

Race 740: North West Passage Choices

A coastal race of well over 1000 miles meant this would be a demanding race, because the boat requires substantially more attention than an ocean race.

My first idea of the fastest route was to go North to North-West from the start in Foxe Basin through the Gulf of Boothia and Prince Regent Inlet to about 74°, then turn West through Barrow Strait and Viscount Melville Sound and finally South-West through the Prince of Wales Strait around Victoria Island to the finish.

After zooming in on the course I discovered Bellot Strait at 72° North. That is an obvious short cut. So the major decision to be made was whether to leave Victoria Island to port or to starboard. The northern route from Bellot Strait through the M'Clintock Channel, Goldsmith Channel and Prince of Wales Strait with Victoria Island to port looked longer to me than the southern route through Victoria Strait. But that may be due to the appreciable distortion on a Mercator map at these latitudes, because the southern route turned out to be about 35 nautical miles longer than the northern route. Zooming in on the course revealed many more small islands along the southern route. Except for the narrow channels the northern route looked much more DC friendly to me.

The race started Sunday 2014-10-19 at 22:00 UT in a nice 20 knots southerly breeze as a broad reach. Because there is a small dent in the Finngulf 43polar I did a few polar jumps from about 146° TWA to 164° TWA and back. Maybe that helped to put my boat into the front row, because the boats around me seemed to follow a more direct course. During the next day the wind backed substantially and when the fleet reached the Melville Peninsula we were on a beat towards the Labrador Narrows. There the first choices had to be made of how to negotiate the various small and not so small islands.

Monday evening the wind was increasing from around 6 knots to 16 knots with a corresponding decrease in target TWA. Because of this and the rather confined waters in the approaches to Labrador narrows I did not dare to rely on DCs, so I spent most of the night from Monday to Tuesday handsteering.

Tuesday saw a close reach across the Gulf of Boothia. A substantial veer of the wind direction required short tacks up the coast of the Boothia Peninsula towards the Bellot Strait. So far the course I had been following was rather straightforward. Upon leaving Bellot Strait the decision had to be made whether to leave Victoria Island to port or to starboard. My routing software predicted an advantage for the southerly route through Victoria Strait with every WX from Wednesday the 22 of somewhere between 1 and 15 hours. The reason was a high pressure system over Victoria Island with NW winds in the North and SE winds in the south. So when I left Bellot Strait late Wednesday night I set the boat on a straight SW course (to get some sleep) through the Tasmania Islands towards Victoria Strait, although I liked the northern route more.

The 0430 WX on Thursday, the 23rd brought a change. From my position the northern route through Prince of Wales Strait was predicted to be faster by one hour and 20 minutes. That was not enough to change my plan, but the next WX at 1030 was worse. Now the advantage of the northern route was predicted to be more than 12 hours. Because I was leading almost the entire fleet towards the SW I did not dare to change my course to NW. If I did, I expected a few others to do the same. That would put them in a much better position, because I had been going in the wrong direction for too long. NED_Arthur, simonf and Jepsom were obviously following a different strategy, and that was a major concern for me. The 1630 WX brought no relief. Although from my position the northerly route was 100 miles longer, it was predicted to be 8 hours 40 minutes faster.

I kept saying to myself that every time you change your strategy, you lose, but I was not really happy.

With the 2230 WX the northern route was 150 miles longer, but the router said it was still an hour faster. The reason was an extended period of no wind 100 miles before the finish. But at that time I was committed and kept following the southern route.

Friday night I hit the beach for the first time when a bad DC fired, but I noticed early enough to keep my lead over Hirilonde and sassy. The next incident was Saturday morning. I had gotten up to check the 0430 WX, but fell asleep before setting the new course. I had planned to slip between Victoria Island and Edinburgh Island based on the previous WX, but now there was no time to reconsider. I am not sure, whether that was a good decision, but eventually I was able to maintain a slight lead over Hirilonde.

After rounding the SW cape of Victoria Island 190 miles from the finish Saturday afternoon around 14:30 a close hauled course was set towards the North with the intention to tack West later that night. That is when I committed my largest mistake. I went out to dinner without setting a safety DC for the tack. I came back late (what a surprise) to find the boat beached at a place called James Island. Hirilonde had gained the lead, but because I had a slightly better wind angle I could keep a marginal lead over sassy.

Sunday and Monday saw very weak winds, as predicted a few days earlier. The three lead boats separated, with Hirilonde in the West, sassy in the East and my boat in between. Because of the separation and the uncertainty between one WX and the next the race was pretty much open. I was content with my middle position, because I think the odds of getting it right are better than committing early to one side or the other. But basically we were at the mercy of the wind gods.

The 10:30 WX Monday morning brought the decision.

Although sassy had a better wind angle I was able to finish first at 17:17 after 7 days and 19 hours with sassy second and Hirilonde third. As expected it was a demanding race, but I enjoyed to visit a region of the earth that I had not been to before.

Thanks everyone for racing.

rumskib / October 2014