

NEWPORT BERMUDA 2020



"Try a tiller they said. You'll drive better they said." Sloan, Kira, and Bean of the four-pawed division.

I was supposed to be doing the actual Newport - Bermuda Race on Artemis, an Italia 13.98 owned and skippered by Jeff Kennedy of Annapolis. He put together a fantastic crew and we had been working very hard pre-race on statistical analysis of historic winds, comparative race data, and expected performance with the Italia yacht. We worked closely with the sailmaker to ensure our inventory was appropriate. Boat prep was moving along splendidly and we were enthusiastic and optimistic about our race prospects. To hear the race had been cancelled was devastating for us as a crew, though we felt it was a respectable decision by the race committee.

Instead, both Jeff Kennedy and I decided to race the virtual regatta both to test our navigational theories as well as keep the spirit of Newport to Bermuda alive. I chose the Sun Fast 3300 because double-handed racing is something I have a great interest in and I've seen the boat sailing around Annapolis.

Several days pre-race the routing was calling for a slight east of the rhumb line course. Near the start, the route switched to an east flier going 100nm off of the rhumb. This is something in real life, I would never consider. I chose instead an eastward route and set a no-go boundary of no more than 20nm off of the rhumb. I set a route to stay on the east side of the main rhumb line pack, giving me manoeuvrability and what I considered to be a neutral position with the uncertain and evolving weather pattern. It became apparent there was little that could be done with the first hole so sticking close to the rhumb seemed to ensure the best performance.

I found it most beneficial to hold true to the old saying of "races are won and lost at night" — something that benefitted us greatly in the 2018 Bermuda race where I was lucky enough to sail with

Glenn Doncaster aboard Nanuq (Fishing Bay Yacht Club). Despite the land-based virtual race, Doncaster's wisdom held true, and I found myself setting alarms through the night often "hand-steering" through the very late and very early hours instead of relying on a pre-plotted and set "autopilot". I also found hand-steering to be helpful in picking my way through the "holes" that popped up in the course — optimizing wind angles and VMC.

After getting through the first hole, I switched in to this optimal VMC mode. [Another benefit of the SOL racing for a navigator is learning to describe and numerically define sailing objectives ie: racing to a point vs. true wind angle vs. match racing and position defense]. Routing then sent me west of the rhumb line. Rather than aggressively chase the optimal route 20nm east then west again, I chose a middle of the road route and stuck along a more optimized VMC course.

This manoeuvre positioned me in a very precarious location with respect to the encroaching low. Watching the weather, it looked like I was minutes from either making it out of the very edge of the low or getting swallowed by it. Enter more hand-steering, again. As the low approached, the wind speed started dropping out faster than predicted and in fear of being swallowed, I tacked early before the optimal angle and was able to stay in the breeze.

After exiting the low, it was apparent that Midnightexpress and OscarBoteco manoeuvred the low better than I and exited with a more advantageous position: stronger wind and better angles for the drag race to Bermuda. I needed to make up at least a half of a mile in the next 200nm, which proved nearly impossible.

I attempted some manoeuvres not called for in Expedition routing. I tried to manually steer a "Wally" course to close the gauge between my more westward competitors [Thanks, Kevin Lineberger the tactician aboard Dennis Hannick's Goin' at FBYC]. When this did not prove fruitful enough, I calculated an exact great circle route and crossed my fingers — all of them. I never could catch Midnightexpress but was successfully able to defend against OscarBoteco whom Expedition initially had finishing at least 2 minutes ahead of me.

Competing in a virtual regatta was interesting to say the least. The SOL Racing community was very helpful in the chat — giving us newcomers access to many of the tools and tricks of the program known to veteran SOL Racers. [Fun Fact: Did you know that you can drive to the 0.001th of a degree in online racing? That would be some fantastic driving skills in real life. Talk about a steady tiller.]

Thanks to the SOL community and the Newport Bermuda race organizers for keeping the spirit of the race alive in a virtual format. While I absolutely missed the ride to Bermuda and the collaboration with my crewmates, the virtual race gave me a very different sort of challenge that I found very enjoyable. All in all, it was definitely the most comfortable offshore race I've done thus far — though the fact I attempted to pour my midnight coffee into an upside-down coffee cup is probably an indication that I got no more sleep than on an actual race.

I hope this write-up is useful for the race and I look forward to 2022!

SloanBurns/June 2026