

Sleepless in Seattle

First let me preface my remarks by stating that while devoid of any sailing experience I have been a fan ever since the America's Cup first appeared on the covers of Sports Illustrated in the 60's. Also my participation here is fueled by just the basic information provided by the Dashboard of the browser client, Brainaid's detailed CSV & AGages's Wx Inspection tool. I am a dedicated Soloist in these waters and have come from the novice ranks some 5 years ago in my unceremonious debut by placing 578 out of 799 who finished the Oct 2009 Plymouth to Boston Transat (1028 boats entered.) So I have been around the block more than a few times since then but only because of the encouragement and helpful advice I received from day one. This blog post therefore is as much for anyone newly arrived or new to the sport to say this is indeed possible & I am more than willing to help you get there too.

In general I prefer to run the course prior to race start to familiarize myself with the upcoming event and take note of any angles soon to be encountered. This time was an exception due to races I was already involved with which resulted in me tackling Pacific NW Inshore on the fly as it were. Getting underway was a simple matter of setting a straight course to the first headland to be cleared & watching as the fleet deployed in earnest. My start was unremarkable but at least functional. In the second hour after leaving Seattle I found myself heading north more or less centered in the Puget Sound and just settling in for which unbeknownst to me was to become an epic voyage.

I would be remiss at this point if I did not mention the expanded weather modeling installed for only the second time that would play a major role in affecting the navigational dilemmas laying in wait to confound the author. In the first instance of its unveiling a week ago out of Boston wind was found in abundance but that was not to be case this time around.

Jepsom made the first bold move by choosing the interior passage leading to Skagit Bay perhaps not so much for the better wind in evidence but also due to the fact the forecast for the more nominal route was rather indifferent. One HD-Wx update latter however conditions improved considerably as funneling effects appeared in both locations. The fact that Jepsom took this in stride sailing extra distance and yet brought his boat home in 5th place speaks volumes for his innate ability to perform well under duress.

Upon rounding Port Townsend & crossing the Strait of Juan de Fuca I inexplicably found myself lying in 3rd place, a fortuitous circumstance to be sure. Please forgive the scant details for this portion as I am at a loss to recall anything other than what must have been a gradual series of improvements along the way. It would surprise no one that bonknhoot & javakeda were leading this or any other race. I was tracking more closely to the latter's path perhaps because he is a fellow countryman whom I hold in high esteem. That being said bonknhoot is no less his equal as I was soon to find out. The former gybed first & somewhat early I thought comfortable with my chosen traveling companion. We followed suit upon nearing Lopez Island and then quite unexpectedly a navigator of Titanic proportions ran aground on Iceberg Point. To my chagrin I had been racing against a boat going on DCs and faring none too well at that. Meanwhile bonknhoot was unabated on his way to Whale Watch Park as I was partaking of that most familiar SOL condiment ~ Ketchup.

What followed was several hours of a more processional nature and my angle to the mark was not so bad after all, such that I was able to consolidate my placement relative to rest of the fleet. Roche Harbor was next to be rounded then unto the southern side of Shaw Island en route to surmounting the northern tip of Lopez Island. It was during this phase which was much less demanding that my mind started drifting propelled somewhat by my insistence to stay awake without respite. While watching a parade of commercials for the upcoming Oscars I started preparing my I'd like to thank the Academy speech. Such flights of delusions came to a crashing halt when I committed a bonehead blunder of classic proportions. In the face of an impending wind shift I ran the gap between Spencer Spit and Frost Island. My tacking angle deteriorating by the minute I was in a state of denial and delayed the inevitable penalty making a bad situation worse. Such a gauche maneuver brought the next echelon of the fleet into play like a pack of hounds running their prey to ground I was cornered with no one to blame but myself. From the depths of my depression, well south of the Blakely Island mark, I was helpless as the nouveau riche laughing and waving with supermodels serving drinks on deck passed me by.

