Skip Johnson's Story

It’s Monday 15 June, a week after the 2009 Texas 200 started and my butt still hurts, along with a majority of the rest of this old skeletal-muscular system. But I’d do it again at the drop of a hat, never had so much of a learning experience in one event/adventure ever.

After driving across much of Texas Saturday just to get to Port Mansfield the main boat ramp in town was fairly busy with not one but two fishing tournaments running. Once ramp settled down and P52 was rigged it was time for the first test, a light wind was blowing directly into ramp. Fortunately my new oar with a skullmatix handle and blade shaped with Tom Speer’s P30015 section skulled right off the ramp to the center of the channel, sail was raised and we were off to the County Park, using the larger semi-roller furling 105 S.F. sail. Out the channel far enough to clear the shallows, trying to get downwind was a series of falling leaf shunts followed by a damn, just drop the sail and drift in.

Since I’m not able to easily go directly downwind, and the forecast is for increasing winds during the week the decision is made to use the 48 S.F. balanced club staysail until events sort themselves out. Two nights at anchor at the County Park facing into a good chop with a long fetch is not a problem, most

everyone around agrees that P52 seems to handle the conditions better than the other boats at anchor, an advantage of long lean lightly loaded hulls.

Monday morning and we are all off, the PDR's at first light; they've a long ways to go on a very short waterline. The gods must truly look out for more than mad dogs and Englishmen, for me the PDR's invoke a lot of awe and admiration but not a scrap of envy. The anchor comes up about 7:40 AM and we head NW toward the channel skirting the shallows north of the park. Once lined up with the buoys we turn directly downwind and I flip the club boom 180 degrees holding the end of the boom down with the off (forward) mainsheet and we are off downwind without the overpowering urge to round up. Marvelous! But the only way to hold the sheet down is behind my ankle or knee, my kingdom for a snatchblock. This will not be the last time I long for a little bit of rigging or a part I don't have at hand. The rest of the day is fairly uneventful, though it is enjoyable to surf the following waves at 10-12 mph. Twice I lose concentration and run up into the shallows to windward. The second time is in the Land Cut and I run aground in the muck. Sail lowered pushing the boat out I step out of one of the new watershoes Susie gave me for this trip. Cursing myself I take the other shoe off and set it on the deck and start to push again and step right on the errant shoe. Carefully extracting the shoe from a couple of feet of muck, I promise myself to be more careful in the future. Once out of the muck I raise the staysail and the clew rips out as it's raised. We drift down the cut for a bit while I rig a new clew with some line, Gorilla tape and stitching and we are back in line down the cut to the first night's camp.

I misjudge the approach to camp and end up on the downwind side of the cut and am prepared to spend the night there but Bill in Merlin rows over a line in Twig the dinghy and I'm pulled across the cut. Thanks Bill.

Statwise we logged 38.5 miles at an average speed of 6.24 mph and recorded a maximum speed of 14.8 mph (from about a mile from the park when I turned on the GPS). As an aside, I really like my Lowrance H20C but I'll never own another GPS that doesn't append time information to track points, there's a wealth of information that's just lost and gone forever.

At camp the wind starts to die down toward sunset and I rig the tent over the cockpit and keep all but a couple of the mosquitos out.

The second day is just golden. It starts with the realization the evening before that there's an extra piece of line from the masthead that could serve as a jack line to the club boom so that there's no flailing around raising and lowering the staysail.

We are off in a parade of boats down the balance of the Land Cut in a light breeze. At 4 mph P52 ghost along hands off, a unique sensation. We stay pretty

