

Percé to St Malo 2020

This 'when things go wrong' editorial policy I have adopted certainly looks like it will have me confessing my ineptitudes post every Ocean Race in 2020 and beyond, and post plenty of other races besides. After a pretty reasonable result racing to Cape Town (with room for improvement, mind you), racing to St Malo I was back in Muppetland.

Things started off badly straightaway. A short enough leg to a silly chicane between the isles of Miquelon and St Pierre in a strong breeze was being routed by cutie Fifi as basically a straight line. I thought I'd be clever and keep a bit south and I don't remember why but I lost three minutes on the leaders.

What's three minutes in an ocean race. "Not a lot" I hear Paul Daniels (an English - sorry, Welsh comedian/magician who married his on-TV foil Debby McGee who much later became the oldest person to nearly win the 'Strictly Come Dancing' glitterball) say. "Not a lot" because twenty-four hours after the chicane, three minutes had become three hours and there was no magic involved, just goo'ol SS (Skipper Stupidity; see Garry Hoyt in 'Go for Gold').

It was late here in Switzerland, where my wife and I are lockdowned, and the router said gybe south for a bit after clearing the St Pierre mark (!) and then gybe north. Since as far as I could remember it usually pays to keep north crossing the Atlantic at the relatively high latitudes of this particular race, I set my DCs accordingly and bade the fleet:

Ne pas de probleme! Open the Vin!
The dinner est pret, so I'm away.
It's drier below, that's where I'll go.
A bientot mon brave, have a laugh.

Imagine my consternation to find bonknhoot P1 or near enough the next morning, and most of my fellow competitors well to the south of her. An early lead is never a good sign! I persevered close in under the Newfoundland coast for a good while, but as the wind dialled down ever more with each WX, our IMOCA 60's distinct lack of pace began to really hurt, and understanding the particular peculiarity of the polar made no difference:

Again, the wind has dialed down.
Again, my polar makes me frown.
Perhaps it is the isolation tipple.
At eight-o-two, I surely see a nipple.
Suckle on then, mustn't drown.

So, in the end, I baled out and took the hit, and if I had only learned the lesson not to take a slowMOCA 60 to places where things may go ever more blue, I might at the end have done a bit better approaching St Malo after having crossed the mid-Atlantic ridge that was wating for us all with quite some aplomb, even if I say so myself.

You see, the odd stepping stone across that river of blue many days ahead could be espied early on, even without a router. Roiling about, it wasn't at all clear where the best stones were going to be, when the time would come to cross. But behind, as the falling winds compress the fleet, is not a bad place to be, and thus, ignoring my router a bit more often, seeing or thinking I was seeing where others might better not have gone, I started to reduce bonknhoot's deficit.

Imagine my exhilaration, once across and back in more wind, now blowing unusually (that should have been a hint!) from the north east left of ahead, finding bonk to be well-paced in the Top Ten. A big veer to the east next had everybody go onto starboard, except I noted WRmirekd, who either crossed just ahead or astern of me, and perhaps a few others.

Most only partially took the lift, but I sailed on to where the wind started to back again to tack back onto a lift. It looked promising for a while, and optimistically I rhymed some more:

Hoping to finish by the morn, our fleet
All in a bunch, a routed herd
We trim and steer trying to beat
Our virtual leader, kRemWird.
(as Kenza might have rhymed)

But in the end it turned out to be a colossal mistake, on several grounds:

- the simple mathematical reality that, given the grib was spaced at 1.5 deg intervals, the strongest wind was on the 48.5th parallel on a course straight for Roscoff and not on the N49 to Jersey
- a repetition of the same mistake I made between Dondra and the Malacca Straits of hitting the layline days early, with even less excuse this time, as, more familiar with the waters, I should have known that the forecasted steady north easterly had to be at risk
- and finally tactics, i.e. once you are happy enough your place in the pecking order can be a counter in your series - cover, cover, cover

Anyway, I hadn't (covered; I'd been asleep) and, sure enough one WX before the anticipated next tack point, the wind bent much more sharply east than forecasted up until then, and all the boats south and to leeward of bonk, that had been footing faster enjoying slightly more pressure (on the data line) and slightly better angle anyway, tacked and came streaming across, with RICOTINA, coming from furthest south, now in a very handy lead.

I tacked as well, and then repeated my earlier mistake and went too far north once more, again well above the layline. There was more wind mid Channel and for a while, just as before, it looked good. Fifi the clown was very excited about it too. But then the wind died away and turned around, and as we closed on St Malo, the greater pressure (if you can call it that) was to be found under the north Breton coast, and bonk fell 4 or 5 places back as we drifted on towards the finish.

What a race, indeed!

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