Javakeda stated in a previous race that just like poker players sailors can go on Tilt and I could not have been a better example of this. Spencer Island lay ahead of me with a retreating wind field to contend with, I used the yellow dot of my predictor line to try and reach the 6 kt isotach opening up my angle to gain speed. At this point I had no thought other than watching the TWS readout creep higher trying to squeeze as much as possible out of this last vestige of hope before tacking as the shoreline loomed large. Clinging to the coastline I went on to Sinclair Island in much the same manner. Bonknhoot retaining the lead had covered my position at this point but decided to continue east after putting Sinclair and me behind him. The only recourse available was to aggressively take aim at clearing Lawrence point on Orcas Island. I had crossed the Rubicon, opening up to a broad reach I threaded the needle between the Barnes & Clarke Islands. The Strait of Georgia open waters were inviting enough yet I was mindful of a handful of boats now to starboard including bonknhoot so I began to feather my angle to see if I could maintain the apparent advantage I had established on them. By the time I reached Point Roberts I finally crossed bonknhoot's bow but only just.

Ominous weather was on the horizon and the sleigh ride was over, from now until the final moments of the race the predictor would resemble a variety of fishhooks. I gybed for Canada as there was a pocket of good air left to the north before everything was just about to get closed down entirely. In my haste I misjudged the situation leaving better wind where I could not reach it but the others found it. Now stymied and coast bound my progress was very much in question. Using what little wind there was I gybed west heading for the stem of all the boats still in contention. I became disconsolate having made a comeback only to have it slip through my fingers again ever so quickly. A metaphorical fog descended all around me.

There was a menacing protuberance known as the Iona Beach Spit in my way before I could even consider how to reach the Foreshore Park mark. I could not bring myself to look at any other boats as it would only make matters worse in my mind. The wind was just about to pivot for the umpteenth time in the process of leaving town altogether, slim & none were not far behind. Eventually I pulled even with the aforementioned evil dagger & took a peek around the corner and did not like those prospects whatsoever. Returning to a westerly vector I noticed Henrys on the far outside making good headway. Checking back he committed to the west quite some time ago, paid his dues and was now reaping the benefit.

Horace Greeley had it right & I was late to the party. West it was until the wind redundantly shifted again. In need of anything to get me out of my rut & I caught a break. A max speed TWA in the 80's would start off to the near north then swerve a little west picking up wind as it went and bend back somewhat northerly. In spite of all my dire expectations I was showing in the top 6. Henrys had the outside advantage & bonknhoot had the inside lead but at least I had a front row seat splitting the difference between them. Transitioning to the more downwind portion of our polars we rounded Foreshore Park with the outside getting lifted and the spacing narrowing but uniformly so. In preparation for the mandated turn to the finish soon to come I was intent on finding what I had missed while going through customs. Where was the wind really ?

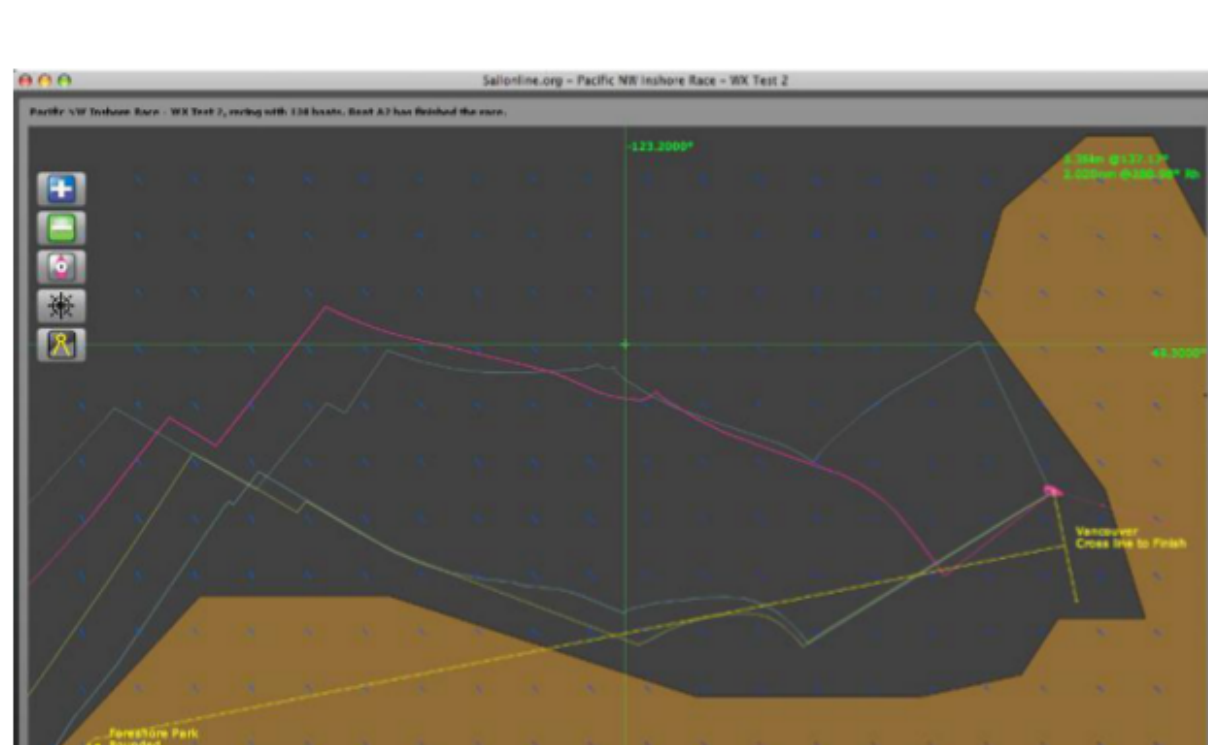
Truth be told there was no real wind in the offing but two prominent wind features stood out nonetheless. There was a High wind pressure ridge oriented along the horizontal at N 49.3 latitude & a Low wind pressure trench organized vertically at W -123.2 longitude. The intersection of which defines the boundaries of 4 weather grid quadrants or at least in my vernacular. They don't show up where they used to but they still exist. For more about this concept of mine please refer to the thread in the forum discussing the new high definition weather model here:

