

Maryland to Alaska 2020

Another ocean race, another – eh no, more – challenging narrows to negotiate, between two short stretches of open sea (a few days on the North Atlantic to start with, and a few days in the Beaufort Sea). And, if you chose to go that way, a few more days of BBQ-risk-free routing across the Labrador Sea and into Baffin Bay. So, what went wrong for bonknhoot this time? Crossing the finish line in P6 after 17 days of super-absorbing online racing, you'd like to think 'not a lot'. You'd be wrong.

As normal, my incidental manual interventions in my DC-series were not always error-free. At least once (exiting the Prince of Wales Strait), probably twice and perhaps thrice, TWAs were entered in my CC box, or the other way around. Apparently, this is much more difficult to do using the HTML5 beta-browser. High time I switched. You see, I'll never learn, and the beta-browser has several other additional very nice features (e.g. various view options for the polar diagram).

Almost immediately after the start, I found myself in-dubio. Coast or sea? West or east? With the hotshots split pretty 50:50 on the issue (DIKKE and Mull and Limes etc out to sea; SKOV, Sime, Dingo and Rico etc close in to shore), I hedged my bets up the middle, and went P1. P1 is never good news early doors in a long race. And thus it came to pass that it became clear that the coasters had it right. I gybed for their coast, and traced a very elegantly curved track whilst falling steadily back, to arrive around P30 at Cape Breton Island.



Cape Breton Island – Rounded

I pulled saw places back, precision routing up the Gulf of St Lawrence between Labrador and Newfoundland. I don't recall whether it was upwind or downwind tacking that was involved. As always there was bend in the wind, but if I remember rightly, the wind dropped away close in to the Newfoundland coast and it wasn't necessary (or best) to delay your tacks till you could see the beaks of the puffins.

Baffin Bay is a bit more than a bay really. At 700,000 km² it is larger than the Black Sea, and together with the 850,000 m² of the Sea of Labrador, the open waters ahead of us now were bigger than the Gulf of Mexico. Ample opportunity then to get things wrong.

Two exits west far to the north – Lancaster or Jones Sound – were both equally valid. Jones Sound, the high north route, at various times had routed better, but now the weather forecasts favoured Lancaster Sound. Thank goodness, there being only one way out of Jones Sound, whilst the more southerly Lancaster route still left you options – straight on into the Melville Trough or hard left into either Prince Regent Inlet, Peel Sound or the M'Clintock Channel.

The more you do the topographical research on these waters, the more the conclusion strikes you that up here it was just a little too cold for your average French explorer!



Jones Sound – Entrance

My choice made, I continued to work on the pulling up of my proverbial socks, with some further success, as various competitors went for various non-router proposed options, notably Zorba777 who went for Jones Sound anyway and duly went P1 (never good news early doors in a long race!), with a couple of Zorba disciples (Zorøbastrians?) all going T10 in hot pursuit. And SKOVSER also made a move which gained him at least an hour on the router-following fleet.

Of course, there were also some who dipped west straightaway into the Hudson Strait. This, however, was unlikely to ever lead to success.

By the time we got to the entrance to the Melville Trough, I had bonk into the T10 or nearly so. The Zorbastrians were stuck somewhere in the Maclean Strait or Massey Sound, and the Hudson-farers were heading for an exciting short passage through the Bellot Strait.



Bellot Strait – Drift Ice

Routing for Barrow on previous occasions (was often not necessary and simply time-consuming) had always favoured continuing straight on into the Beaufort Sea, but now, for the first time that I could remember, a passage south west down through the Prince of Wales Strait was indicated. It was at least six hours quicker than continuing on westward, hoh and then GC-curving down to Barrow, but it did involve more nautical miles.

Driving all this was a long patch of stronger easterly breeze close in under the coast of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation lands. It seemed a no-brainer and all the guys that remained for bonk to chase down went for it, so naturally I followed, only to notice to my horror, that my nearest pursuers – DIKKE, Dingo, Mull, StIng, SCARA – all carried straight on, holding further north as well. And at the next WX, it was their route that was back in favour.

