

The thing with WeekEnd SOL races is that you never quite know what you are going to get. Sometimes they take the best part of a week. Our very own version of last year's Middle Sea Race springs to mind: 588nm in a 40ft production monohull! We classed it a weekender, but called it the Valetta Sprint. Starting at 09:00 on a Saturday morning, the first boats didn't get back to the line till Tuesday evening, half way into the next working week! That said, those types of WeekEnd and Week races of 3 or 4 days and up to a week duration, I confess to liking the best. They require a certain amount of stamina, need the use of a router for ideas but not for uploads, a full understanding of your boat's polar including 'hopping' angles (the Frers doesn't have any), and the ability to read the wind as you find it, and good cornering skills of course.

How as ever, the Lake Erie Round the Islands Race was never going to be a Week race in disguise. No, it was always going to be a Sprint – well... a m a r a t h o n s p r i n t – and so it was that in a 5kn Easterly, a group of us got round the zig-zags round Kelleys and Pelee Island and the Bass group to the finish just off the sailing club on South Bass, in slightly less than ten and a half hours. If it had blown 20kn out of the South West, our Frers 33s (which, btw as Captain Jack remarked, reach faster than the wind in 4kn of breeze!) would have taken just five hours from Start to Finish, almost as long as ITV's full FA Cup Final presentation, that some of us were following avidly simultaneously.

More is over, in those ten and a half hours (well, 10:16:56 to be precise), I, sailing bonknhoot, managed to take 1 second out of Neuroman for my first ever SOL first place. Wow!

So how did it go down?

At the gun, leaving the Moseley Channel, our predictor lines showed that the wind was going to lift as we headed North, slightly initially, and more severely later on. There was a tad more wind (a few 0.01kn) to the right, and obviously freeing off a little was going to give you better VMC to the first mark into that ever slightly stronger breeze, and you would be able to recover height later as the wind freed. So a lot of us sailed a shallow arc over East. I overdid it, but still got to the turn at Kelleys Island Shoal in or around the Top 10.

A round-and-tack was going to have to be the first manoeuvre. As I always do, I set a DC to execute it, and revised the execution time as I approached, copy-and-pasting BrainAid's navigation data into a little spreadsheet to re-estimate my ETA regularly. I'm not good at counting out-loud. I don't think anybody tacked earlier than bonknhoot. A short hitch and I tacked back onto port. I had overstood by 1 degree. Not too bad.

Two longish reaches now followed punctuated by a shallow turn at Mill Point. The wind was still freeing, so again we all sailed mild arcs over East. I can't remember exactly, but I think I underdid it this time on the first leg to Mill Point, and then overdid it along the eastern coast of Pelee. Typical cyclical investor behaviour!

The tactically most challenging part of the race was next: a 10nm beat from the SOL mark off Lighthouse Point to the North Bass Island Buoy. The wind was still lifting on port tack, but slightly less than half way across was going to reverse into a header. Neuroman read it best and almost immediately tacked onto starboard into and along the north coast of Pelee, together with two of his compatriots, Scara and Picter. This Italian fleet then put in one or two short tacks along the coast keeping them more to the inside of the curve than bonknhoot, as I had decided wrongly that the performance loss would be bigger than the distance gain and had set a DC to clear Sheridan Point in one tack and taken a short break for dinner.

All was not lost, and the next critical question was when to cross over from the South side of the beat to the North, to get inside the lift over there for the second part of the leg. Bonk played that better. Nevertheless, at the North Bass Buoy, Neuroman led. For the first time during the race, the gaps between the leaders were in excess of a few 0.01nms and bonknhoot, just outside the Top 3, had work to do, so I tacked immediately. Most everybody else carried on. I tacked back almost exactly on the lay to the corner.

It was now all boat handling to get around the corners of North Bass, followed by a short run to the mark East of Middle Bass. I recall managing to pull back some distance on that run, by sailing fractions of a degree deeper than others including Neuroman, and bonk was a 'solid' second to Neuroman as we dropped spinnakers and headed up onto the reach down to the Ballast Island Light. I write 'solid'; however, the gaps between the leaders were back to only 0.01 or 0.02nm, and the Brazilian Zero, winner of the recent Santa Monica 1000nm'r round the Canaries, was now also in the hunt.

Two more manoeuvres punctuating either end of a short beat and reading the line were the remaining opportunities for winning it. I rounded the Light smoothly, recovered my performance loss and tacked. Once again, nearly everybody else, this time including Neuroman sailed on. I tacked back onto the lift on starboard. I was a bit early and would have to tack again, sail 21 seconds and then bear off around the Put-In-Bay mark onto a COG of 23 degrees for max VMC to the Finish. Easy IRL, but tricky in SOL. Contrariwise, the closer you are to a mark in SOL the more difficult it is to time your tack or gybe right; IRL it's the other way around. But, hey, I was in the lead. Just.

It didn't go well. I rounded wide and the tack followed by a sharp bear-off dropped bonk's performance to 94%. Klyvarn had come into the reckoning as well. I was back into 2nd and hailed Neuroman a well done. But it still wasn't over. Neuroman sailed the shortest course to the line, Klyvarn went for the western end for max boat speed. My 23 degrees in between proved a superior selection and that was that. 1 second. What a game this is! Thank you SOL.

/bonknhoot