

Race Report - Gulf Run 2018

=====

Initial Weather Situation

North half of the gulf: from SW/W

South half: from E/SE

Transitional region in between with very low wind speeds and it is expected to be very volatile. The East part of that region in particular is discouragingly blue. Following the strongest winds from the start would mean sailing to that blue. Close to the finish, however, being more East seems beneficial though due to the prevailing wind direction.

Because the middle region is very unstable, the relative strength of advantages in being different sides of the gulf can change rapidly. Each side has to trade off significantly but also holds advantages that come with a high payoff if weather turns favorable. This makes the race very challenging and, I'd say, results somewhat more random than in many other races. Such randomness, however, can also be seen as poor-man's substitute for the challenge of sailing in real winds that differ from the forecast (vs SOL sailing in 6 hour blocks of known winds), which makes this a very nice race.

My Initial Plans and Goals

After clearing the land, I want to sail slightly West to avoid the blue in East, however, not too excessively as I need to head towards East when nearing the end of the transitional region.

Because of volatile weather in the middle, I want to try to keep South of as many nearby competitors as possible when a weather update comes, which meant a few tactical early tacks when the weather update was right around the corner. Optimizing for short-term gains over long-term ones is also very important.

Also, I'd like to have a position where I have some distance to the nearest competing boats on both sides. And then hope the weather turns favorable for that position. It also means I might not charge full ahead sideways into the most promising route, which keeps changing anyway, often before you even reach there. Instead, I try to make good progress towards the finish whole the time, even if that means sailing through blues (no route can fully avoid them anyway).

Sailing the Early Race and Transitional Region

The start was into headwind and navigating in the tight space between the continent and a barrier island. To reach the first waypoint, I first sailed into better winds towards South. The wind direction was such that to clear all land with only a single tack, there was too little room for a safe turn but I managed the risky turn fine. Multiple other boats were not as lucky as me though and overshoot the turn hitting land. Those sailing first West to nearly constant wind got good enough wind direction shift to get slightly ahead of me but in a race like this such a difference did not matter a thing.

Once on the open sea after the first waypoint, I sail according to the plan into the general direction towards South-Southwest taking advantage of wind direction variations. Most of the boats which usually sail in the leading group also chose to sail towards that direction but the early routes varied

quite much. I made a stupid blunder once by mixing the DC list (brainaid) of this race with the one for GGR and sailed to wrong direction for a while but luckily caught it very soon and heading 105 was not too bad as it mostly traded off some height to speed (I don't believe this blunder had a significant impact to my end result).

Some boats that first sailed towards Southeast joined us soon and had a small lead because of an advantage gained from the updated wind direction. I soon noted that a group of leading boats typical to many other races did not form at all.

Once approaching the blue region, I intentionally chose to not sail into the best looking overall route available in the middle but set a slightly less sideways course that made better short-term gain. To my delight, my approach to course selection made me to have quite little company in the immediate vicinity.

My router was getting crazy at this point almost always suggesting sailing first directly either to West or East rather than heading somewhere into the blue. I did not follow its advice because I expected such "good" routes to turn out duds once you reach the critical parts of the journey and then you'd be behind the boats who sailed directly there. The boats now formed a roughly straight line because the blue stopped the advance of those who got ahead. I was in a good position slightly ahead of many in the line but a few were even more South than me at this point.

The race continued South and a deep blue wave after another hit us moving faster than us towards our direction of travel allowing any fall-behind to catch up the line again. I ended up sailing in my own gap(!) in the line between weather grid points. I later realized it has one strategical advantage: Off-grid position avoids the lowest wind speeds that occur at the grid longitudes (unless both sides have a low wind speed at the same point of time which does not occur very often). Sadly it also means one side usually makes more progress than you but I could always catch up and with small movements take advantage of the better side more than picking either weather grid longitude could.

Racing to the Finish

Those few boats ahead of me nearby made mistakes when missing weather updates, some of the worst ones were no doubt because of the dreaded TWA steering after a weather update. Small sideways movement allowed me to keep making good progress and I managed to reach position 3nm more South than the main line. Many others sailed more aggressively sideways to the current good route and couldn't therefore make as much overall progress to South as I did.

At this point, there were also some other boats West of me clearly ahead of the line. West of me, however, means worse angles when nearing the finish so they were clearly behind me considering the advantages at hand. The East side of the line had deep blue obstacles ahead. Everything was looking quite bright.

I am now only one weather update away from clearing the worst of the blue region and supposed to sail Southeast with ok speeds and direction during the upcoming 6 hours to prepare for the final, easy looking part of the race. From there on, it looks just more wind. ...But but, then a big disaster strikes... That next weather update.

My good progress towards Southeast is replaced with limping speeds in a newly appearing deep blue that expands more and more South according to the new forecast. That new blue alone was not enough though, adding into the misfortune, the blocking barrier in East is mostly eliminated by

the same update allowing the East side boats to reach much sooner the good areas that also extend more North there than they did earlier. This turns to tables completely. Beforehand the toughest competition for me was from West end of the line that had been able to sail more South than most of the line but now the height advantage held by the boats in East is going to pay off big time.

The boat ahead of the line in East soon takes over me while I struggle slowly to reach the better wind speeds and eventually takes the win. My route curves slightly into East to avoid the low coastal wind speeds. Two other boats from East side also slip past me taking the second and third positions. Some boats from middle/West try a more direct route towards the finish though the coastal winds but their advance is short-term and I overtake them back before the finish line. In the end, finish 1.5 hours behind the winner (and roughly 6 hours later than what I was expecting before that fateful weather update).

Concluding Thoughts

For the route I chose, finishing fourth seems a good results. There were more boats from East trying to take over but I could keep them behind. Also the winner admitted that before that weather update it looked pretty dark for the East side. There was potential for a better result too but weather luck was unfavorable enough this time which, as I mentioned earlier, is a major factor in this race and one just has to accept it. Nevertheless, I was not expecting a disaster of that scale that close to the region with higher wind speeds. But on the other hand, such drastic changes also adds healthy bit of realism to the weather simulation that often feels to me quite algorithmic rather than really windy due to obvious, insurmountable technical limitations SOL faces. As such, it was a very nice race.

--

ij./August 2018