I seem to remember that one of our group heading for the Prince of Wales Strait changed his mind – flying the Stars & Stripes, was it Garagiste, the original designer of this icebound tombola? Or Renegade? The rest of us carried on, and of course halfway down the strait, the wind fell away more than forecast, and worse again, that forecast easterly that we were hoping to catch started to ease

in strength as well. The lead switched to the boats beating out onto the open Beaufort Sea, as Fifi laCuteé had predicted.

But then the weather changed again. The Beaufort Sea went very blue, and the easterly that had tempted the (Outlaw Josie) Wales gang picked up again. Could this have been expected? Well, the pilot chart for the North Pacific extends north- and eastward to +73,-120 and in August it shows the prevailing (c 50%) wind is ENE F4, but alas no such handy reference exists for the Beaufort Sea, as normally it is mostly covered in ice; so who knows.



Beaufort Sea – Whales and Ice

And still the surprises continued. Having passed rafa just before entering the Prince of Wales Strait, a keyboard error (mentioned previously) nearly gave him back P5. Sax747 meanwhile had ceded ground to both of us, and at 15 minutes ahead was perhaps catchable. It was now Wednesday 19 22:30 and with less than 48 hours sailing left, a forecasted big lift if you chose starboard gybe north west was preferred by Mme. Qt. This would simultaneously also comfortably cover the Beaufort boys, who only recently had looked like they would fill the podium. So, I followed the well-ahead SKOVSER following the router. But SimeMali in P2 and Sax747 went for the coast.

S and S were right, and to crown my curate's egg of a race, in the morning I routed with the old grib, which naturally enough (!) confirmed the course north west that I had bonk on was right, and so I quickly went back to bed. To my surprise when next I returned to my monitor, SKOVSER, RICO and rafa had all gybed about and were heading back into shore and I had gone P1 again (eek!). My mistake was quickly obvious, but the damage was done and rafa had a good jump on me, and of course Sime and Sax had gone out of sight, to take the race and P3 respectively.

There's a LESSON here: don't be pleased you got it right when at the next WX the router says 'continue on'. More likely is you haven't loaded the new grib!

It's been a tremendous race and our SRC have to be thanked for having the gumption to put it on, with the choice of our 90ft monohull, which ghosts so well through sub-6kn goo at 2x TWS on nearly all normal angles to the wind also being very prescient, or perhaps just serendipitous.

You could sense from the chat that everybody was truly enjoying the 'never a dull moment' of the race. So much so, that the blue water die-hard ocean racing fraternity, at whom our annual OCCH Series is of course aimed, were barely heard to grumble. Nevertheless, it got me thinking.

Wouldn't it be great if in 2021 we had a series that consisted entirely of these sort of multiple choice, BBQ-likely races through volatile forecasts. And where might that be? Well, either between the Tropics or at High Latitudes. The more I thought about it, the more High Latitudes seemed to be the better choice. The ice is melting and so exploring arctic and antarctic waters has some relevance, and in Amyr Klink (<http://www.amyrklink.com.br/en/>) and Skip Novak (<http://www.pelagic.co.uk/>) we have two potential buddies, who might welcome the publicity that an association with a 6-Race High Latitudes Series could bring them. So, here's my proposal:

- Round Antarctica in three legs,
- the NE Passage
- Round Greenland, and
- the NW Passage,

all in fluky variable winds, on Mercator-distorted charts.

Subtle improvements that have been incorporated in the new HTML5 client by ij vis-a-vis the Flash client, which I understand will become the standard in 2021, make all these tracks feasible, as you can see from the 'breezy' snips below.

See <http://www.sailonline.org/board/thread/16941/?page=1#post-16941> for the full Race Proposal.

bonknhoot/August 2020