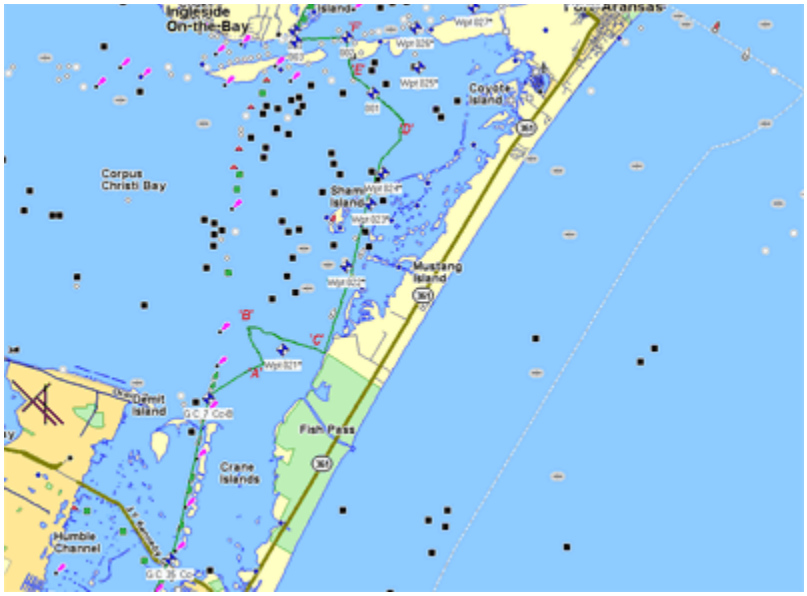
well in line with the rest of the boats except for Charlie and Laura Jones Traveler which slides by with the greatest of ease. As the breeze freshens we start sliding by other boats and by mid morning I can see sails to the horizon both ahead of and behind me. The sense of being part of something both meaningless and grand warms my heart. To reinforce the sense of well being, dolphins come out in force and there's a real high point when two dolphins surface between the hull and float virtually kissing the bottom of the pod. This apparently is a common multihull/proa phenomenon, but it's my first time.

Stats are similar to first day, we logged 33.7 miles at an average speed of 6.89 mph and recorded a maximum speed of 14.2 mph.

Second nights camp was an exercise in Super Texas hospitality. I'm not sure what the Padre Island Yacht Club gets out of the deal, but the good karma must surely last for most of the year.

In the rafting up at the yacht basin there's a lot of first in last out involved and it's after 9:00 AM before I get away and head out to the channel.

Under the causeway and up the channel we turn at buoy 7 and head toward Shamrock Island in a freshening breeze. A mile and a half or so later there's a loud 'crack' and the top 6' of my mast is being held up by the wiring to the masthead. Oops. That's point 'A' on the map. I call Chuck and Sandra who I know are behind me to see if they can tow me to the shallows at Mustang Island so I can re-rig the mast and continue. Chuck and Sandra reach me and start a tow at point 'B' and head straight to the shore at 'C'. Many thanks again, re-rigging the boat solo in open water would have been difficult at best and going swimming solo in those conditions a bit risky for this old man. Re-rigging is pretty quick; it helps to have another person to bounce ideas off. Once the mast is re-stayed with truckers hitches and a dirty reef tied in the staysail, I'm off and flying on a broad reach hoping to get at least to either Port Aransas or the Fin and Feather depending on conditions at the point of Mustang Island.



Wasn't to be, as the wind freshened even more and the seas got even bigger, I'm almost literally flying with my new shorter mast and reefed staysail, the GPS recorded a maximum speed of 20.2 mph in these conditions. I pull up at 'D' and drop the staysail to reef even more and the boat gets backwinded, main hull to windward. This is the first time P52 has ever gotten basackwards and no amount of oaring or dragging an improvised drogue seems to be able to turn the boat in these conditions. At point 'D' I decide to drift downwind and find a lee shore to hunker down behind until morning.

It's difficult to tell where I'm headed in these conditions, boat is beam on to the waves and drifting slowly but not directly downwind. After setting a waypoint and then checking drift after thirty minutes it seems I'm making about 0.8 mph. At point 'E' I put the oar in the water and find a position where we crab towards the edge of Pelican Island. Once alongside the island I start to work the oar with vengeance to get turned around and raise just enough sail to scoot into the lee of the island. Then over my shoulder a tanker going out the channel pretty well fills the horizon. The anchor is lowered with dispatch and sets immediately in about eight feet of water.

This is where we are going to spend the night. The anchor line is tied to the float beam and normally the line is then wrapped around the oar socket and the boat faces wind and waves bow on. The anchor was deployed with such dispatch that no turns were taken over the oar socket and we are now about 30 degrees off of beam to the waves, float now to windward. A waypoint is set and our location in reference to surroundings carefully noted, we are about 30 yards from the edge of the ship channel.

