

Leaving Tokio

You may talk of Columbus asailing
Across the Atlantical Sea
But he never tried to go sailing
From TokjoEnnis as far as CalifornKilkee

Percy French, 1902

SOL introduced a new boat (well at least for me) for this 4500 miler across the Pacific: a 60ft trimaran. A typical multihull, the Tri60 doesn't point (except in a narrow range around 6kn windspeed when it can be pinched up to 43° or even slightly higher), goes like the blue blazes on a broad reach once windspeeds hit double digits, and slows down just a little in a proper (code orange) breeze. There are also some small dips in the curves here and there to hop over.

Twenty four hours prior to the start, quite a debate developed about the position of the departure point well inside Tokyo Bay at 16:00 local time, when all of North America was going to be fast asleep. This wasn't what was agreed for the Ocean Championships Series towards which this race was going to count. Not cricket; not even baseball. Oh well, it was too late to do anything about it, so we were off.

The wind was blowing from SSE at c 6kn, almost exactly that wind strength the Tri60 can point perversely high in. The big kahunas all set off on port tack with sheets slightly eased into a header. I followed the crowd, sailing c 6° low initially and only hitting max VMG TWA just as or just after it became time to tack. I wasn't alone, but slightly higher would have been better, in part because this would have held you up in the slightly (0.2kn or 0.3kn) stronger breeze.

Three tacks later and I was into a bigger lift than anticipated, easily clearing the Boso headland, and just a bunch of early tacking Fins – Dana1, hmm, Kaitsu, StIngFI – were maybe going to be ahead at the first major decision point: to head south east to catch a storm, or head north east along the great circle!? Then, surprisingly a further bunch including Outlaw and Neuroman, who had seriously overstood, came bombing in at the last minute on TWAs of 60° plus to take the early lead, with bonknhoot possibly rounding 10th dead-headed with Dana1 and Dingo.

All the forecasts had so far routed south east, always first trying north east for three or four days and then getting stuck in blue goo. Moreover, before the start, psail, who has an eye for these things, had said to me: it's going to be about getting across to the right (southern) side of that storm in the West of and about getting through the stationery High off California.

So... I fed CC 143.8° into the commander, rounded the point Sprint-style close and noted to my satisfaction that Outlaw was leading the same way. Two days later a bunch of us had worked our way South to just above the 30th parallel. It had been hard work with some holding a bit more North (well less South) at c 90° TWA for a bit more pressure in a slowly heading 4kn to 5kn breeze, and a few, amongst them psail, going for broke on c 70° TWA and almost negative VMC. I kept a bit higher than most, but not extremely so, then tried to soak down over the bunch below. Soaking proved wasteful as the Tuesday 10:30 WX made it clear we had to get South, and we all tightened sheets.

As the next WX approached our group hit close-hauled and one-by-one we tacked onto CCs of between 220° and 200° for some seriously negative VMC. The right thing here was to sail as free and fast as you dared (i.e. at 50° to 55°TWA) going backwards to get out of the blue. However, I

stubbornly held height giving away up to half an hour on the likes of Neuroman, Outlaw, DikkeHenk, etc, etc. Bad unnecessary error.

Night was now upon us and we were about as far away from home as we had been two days earlier in Tokio! Timing the tack back onto a western course was the next challenge; also at what point were you going to be close-hauled again and what would be the right TWA at that point? There was nothing for it other than to rely on qtVIm, set a DC as well as a 04:30 alarm to just see what the new WX would bring. Nature called me at 03:00 and I thought I might as well sneak a peak. One or two had already gybed and it looked promising to follow suit, while the kahunas, hooked to their router downloads, carried on. DikkeHenk was with me. Was it too early? We were 2kn slower than the guys who had gone further South, but speed was building as the wind freed. But psail, furthest South, had a jump on everybody.

400nm Days

This time tomorrow where will we be?
On a SOLspaceeship somewhere
sailing across the Pacifican empty Sea
This time tomorrow what will we know
~~Will we still be here watching~~
~~an in-flight movie show~~
Will it be the Frisco Ortho is not the way to go?

Ray Davies, 1970

Thank you for the days,
Those endless days,
Those sacred days
SOLyou gave me.
I'm thinking of the days,
I won't forget a single day,
believe me.

Ray Davies, 1968

I'm sure all of us who had gone South were feeling just a little elated. There was a lot of chat and two days sailing later we had all made up the c 400nm that we had lost on the Northerners. Because Dikke and I were early gybers we were some of the most northern of that group, which gave us P1 and P2 on the basis of DTF. The ride continued and continued as the centre of the depression to the North, that we were surfing on top (or should that be bottom?) of, moved with us in a generally ENE direction.

