

I sailed Lightnings for 30 years, most of it as crew for my children. Once they were grown, I found myself growing tired of the on-the-water lawyering. I quit sailing my own boat about 10 years ago. I raced for a time with friends, but finally sold my boat about 4 years ago.

I always wanted to learn how to navigate offshore and found Virtual Regatta when it was first launched. I raced mainly the big races, i.e. Volvo Ocean Race, Vendee Globe, etc. but I got very "cheesed-off" (see later, Ed.) with the cost and the stupid cards and crap that needed to be accumulated.

This summer I found Sailonline through an article in Scuttlebutt about the Newport Bermuda race, I think. I joined in time for the Transpac and was hooked. I enjoyed the Arctic race as well. I signed up for a couple of sprints, but those are not as much fun for me.

Anyway, I made the start at Melbourne and was quite happy to be sticking pretty close to the leaders. I am a seat-of-the-pants guy and knew that a few (a bunch?) of the veterans used routers. I was able to squeeze my way up the coast still in contact with the main group, which of course, changed around a lot.

One decision for which I had to trust my gut was after crossing the Bismarck Sea. I felt there was more wind and a better angle available to the west. It was a split from the group, but looking ahead for several days I felt we would be in better wind at a better angle. So, I went west and tacked to the north right when I could clear Manus Island. I was tracking FastFlo who had kicked my butt in the Arctic race and he went farther west into more wind and a bigger shift.

I thought they would grind me down, but there were not a lot of boats over there, so I didn't follow. The number of days is a blur, but the group I was with did punch into the lead by some miles. I ran in the single digits for quite a while. Then it started to be apparent what would happen next; the new wind was consistently filling from the east. The big pack of boat was slowly grinding up those of us in the middle. Plus, FastFlo and that group caught and passed us to the far west as well.

I kept looking ahead at the forecasts and every now and then it hinted at the possibility to punch through the west end of the ridge of "blue goo" just before Japan. So, I stuck to the best VMC toward the finish and stayed in my lane. The group to the east slowly started to crawl past me and my position numbers climbed into the 50s I think. Then about a week out, FastFlo and most of those to the west had fallen back a bit.

I was still looking for a way to the west, but was also thinking of hedging my bets a little. I and a couple of boats around me got a private streak of wind that had a big lift to it. From the looks of the polars, I felt I could close up underneath the pack without losing a huge amount of distance. Plus, if the door opened, I could burn down at max speed to get to the west. We had that streak for about 8 hours and I liked where I ended up even though I was in about 80th(?) position.

After a couple of forecasts, I thought I saw the window open and that I could start my run down to it. Then, for 2 straight forecasts, the window was gone. I was kind of committed at this point, so I just kept going. I was pretty much alone, having punched out to the west with the burn down.

Then a little streak formed over me and I sailed a course of about 170 TWA (I would probably never do that in real life) hoping to be able to get through in time. I was shocked that almost no one followed. BadgerOne was the closest, but I got to the new wind first. I felt Corners, way over in the east, had a great angle, but he looked to be stuck in the "blue goo" for a couple more forecasts. My die was cast and I went to bed.

When I checked in the morning, it looked like, as they say in the mid-west, "the horse had broken for the barn". It looked like a clean blast to the finish at that point, but with all the changes in weather updates at that point, I knew it was still a race. Then with the next weather update, Corners was free from the "blue goo" earlier than I had hoped. Plus, BadgerOne and another boat (Chaos, maybe) were also moving into the new wind behind, but to the east of me.

About 12 hours from the last mark, I knew I was in trouble as Corners, BadgerOne and Chaos(?) would have much better wind angles, which I thought would outweigh my stronger wind. At about 6 hours to the mark, I thought I might squeeze around just ahead, but the next weather update handed me a private little hole to fall into and I went to bed discouraged. When I awoke a couple hours later, Corners had passed me and BadgerOne would soon follow.

As we rounded the mark I was in touch, but in 3rd place. We did a couple of tacks along the coast to align with the new wind which would be coming down the middle of the main channel. With the wind mostly from the north I was pretty sure no one in this group was going to attempt to transit the narrow slot to the east end of the bay, so no worries there. I tacked when I could just lay the west tip of the bar islands.

We were in really good wind, so I sailed a really tight course of 39 degrees TWA to sail the minimum miles I could. Corners took an extra tack and was screaming down at a hot angle. BadgerOne was to leeward ahead and also sailing a fatter angle. I had picked out two possible places to tack, an earlier one with which to play the final header up the last beat, or one to sail in more wind a little longer and then tack in a place to be lifted to the layline near the finish. I decided to stay in more air.

BadgerOne tacked on about the line I had chosen for the first option. He crossed just ahead of me and I let him go as I had committed to the other track. My DC was set so I went to make more coffee and to try to breathe. When I came back, Corners had tacked earlier than me and I was alone to the north. I was kind of disappointed, thinking I had tacked too late and would be lifted above the layline much sooner than planned. I watched BadgerOne build his lead on me and then Chaos sailed out ahead of me. I was now in 4th place.

When I reached the layline I changed from TWA of 39 degrees to a direct course to the left side of the line. I didn't want to sail extra miles. When the header came, I had to switch back to a TWA course because I was being forced below the line. With the air going lighter I increased the angle to 40-42 degrees. Soon, BadgerOne tacked toward the left end of the line and I knew it was very close between us.

I thought the far end of the line was slightly favored, but I was not sure how things respond in the game as opposed to real life boats. So, I decided to burn down to his track to just make sure I was ahead of him. I had to change the screen color to dark because his track was yellow and didn't show well against the white. I guessed that he was on a heading of 45 or 46 degrees TWA, so I set my boat to tack on that same angle.

I finally pushed the tack button when I reached what I thought to be his track. I was ahead, but watched tensely as he gained on me while my boat slowly accelerated. I kept watching the standings and saw 2 or 3 updates with 0.01nm separation with me ahead. Then my boat went crazy and turned a funny angle and stopped. I freaked out, what the hell???

On the next update his boat did the same thing! After so little sleep the night before, I hadn't realized that we had just finished. It was later reported that I had just edged BadgerOne by 5 seconds to finish 2nd. I am originally from Wisconsin, and of course BadgerOne lives there now, so 2 cheeseheads finished on the podium (and DIKKEHENK 23rd, Ed.).

Congratulations to Corners, BadgerOne, Chaos, and all the others, it was a great race!

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