

Mike Monies' Story

Two and a half days into the Texas 200 Corpus Christi Bay was showing its rough side. Chop was turned into whitecaps and my Bolger Cartopper was on the edge of disaster, as it had been so often in the high winds and waves, even with a reef tied in. When the Noble Plan went over, her tender handling simply didn't allow for any mistakes in sailing or loss of vigilant handling. We were upside down and demasted in the middle of Corpus Christi Bay.



I had left the Intercoastal Canal and hugged the leeward side of Mustang Island as much as possible, cutting through Shamrock Cove, but now I had been running almost due downwind to Stingray Hole and the wind and waves had been building. The Bolger Cartopper has no seating, so I had been on my knees for over two hours, trying to shift my weight with the sheet in my left hand, the long tiller in my right hand behind my back. By pumping the sheet, pulling it in when the boat rolled to windward and letting it out when it rolled to leeward, I had so far managed to stay somewhat upright.

The Cartopper with its narrow four foot beam and large sail area even when reefed was overwhelmed by the conditions. In the end, however, it was not the

boat that let me down. My sixty-three year old body chose just the wrong time to get a very bad charley horse in my left leg. I simply had to straighten it out and when I shifted my weight, over I went. Back at the Padre Island Yacht Club I had tied everything in the boat, but now things started to drift away. I let them go and stuck with the boat. The charley horse was still in my leg and wouldn't go away but wearing flotation gear, I was in no danger.

I managed to get the Cartopper upright one time, but the high winds and waves simply turned it over the other way. The mast had come loose from the boat despite being tied down too. I was drifting toward Stingray Hole and the boat was floating well thanks to the watertight area I had built into the floor, not part of the original plans.

At this point Carl Haddick came up in his beautiful green Compac cat boat to offer help. He had Kevin Hahn, the videographer with him and Kevin got in the water with me. After considerable effort we got the boat upright, bailed out and me back in it. They towed me back to shore right at Stingray Hole. I was tired and wet, but most of all despondent. I had lost my mast and sail, as well as an oar and sleeping tent, but losing a mast and sail does ruin your day. I did not want to drop out.

Dragging my boat around the point, I found the Bolger Folding schooner, resting and enjoying lunch, along with Kevin O'Neill and Laurent, in the lime green Proa, along with the entire flock of Puddleduckers. Carl had called the tow boat on his radio, as well as the Coast Guard. At this point the tow boat showed up and I waved out to tell him I was all right and did not want a tow. He went off looking for the lost mast and sails, but returned later with neither, having found two pieces of my take-apart oars.

By the time I walked back to the Cartopper, the Ducks had come up with a plan to fit a spare sail one of them had to a spare mast another had. The Ducks already had out a big tool box and were using an ax to shape the end of their square mast to fit in my round mast step. While I ate sausage and oranges offered by Kevin and Laurent, the Ducks rigged the poly tarp sail with a sheet hoist and downhaul, all done with electrical wireties. In no time at all, about ten minutes, I had a sort of square sail that could be raised and lowered, as well as controlled with a sheet.

The plan was for me to sail to Port Aransas and call for help. They urged me to go ahead and they would follow. I set off into the ship channel and was amazed at how well the new sail worked. With almost equal area on both sides of the mast, the Cartopper was much more stable and my speed downwind was quite

good. I determined I could sail on a beam reach but could not make progress to windward. The rest of the trip would be downwind, so I decided to keep going past Port Aransas. I turned into the Lidia Ann channel and made it to Paul's Mott Reef by 6:00 p.m.

The backpacker's hammock-tent was lost overboard, but one of my reasons for building the Cartopper was it had room to sleep onboard. I stretched out in my still wet clothes on the floorboards and slept in the boat. Since everything was wet it didn't seem much choice.

The only real trouble I had for the last two days of the trip was getting in to Army Hole.

The entrance was directly upwind. I tried for over an hour and a half to get up the channel but the temporary sail just could not do it. Since I only had one oar left, I could not row into the wind. I was about to tie up to a channel marker and sleep on the boat when Carl and Chuck came out to tow me in. Once again, saved.

When building the Cartopper, I built it as an Expedition Model, with 3/4" frames instead of the 1/4" frames called for. I glassed it inside, as well as outside and added an airtight chamber under the flat sleeping floor. The only real change I made to the plan was to make the large rudder into a 1" thick foil instead of 1/2" thick as called for in the plans. The rudder was finished with carbon and worked quite well. The extra long tiller is a custom wood tiller I made for a AMF Paceship 23 I am restoring. The extra length and strength were a plus in the long sailing periods. The two lower sections of the mast I lost came from my B & B Two Paw.

The only real problem with the boat was the lack of a place to sit. That was a real problem as it led to leg cramps. The leg cramps were what caused me to capsize and demast. I got to envying even the Ducks, who could sit on the windward side aft, just like in a chair.

This is a tender handling boat, carrying a large amount of sail for her size. She is fast, even fully reefed, but probably not the right boat for an inexperienced sailor on a long trip like the Texas 200. I viewed her as a challenge and deliberately chose her design for this trip, mainly for the camping ability of her cockpit decking, which allowed my tent to be setup on her. Bolger designed her with the idea you should put your guests on these and tow them behind your larger yacht, like so many extended bedrooms!

Singlehanding in a boat this small and requiring constant vigilance was tiring

and demanding. Going into the Texas 200 was a challenge I set myself, first to complete a boat for the event in time and second, to complete the sail itself. My greatest satisfaction was to actually finish, with the help of so many others. It made me feel a sense of achievement to realize what I was actually capable of accomplishing.

Definitely will be returning next year, but not singlehanded or in a boat this small. The Noble Plan was the smallest boat I have ever built or sailed. The Two Paw Dingy was built by John Turpin of the Tetra, so while I sail it, I didn't build it. Even my windsurfer was larger than the Cartopper! Those entering the Texas 200 for next year need to pay special attention to their boats handling in high winds and choppy seas, as well as its mechanical and physical sturdiness. Only reading this and last year's accounts points this out. Lots of demasting, equipment failure, breakage.

Another point to consider is the sailing ability of those entering this event. Both years the weather has been pretty much what you expect off the Texas coast. Hot and windy. The winds this year were higher than last, but this was no storm or unusual weather, just sailing along the Texas coast. The coast is dotted with hazards, some that move, like the ships and barges, and some that lie beneath the water, like the oyster reefs, mud flats or even rusted oilfield debris. I personally never turned my GPS on the entire trip, sailing as I always have by visual and compass points. Too much reliance on electronics can lead to accidents in these areas, as happened on this year's sail.

Having said all this, and still very bruised and scratched, as well as a bad sunburn on one leg, I wouldn't have missed any of this. The Texas 200 is a life-adventure for some of us. Others may have just had a good sail.

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