A few attempts were made to turn the boat bow to wind but the wind is such that the anchor line is bar tight I can't find a way to turn the boat. First things first, the

strain on the anchor line is fierce and is ultimately resisted by one #12 or #14 screw in tension in the latch at the end of the telescoping beam. A Spanish windlass over the anchor line to the base of the mast step takes some of the strain off the latch assembly. The homebrew masthead LED anchor light is taken from the broken masthead and rigged to the mast tripod, fortunately there are a couple of small jumper cables on the boat. One last prep item, the chances of ever using the larger 115 s.f. sail are pretty slim and I cut it loose from the end of the beam which unloads about 20 pounds from the float and eases the motion and stress a bit.

In these conditions, as darkness falls, new noises are not your friend. Do pelicans bark? No…the new noise is the hard rubber pads between the float and downwind beam squeaking as the lashing of 4mm Dacron loosens. I can't easily reach the outside lashing in these conditions but adrenaline helps wind some new lashing in place in the middle of the float which is then tightened with wedges cut from a wooden pencil. When more wedges are required, the ends of a cpvc batten from the abandon sail suffice. After this it is just a case of watching that the anchor doesn't drag, anchor line doesn't wear thru at the float and that everything pretty much stays together until the wind dies down.

Of course NOAA keeps extending the forecast. First the wind was going to lay before midnight but by midnight the small craft advisory had been extended until 4:00 AM. Bu 4:00 Am the wind does die down a bit, no longer the whistling monster it has been but still strong. I catch 40 winks 2 winks at a time, laying back against a couple of drybags and closing my eyes for a few seconds at a time.

As first light approaches, I plan my strategy, thinking that if I leave at first light I can get up to Rockport and across the open water before it gets too late in the day and then cross San Antonio Bay the next morning at first light. Having made a plan and setting some new waypoints I wait and contemplate how hard the anchor must be dug in. It's still pretty breezy and dragging the boat up over the anchor is going to be a chore. Then as a final gesture, another tanker comes by and floats me up directly over the anchor. The anchor comes up easily hand over hand and we are off. No other traffic in the channel it is a straight shot to the mouth of the cut, things are looking up. I sail down to marker 32, find the cut and shunt. Without a jackline on the club the sail flogs a bit on the shunt and tears out the unreinforced reefed clew. I'm done. No more gorilla tape on board, the idea of crossing two stretches of open water solo, unsupported is beyond me. Still hurts, but it was the right decision. We go ahead and mosey up the channel to the public ramp at Aransas Pass and return to the landborne.

Lessons learned? Many. Solo sucks, in a lot of respects, but it's a great way to find your limits without endangering others. Reef points are a little like clamps,

hard to have too many. I'm still learning how little it takes to power a proa under sail. Hitting 12-14 mph regularly with 48 S.F. of polytarp sail is still hard to believe, never mind the 20+ mph on less area on a shorter mast. Always have a lanyard on your oar. Spare parts are a treasure. Telltales tell true tales. Small boat sailors are nice people, some of the smallest carry the nicest and toughest. And so on and on, I'll be digesting and cherishing the experience for quite a while.

What's next? A new mast obviously, once I've analyzed the failure some more. It appears the mast went out of column at a third point of its unsupported length, but still not sure why. The relatively wide staying base means relatively low stresses, should not have happened. Before the mast break, agenda items were, new oar, relocate oarlocks, extra sheave on mast, new sail with many reef points and a lazyjack system, improved anchoring techniques, better trailering cover and reskinning the float with a layer of foam and fiberglass to increase buoyancy and improve hydrodynamics. Events after mast breakage put some more emphasis on anchoring along with the need to investigate drogues/sea anchors (in a more controlled environment).

The float needs more buoyancy in part because its lateral profile was sized for leeway resistance for a 150+ S.F. sail system. The proa gods have probably quit rolling around on the floor over that item but are probably still wiping the tears from their eyes. The other thing about the float is the great probability that Tom Speers Proa section P30015 should improve lift/drag characteristics and handling. The P30015 section transformed the oar in sculling mode and worked well as a rudder but it needs more area and the geometry improved to reflect the 3D realities of the Laguna Madre rather than the flat screen of a computer monitor.

Changes will take some time even to start since there's the rest of life to spend some time on but it's been a memorable, educational adventure.