

Log – SWR Leg 7

Inspired as we are by the Volvo Ocean Race, a lot of the fun we had on this for SOLers amazing leg of our World Race was dampened by a second tragedy IRL, that of John Fisher's life lost at sea. Most of us knew him not, but courtesy of the connected lives we nowadays lead, we know him now. Too late.

We have no option, we move on.

bonknhoot, it can't be denied gets his fair share of podiums over the course of a SOL season, but when it comes to ocean races - SOL's paramount metier – similar achievements are rare indeed. At a guess, I'd say it's been little more than a half a dozen (six) or perhaps only a handful (five) times. So far... as I am determined to improve.

Now (again), long ago, when bonk's skipper was a muscle-toned and perma-tanned young(sih) man, a long career as a trapeze dinghy crew was punctuated from time to time by having a go in the Laser (big rig, there was no other). Invariably these efforts would pointedly remind him why, if he wanted results, it was better to stick to the crewing (and the boat prepping and tuning and the campaign logistics, etc). Things would go well, indeed very well, and then self-inflicted disaster would come down like a Damoclean Sword, which would be followed by a hard ground-out recovery for a strong finish but rarely if ever a win.

Two types of disaster were possible; strategic and technical.

The strategic type is easy enough to explain. It's going there where the wind ain't. The longer a course, the more likely the disaster. The SOL equivalent is obvious.

The technical type is a more complicated matter. Back in the late 70s and early 80s, dynamic sailing (rocking, pumping and ooching, even sculling with the rudder blade up and horizontal to hold position on the starting line) was in its infancy. Prohibition via the Rules had followed, but policing the new rules on course was poor, indeed often non-existent, and protests from fellow competitors were very rare (everybody was doing it). In a F4 downwind, running the Laser by the lee, whilst promoting her to sway violently from side-to-side, was very fast. It's all different now, but back then this could get me into the lead, but then I'd move my shoulders just a little bit too much, a steeper wave would catch the stern and I'd roll in to windward. The SOL equivalent is typing a TWA number into the CC box, or vice versa and mindlessly/instinctively hitting 'Change Course'. The more you sail for days on end on long lists of DCs, the more likely this type of error returns to haunt you.

So, to our race, which for bonk was like one of those best days in his Laser.

Good start, free and fast towards a tacking point out beyond the southern tip of Great Barrier Island, a well-judged tack for Opito, and at the bear-off for points south, bonk had the lead by the slenderest of margins.

How deep is too deep? The router kept me closer to the NZ coast than seemed sensible; there was more wind out east. I missed a WX and the next said more east, after all. I compensated, but not all the way, and this pattern repeated itself several times so that by the time the fleet hit the favoured southern latitude (was it 58?) bonk had dropped back down into the 20s or 30s.

Once in the ideal wind track, things got simpler. Timing your gybe points and their frequency, avoiding excessive PL and estimating how 'hot' to sail from one point to the next were the order of the day, and bonk recovered to round The Horn 4th.

Rounding sharply, I opted to take bonk west of the Falklands, but the next WX (in the morning), once routed, advised me strongly to change my mind. So I did. The forecast for the centre and extent of the HP system several days ahead was moving about a lot and the next WX said west again, so I went for the strait through the middle, together with kipper, and briefly we were 1,2. But the next WX had me change my mind once more and I opted out for the easier passage east. So by the time all those zigs and zags were behind me, bonk was back in the 30s. Clearly I need to become more certain in myself as what is best, and learn to ignore the router when the forecasts turn stochastic.

Anyway, once stability returned, I embarked on a second recovery. Steadily the gap to the leaders reduced, and steadily bonk's ranking climbed. About 17th was as good as it got though, and then I entered a TWA as a CC, went the wrong way, went head to wind to shed the PL and corrected back onto my correct course, before a further dilemma presented itself. How best to negotiate a second HP zone about a day's sailing ahead of the finish.

Being to the east of the rhumb, east was the only option. It looked good, and I was more than disappointed to find bonk ranking in the 50s, after the passage of that second HP was done and dusted. But, given that I hadn't weaved about much this time, I couldn't have thrown that much away, and there was still hope. After all, 'Dikke from Delphi' had said in chat we'd all arrive at the finish around the same time.

I tested both ends of the line and decided going wide for the northern end would save me a minute, keeping me in more pressure and better angles whilst sailing more miles. limesinferior, the leader and eventual winner had started to sail up towards our little eastern group, which included psail and Dingo, and that was encouraging also.

There was a SLI in the way, so, to be sure, I set an alarm for 0300 UTC. To my surprise, when I got back behind the keyboard, bonk was back in the early 20s. Perhaps there was more than hope. I deleted my DCs and started to curve bonk by hand towards what from where bonk now was, was the nearest part of the line, the north eastern pin, aiming to come in on max BS at 107 TWA on a course at right angles to the line. As it turned out, TWA was 105 as I crossed in P2, just seconds ahead of Dikke, who had made an even more amazing recovery of his own, and Kipper, who had made that run through the narrow of the channel in between the Falkland islands that I aborted for a more easterly route.

How lucky can you get? What a race! And congratulations limesy for a majestic victory in very challenging conditions!

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