

Performance Boat Sales Shorthanded Ocean Races. (or Weather Bureau gets it right- as usual.)

Up until about 2000 I felt the boffins at the Weather Bureau were so inept at weather predictions that "They should pull their heads out of their bums and have a look out the window. They couldn't predict what side of the sky the sun would rise in." But these last few years I now vehemently defend the BOM. Sure, they get it wrong occasionally in a quirky emerging weather system, but very rarely I reckon, and gee they get it spot on most of the time. Last weekend is a good example:

Having missed the last Shorthanded Sailing Association's (SSAA) race I was itching to do another ocean race. Mind you, looking at the times for that previous race, The Polar Challenge which is from Balmoral out to a longitude and return, made me think that I only missed an exercise in severe frustration. Very competent boats including a Farr 40 and a Sydney 32 taking between 7 and 9 hours for a 17-mile race. Are you guys n' girls nuts!?? I bet you were after that. Under a 2 knot average speed. That made the painfully slow Newcastle race's average, held a few weeks ago, of around 4 knots look exhilarating.

It seems like nearly every weekend this winter a high pressure system has landed right on top of Sydney resulting in zero air flow. On the other hand, the long range forecast for strong to gale force winds being predicted in the lead up for last weekend's 2-legged Pittwater/Sydney, Sydney/Pittwater races was not very encouraging. I don't really mind getting cold, wet and tossed about but damaging gear and wearing out sails and other equipment is a bit disheartening. It's hard to get motivated to head out into rough conditions.

Since the chances of going off shore seemed unlikely I encouraged my co-sailor to return to his usual Saturday inshore trimaran gig from where I was "stealing" him. That made me feel better. He would get to sail, as would his usual trimaran skipper and I could pull the pin from the SSAA races if the weather was too foul and I wouldn't feel like I'd let anyone down. Problem was as the weekend approached the weather forecasts were downgrading the predicted wind and if I'd decided not to sail and the weather wasn't all that bad I'd feel like I'd cheated myself out of a couple of good races. What's more, this year for the first time, race 1 started from Pittwater and race 2 finished back at Pittwater so for Pittwater boats such as Big Bird this meant 2 less trips up and down the coast. Oh, the pressure.

I like sailing solo and although I haven't got an auto helm by cleating the helm and wobbling all over the ocean kites can go up and down, reefs can be taken in and out, and jibs can be changed without too much problem. I do make sure I'm harnessed on when going for an excursion forward and I wear a lifejacket (sorry, PFD) too. Normally carry a phone or VHF on my person too but didn't last weekend for some reason. I sometimes wear a helmet too when on my own- but didn't. I suppose having that stuff and a bit of water and nourishment and an easy to reach knife (if getting dragged along by your harness or a rope) on your person makes sense. I've decided that foam PFD's are safer than inflatable ones. It's too easy to knock yourself out on the way into the water. A boom, a deck, a clew- can all knock you out and into the water. Auto inflating? nah. Take one wave while your fiddling around up the front and you've turned into the "Michelin Man". One thing I love about going solo apart from the challenge is you can have the music up nice and loud yet the VHF is still audible.

Saturday morning, woke up at 5 am for latest BOM weather check; "Saturday, winds S/SW 15 -20 knots, tending S/SE, easing later, 2.5 m sea. Good enough. Big brekky and off to load up the boat with stuff. If ever my boat sinks, difficult with no lead, I reckon it will be because of the mountain of safety gear we have to put on board. (The life ring for a solo boat is a funny idea. If you fell over board you'd have to climb back on board so you can chuck the life ring to yourself! or something).

Anyway, there's no morning rush as the start has been put back 2 hours to let the earlier predicted 25 -35 knots ease a bit and allow the Sydney boats a bit more time to get up there.

As the RMYC inshore cats 'n tris go whizzing past we (9 SSAA boats) start in a nice little sou'wester off Mackerel Beach, head nor'east for a mile, round Barrenjoey Headland and head off to the Port Jackson (Sydney) finish line about 18 miles to the south. Boy, there are some keen energetic people sailing! Plenty of boats pop spinnakers for the short down hill start, including the other solo boat(s) such as the modified Adams 10 "Torquil". Full marks for enthusiasm but we all park for 10 minutes in the wind shadow under Barrenjoey and, surprise surprise, the boats furthest away from the Headland get the new breeze first and head out to sea. I think I was one of the closest in. Brilliant!