In high-ish 20kn to 24kn windspeeds, the Tri60 has a curious speed bump at 130° TWA, which calculations suggest makes it marginally advantageous to snake between c 113° TWA and c 123° TWA. Since the router was consistently tending towards 118° TWA (or slightly tighter) in order to keep a bit more south of the centre and hence in the long run more freed, I tried to use this polar knowledge to break free. The predictor line ahead was wavy, so when the waves went up I went down, and when the waves went down I went up. The net result was that it kept me more to the north of our group than most, and hence (on a DTF basis) close to the lead. However, every now and then a new WX generated a strong keep South (where the wind was freer if perhaps slightly softer) advice from qtVIm, and reluctantly I would correct.

Gybing North

Whether it was simply because if you were further South, qT said keep South and hold that stronger breeze, but if you were further North, like Dikke and I and Patrick70119 from South Africa, it said head North so that (much) later you could come up as the wind freed, God only knows, but after four or five days out, our whole southern group split again, with the majority holding South and a few of us heading North.

The New Southerners started to pull away and by Saturday morning bonk had fallen back to P92, more than 100nm behind the southern leaders. It wasn't that we were a platoon of heroes, there simply was no option: any attempt to get back in touch would simply be a decision to loose. Then some strange things started to happen. One New Southerner after another gybed to come North and twelve hours later bonk was back in contention in a leading group still together with Dikke, with ghibli from Italy in the lead and Dingo inexorably closing, and Kroppyer and psail also in the mix, all on starboard gybe generally heading East, but still all putting in more southing, to there where the parallels get longer and longer.

It was now Monday afternoon of the 25th, we had been at sea for 9 days, and qT on chewing through another WX once more proposed go North, by means of a gybe at an ungodly hour. As that huge bank of high pressure was still sitting in front of California, it didn't seem a bad idea, although there was a long finger of stronger wind blowing in the general direction of SF and nearly getting round the southern extremity of the blue goo.

Determined not to miss a trick, I set another alarm, and once again was awake before it went off. I waited for the first gybers. kroppyer went, DikkeHenk, Rumskib as well. I followed suit just behind and to leeward, and went back to bed. Back in the cockpit a few hours later, I was surprised to see the four of us out on a limb, shedding places rapidly. The rest had all carried on, were in more wind and were sailing more in the direction of SF!

Sure enough, the next WX generated a gybe back advice, and once again this was an option to consolidate a loss. Rumskib went with it, and so did Dikke, but kroppyer and I carried on. Having learnt in the chat that kroppyer applies his own interpolation to the basic $2^0 \times 2^0$ gribbs that we obtain from BrainAid, instead of relying on the proven unreliable (particularly below 12kn) internal interpolations of qtVIm, I was hoping he knew what he was doing. Later it transpired that for him too, necessity was the mother of invention.

Information is not knowledge.

Knowledge is not wisdom.

Wisdom is not truth.

Truth is not beauty.

Beauty is not love.

Love is not SOLmusic.

SOLmusic is THE BEST.

Frank Zappa, 1979

The Wednesday morning WX showed a big lift to gybe on would hit the two of us at around 07:30 UTC. No, the three of us; psail had turned to follow us an hour or two later, which had been a further encouraging sign that the cause of the North was not hopeless. But psail had already gone and that seemed too early. I programed in a DC to gybe onto $c 95^0$ CC, which was going to be the GC course to SF and equivalent to about 137^0 TWA, the max VMG downwind angle. The turning wind would do the rest and hot bonk up as she progressed towards the finish, now only 1000nm away.

I had a medical appointment and was going to be off watch. But unattended, the timed gybe might be later than the one kroppyer, to windward and ahead, was planning. Time to call a friend, so psail's Joao kept an eye, and when I got back to my screen later that morning, kropp and I had both gybed and he was positioned to leeward and behind in 1kn more breeze ($c 13kn$ vs $c 12kn$) that was

set to move from 137° behind to 80° ahead and might conceivably turn into a fetch into the coast and a tack once closer to shore. We were lying in the mid 60s with kropp c 5nm behind bonk and both of us c 100nm behind the leaders.

