pulling the boat with a 50' hank of paracord and a fender to toss cord over and/or around various pilings and boats, while I stayed in the boat and fended off same pilings and boats. Spent the night in Fulton with Susie and Mike in a motel they had used as a base while sightseeing.

Magnolia Beach one more time, got to visit with some old friends, see Capt Dan and Damon arrive in Precarious Cat and enjoy another Shrimp Boil. It was a most excellent bucket list trip.

What's next? Deferred honey do's. Susie has patiently accumulated a list of things that need attention around the house while I pursued getting QB ready for the 200.

Eventually QB will get a little fine tuning. Top of the list is a pair of reinforced ratchet assemblies for the booms and a lot of practice. Followed by making new stronger, stiffer planks to rest on the sliding alum tube beams. Current ones weighing 3# each were a quick experiment in minimalism while waiting for building material. I'll probably switch to a cable type system for rudder control; not because of the busted push rod but rather to improve the ergonomics of steering. Current setup is OK but interferes with deploying the scull and I think a rod parallel to the cockpit coaming would work better. Last on the list would be changing the 3/16" shock cord around the trailering cover to 1/4". The cover starts to lift at about 65-70 mph on the highway. Virtually all planned excursions for some time are local and we are two miles or six minutes from our regular launch ramp. Eventually QB and I might come down and start from Magnolia Beach a day or so early to be at Seadrift when the first Safari boats come in and then head South to meet the fleet. Time will tell.