With the No.1 genoa and all the mainsail set I was expecting not to have to do sail changes as the wind decreased. As it turned out it was a constant 14- 18 knots (according to Seabreeze's North Head wind instrument) for the 3 hours required to finish and with some pretty solid waves marching up from the south Big Bird was well loaded up. Despite occasionally free falling into the troughs, the leeward float under water more often than not, the deck under the genoa track and the sheets groaning under the strain when burying the bows into an oncoming wave and constantly thinking I should maybe change down a bit I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was having a bloody good time. Initially, on seeing so many sheep in the paddock I wanted to run back into Pittwater, then I reasoned I could first reduce sail and see how things went. "Give it 10 minutes and then see how it is." I tell myself. It was close racing at first, and when I was a little way in front of the next 2 boats I tacked to go inshore. Well, I fluffed the tack, rounded up, was swept backwards in the swell and made a total twat of myself. Fortunately, those 2 nearby yachts were able to avoid me.

Another fluffed tack off the towering cliffs of Bungan Head and I was ready to sack the crew. "Keep the tacks to a minimum" were my new tactics. All but one of the other boats headed out to sea. My guess was that they were after the southerly current that had been running up to 2 knots and to get on the right side of any easting of the breeze.

Yet, I figured that the southerly breeze still had the slightest bit of west in it and therefore the water should be smoother close in. After 2 big tacks to get to Narrabeen (the crew work had improved slightly by then) which is about half race distance, it appeared that the wind was going to come in more from the S/SE. Time to head out. There was definitely more chop off shore but as uncomfortable as the starboard tack was I was determined to keep going until my next tack would clear North Head. Meanwhile, the off shore boats had tacked back and we crossed a few miles off Long Reef with them heading in and me heading out. I figured there wasn't much in it. A fluffed tack, a slight swing back to the S/SW to give them an advantage, a broken sheet or a tear in the sail and they'd be all over

me like a rash. It was definitely “game on”. The wind strength came back up a bit; it was a solid 15-18 knots. I so wanted to tack back in but it was important to clear north Head and to stay away from the dreadful back wash that comes off those cliffs, especially when the swell is southeasterly. I didn’t want to pinch and I didn’t want to do more tacks. At last I figured I could tack, and the breeze had appeared to have moved a few degrees to the S/SE. 3 hours after the start we sailed through the heads at 12-14 knots with the new weird rudder blade humming away and the sun still well up in the sky and, so, all was good. I was so pleased with Big Bird. That was pretty tough on a 30 foot trailerable trimaran, I thought. I reckon there must put a lot of strain on its structure, yet it seems to keep handling those moderate conditions quite well. Heavy conditions could be another matter.

After pizza’s and beer in Manly with family for dinner, a nice sleep on board just a few feet from the beach, I was ready for race 2; Grotto Point to Pittwater. First I popped home to feed the pussy and check the weather. “WNW 10-15, tending NE.” Linked up for breakfast at Balmoral with Windsurfing and champion B-14 sailors, Lisa and Richie, who would sail with me in race 2. They’re great sailors and good fun and I was more than happy to take the penalty of 7.5% added to one’s time which is applied to crews of 3. By the way, Nigel-No-Friends who go on their ‘Pat Malone’, as in ‘Hans Solo’ from Star Wars (is that ‘Short-Hand’s Solo’?), get a discount on their times.

So, at 10 am we started with kite up in a 10 -12 knot westerly, a really beautiful morning! Out the Heads, chuck a left, off we go. Doing 7-12 knots we took about 1 hour to Long Reef but then we parked in no breeze. The other boats caught up and passed us in shore. The weather forecast had predicted a nor’easter to fill in and so we sailed slowly (drifted!) out to sea. Finally, the seabreeze started to fill our sails. But the breeze was ever so slightly east of NE and maybe the inshore yachts wouldn’t have to tack out. “this could be a really close race”. Finally, they conceded and had to tack out and we were able to slip into Pittwater on one tack. And what a gorgeous afternoon for a shy run all the way down Pittwater back to the mooring!

Once again, relying on BOM for accurate weather predictions had given us a vital tactical leg up. It’s happened before, it will happen again..They warn me when the weather will go to porridge and help me make good tactical decisions. I’m more than happy for my taxes to go to a useful service such as BOM.

Stephen Barton
Big Bird