Soaking South

24 hours later, kropp and bonk had a jump of 15nm on the best of the rest, with bonk's lead on kropp reduced to 3nm. With a 25kn system pressing in from the West and a more stationery 25kn system due North of us, the High in front of California was steadily moving in towards the land, so that instead of heading and reducing, the breeze local to our exclusive little group was slowly building and lifting us in the general direction of SF. kroppy, still to leeward of bonk, had better pressure as he was closer to the stronger winds to the North but was sailing the outside of the curve, so that the delta VMC advantage was less than 0.2kn on speeds approaching 20kn (i.e. 1%). Nevertheless, if that delta were to persist, then 40 hours of sailing later, kroppyer was going to be ahead by 8nm less 3nm would be 5nm, approaching SF.

At c 09:00 that morning, kropp put in a course of 107.5°, which for the first time was above the GC course to SF which had grown from 103° or so to 107.2°. His reasons were probably that qT had that morning routed the course as even higher (e.g. c 110°), and that the pack of erstwhile leaders, inter alia comprising ghibli, psail (who had been with us but had gybed earlier), Ricotina, Dingo and Outlaw, were starting to build some speed, but only by sailing deep into what was after all a lifting breeze... I thought! I compromised by settling on a course CC 2° lower than kroppy's, giving me essentially the same boatspeed, but taking me slowly across his bow to dead ahead and beyond.

We were 800nm from Frisco, and we were starting to match race! kropp sailed well, and after having held more of the breeze on the outside of the curve, next found a wider angle on the inside. We extended our lead on the bunch to 20nm. Was this going to be it? Of course not! Suddenly the bunch started to come back with a delta of 1.5kn to 2kn or 10%, as the system behind us in the East started to march more rapidly land inwards. I luffed sharply to cross kropp's bow and kropp went with me to cover the bunch. JoeBannon from Spain was watching and enjoying us and quipped if we kept it up, ghibli would win.

With less than 300nm to go, things were more tighter than ever; psail was also still in the hunt, and ghibli, who had led at various times during the race, had done very well despite not participating in our little jaunt North. As we constantly battled with ourselves and each other, hung between freeing off onto a more direct course to SF and keeping out to sea for more wind and better angles, the breeze, after having fallen away earlier, slowly but surely came back up as the High was pressed more and more into shore. Soon we were doing 20kn again in 12kn to 13kn, absolutely flying, but almost due South.

As we thundered on, our predictor lines were showing the wind would lift in 5hr to 6hr time and invite us to gybe for Frisco, so staying high in the stronger breeze on the inside of that impending curve made sense. But it was a long way away and the IRL Tri60 must have a big blooper of an assymetric that you can pop when you free off onto 120° (or not!); either way when the wind goes to 12kn and beyond there's a 1.5kn bump in the polar at 120° available. And at 120° TWA you were going to be heading straight for Frisco. psail was the first to try it, and I went with him; kroppyer and ghibli stayed hot.

Amazingly, headed down those 20°, the predictor line straightened out. No curve out to sea, just a few wobbles left and right. We were taking 1.5nm DTF out of kropplier and ghibli every hour, and it wasn't long before psail and I went P1 and P2. kropplier and ghibli kept their faith and during the night wandered 15nm out to the West, where they were clearly heading into the bend and had more wind. Perversely, having hedged my bets just a little, psail further into shore was in more breeze as well. Clearly, I was in some sort of transition zone. Keeping the virtual blooper up, I started to work back out towards the western pair, little by little, shedding VMC to psail who carried on in the general direction of SF.

Gybing Home

Let's go let's go to San Francisco
Where the flowers grow
So very high
Sunshine sunshine in San Francisco
Sunshine in San Francisco
Makes your mind grow up to the sky.
Lots of sunny SOL-ly people
Let's go let's go to San Francisco
Let the wind blow right through your hair

The Flowerpot Men (loosely), 1967

I had got up beside my two targets on roughly the same longitude but perhaps 8nm further in to shore on the outside of the curve, when the bend started in earnest. It wasn't exactly cover but it was enough; the wind bent, they gybed, perhaps a little late for safety, and I gybed bonk inside them. It was now a drag race into SF.

ghibli said he was going to bed and had set a set of DCs to take him all the way in. Brave! I wasn't going to risk that. And not just brave, but brilliant as well, as ghibli first sailed fractionally higher to find some better breeze and then lower for ditto, finally keeping low in order to point up to the Finish, since for the first time over the fortnight (as far as bonk was concerned anyway), the wind was going to drop below 6kn and we'd need a tight angle as we came in. kropplier also retired to bed and claimed he set a constant TWA DC all the way to the line!

I watched them, and kept an eye on psail's autopilot, as its marinero had knocked off for weekend duties. I was alone, no chat, nada. Finally at c 03:30 UTC I judged it safe to go to bed, and left a simple CC stand to take bonk across the Finish. CC predictor lines don't wiggle, this we know!

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