<http://www.sailonline.org/board/thread/13266/>

Henrys made the first move and crossed in front of me without too much difficulty. This was a bit of a surprise since he had made a considerable effort to find the better wind and could reach N 49.3 latitude before anyone else had he chosen to do so. It was his call & I was not about to argue the matter. I waited until after crossing his track to do likewise. I still preferred the North but either he was right and I hoped to also gain from it or if otherwise I could check what the predictor was doing looking at Vancouver with a Wx update not far off. We did not reach the others in time and I was at the tail end of this group who would have fit neatly into a thimble with room left over for another 6 boats. Soon enough we had new weather and my predictor which had been underwhelming suddenly appeared grotesquely distorted as if it was auditioning to be a contortionist with Cirque du Soleil sending shivers up my spine. I tacked immediately. I was content in so doing even if I was in the minority. Any race in which my boat finishes with just a single digit next it is a considerable accomplishment in my book. More than anything I just wanted this race to be over and let the chips fall as they may.

On my way north I studied further the action along the weather vertices. The axis at W -123.2 longitude was soon to become a considerable barrier. In less than 45 minutes it would move in like a stalactite & a stalagmite growing towards each other with just a small gap between them at W -123.2 longitude until they joined and swallowed everything including the finish line. Finding a way through those narrows was essential. I made it above the northern ridge as I was being increasingly headed. I wanted to continue until the top of the hour but realized that there would not be enough time to reach that vertical threshold. Tacking 6 minutes earlier than planned I had the right angle but would not reach it in time. As it were Henrys had belatedly decided to join me but he too was late. I was pointed at the pin end of the line running hot as my angle was increasing. Henrys was tacked over but was going with VMG narrowing our margins as he went. The wind was my adversary whether or not another boat got the best of me was simply not relevant. I passed in front of Henrys by a whisker.

In Retrospect from this point forward the fate of all boats were sealed, the vise had closed and there was no escape. There being but naught wind to work with I aimed at the bottom of the line as I would be turned soon after crossing the chasm abysmal. The strokes of a still life painting showed more movement than the fleet at this point. With nothing but time on my hands only then did I think to check on the boats in the southern contingent. I cannot say if this was the lowest ebb but as I placed my cursor over them it showed but a scant 0.20 kt compared to my 0.40 kt and it remained thus for a half hour or more. Even as they rose to a quarter knot I had a full half. I was leaving the quagmire behind me. There is little left to be said other than that by guile or circumstance I found myself on the favored side of the course. Even Henrys who was at my stern could not keep pace but was firmly in second place. Henrys then tacked to the north almost as a stubborn epitaph to the decision he had eschewed hours before to reach N 49.3 latitude & the elusive 1 knot of wind. My margin at the line was 27 minutes 7 seconds. Sleepless in Seattle had become Victory in Vancouver.



tracks from the left edge of the photo outside to inside of the top 4 finishers:
Henrys, A2, bonknhoot, Hirilonde