

Cape Town to Auckland 2020

Another ocean race; another series of errors, that, despite bonk actually winning the thing by missing out on an error that most of the rest of the fleet made, are worthy of note.

Things started off error-auspiciously straightaway when, now almost a month ago, we departed virtually from Cape Town, via a chicane between Kerguelen and Heard Island and then round the top of New Zealand's North Island, for Auckland.

Conscious as we all were that the wind was strongest further south, there where the lines of longitude converge ever closer together, I was not particularly perturbed to see my router proposing an initial course out of Cape Town holding slightly west of due south. Perhaps if I had drafted a GC line to Cap d'Estaing on the north west corner of the Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises, I might have considered that a 60° deviation off 'the shortest distance between two points on a Mercator projection is a curve' was over-cooking it, but I hadn't and I didn't. After years of online racing, the cosine table becomes second nature and one knows 60° is 0.5, so my VMC to the Kergs was only half my BS, and my BS wasn't even the max obtainable in the prevailing wind which would have required at least a little easting for a TWA of 115° or so.

All this became apparent to me, when, on returning to the game for the first of many, many WX updates, I discovered 95% of the fleet to the north of me. The damage was done, but it may well be that I compounded it, as, such is human nature, I didn't correct fully, hoping that some good might yet come out of my bad investment. It didn't and as we approached l'Archipel des Kerguelen, bonk was lying somewhere in the 30s or 40s, but thankfully the gap to the leaders wasn't that big.

Twenty-four hours where cornering and precision routing (not ocean coursing at all, really) would be king now followed. bonk's good at that, and if my memory serves me right, I was into the Top 10 as we came away from the southern tip of Heard Island. The real race was on – 4000 nm across open water to Cape Reinga Offshore, a buoy 6nm out to sea only to be found in virtual reality. I think one of our Croatian pals was in the lead – was it SimeMali? – and by a handy fifteen minutes or so.

It was now all downhill, hunting for pressure that would lift BS above 30 knots, while at the same time avoiding too many performance-loss (PL) incurring gybes, and, as and when you did gybe attempting to reduce the PL debilitations through various stratagems – gybes onto 179.99° TWA followed by a correction onto opt TWA (the square-off), series of wiggles to bring PL below the 0.93 threshold and then a clean gybe (the wobble), and round-ups by more than 113° followed by a clean gybe (the proa). If executed correctly, each of these options will save you several minutes, so are worth doing. However, if you muck them up, they will cost you several minutes as well. That they are advantageous is of course a minor imperfection in our beautiful game, but it is what is, and I was mucking up I reckon 1 in 4. Note to bonk: practice that big wind boat handling more!

How as ever, it wasn't the mucked-up gybes that quickly brought bonk back down into the teens and then at times into the twenties. No, it was basic fleet positioning; i.e. the same tactics many of us are familiar with from our round-the-cans days – don't hit the laylines too early or indeed at all, be aware of the established pecking order, cover the likely lads and loose cover the rest. Which means: don't mind the router, and more frequent position checking than just at WX time.

There was a big call to be made as well, which was where exactly to plan your New Zealand landfall (well, from the top of the 50m mast) should be in 7 to 10 days time. Early doors, a diversion via South Island seemed fast, but as we continued east, once skirting Tasmania a course either directly to the tip of North Island or half way down along it, became the only two remaining options, with

the router switching regularly between one way or t'other as one WX superseded the next. Thus, as we slowly (relatively) closed, many of the leaders were changing course violently every six to twelve hours. I too could see the dilemma – a big blue ridge dead ahead with a tendency to drift/grow slowly southward which had to be left well to port, or alternatively to starboard more or less on the direct and thus shorter route. The other side of the ridge though, the wind was forecast to back from south to south east, making the approach to Cape Reigna a fetch if you were coming at it from out to sea in the west, and our Orange 125 was pretty slow (relatively) once the wind forward of the beam.

I was no better than the rest, but missed an entire WX entirely and then forgot to load the next WX, so my last abrupt course adjustment from north east to east turned out to be my last, and although the router when I finally did get in sync with the rhythm again told me gybe north, I ignored that, strengthened in my resolve by DIKKEHENK's pronouncements on the Orange 125's lack of on-the-wind speed from a positioning much to the north of me, i.e. somewhere where you'd know all about it. Instead therefore I sailed a wide arc, randomly choosing to put in 10° of northing on a few occasions, until the router started to agree with me once again.

At this stage, there were three of us furthest south and we soon went 1,2,3 with Kipper1258 holding a handy lead over FR_vostro and bonknhoot, who were pretty much neck 'n neck. Sadly, Aner59, who had been at the front of the following pack missed the mark, and several others did so also, one presumes. From Reigna Offshore, it was now upwind all the way to yet another mark in the sea, with more breeze and a lift to the east way out on the ocean. With less than two days sailing to the turn, we were in precision routing territory again, and I went pretty far east before I tacked.

Rounding Great Barrier Island 'very' Offshore, I had closed the gap to Kipper1258 a little and got away a similar fraction from FR_vostro. With appreciably less wind under the tip of the Coromandel peninsula, the router proposed a short gybe north and then a hot angle in. I followed the proposal going further north than most, many laying the tip of the peninsula straight from their rounding. This final move proved to be a winning one, and with some chagrin I overtook my good friend Kipper1258 as we thundered into the Hauraki Gulf, with FR_vostro holding off all challengers astern.

A terrific race and really I can't believe my luck!

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