

RTW 2020

The Ocean Championships

Before the first wave of 'The Pandemic' took hold at the start of the year, I had already resolved I would race every leg of the 2020 Sailonline Ocean Championships. This was going to be a first for bonknoot – in the past I had always skipped a few and given up or not tried very hard in a few more, because to pay attention to them tended to take more time than I had, but also, of course, because there was always a good chance that even if you put in the time, you wouldn't do very well. Focused as I had always been on my position on the SYC Ladder, the ROI (return on investment) of OCCH races was simply poor.

Things started off reasonably, but not amazingly, in the first two ocean races. The fact that together they were actually just a single long but very coastal leg from Abu Dhabi to Sanya of the 2015 Lada Ocean Race probably helped me avoid disaster. Routable from the get-go with 15-day grib, both our now two races actually broke down further into several coastal races – a race along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, a race across the Arabian Sea, a race across the Bay of Bengal, a race down the Malacca Strait and a race up the South China Sea – none of them of more than a week duration, so each immediately routable with a 7-day SOL grib, reducing the opportunity for disaster significantly.

Race 3 from Lisbon to Cape Town of the 12 race 2020 OCCH, however, was a true ocean strategy test – 5000nm through various weather systems including the Intertropical Convergence Zone, where the fitful winds are further enhanced in SOL by its quaint u/v interpolation, and it was going to take at least three weeks.

The Round The World Series

As I made my preparations, I noted that this OCCH 3 race was also one of 4 legs counting toward a RTW Championship. What the other races would be, I didn't know, but I thought there was a good chance the next leg would be from Cape Town to Australia or New Zealand, and leg 3 from there to South America, with a final leg taking the fleet back to Europe; in other words, a classic round-the-world race following the route of the 19th C clippers, and as sponsored by Whitbread from 1971 to 1986. Without a discard, consistency was going to be paramount, which meant I had a chance.

Race 1

That chance improved significantly when, when the virtual gun went at Cascais, a number of well-known Ocean SOLers were notably absent, and improved further again when the winds tempted an important fraction of the fleet to continue on down the coast of Africa, whereas the standard sailing sense is to get west and down the coast of South America and then come into Cape Town riding the edge of the Roaring Forties, which is what I did, thus scoring a 6th, which might have been better. Mullionman won it – impressively!

Race 2

Race 2 of the 2020 RTW did indeed turn out as being a race from Cape Town to the Antipodes, but to about as far distant as possible – Auckland on the far side of New Zealand's North Island. As the crow/gull flies this would be 6300nm, if said bird survived its flight across the eastern coast of Antarctica, but as set up on SOL, we were looking at covering at least 7000nm.

This set-up on SOL included a chicane at the Kerguelens and a mark in the sea off the North Island's Cape Reinga for an approach from the north via a turn at Great Barrier Island to a finish in inner

Auckland harbour, thus breaking the race up into four sections, two of which – at the Kerguelens from Cap Digby to Heard Island, and along the eastern coast of North Island were going to be simple enough precision routing challenges. That left two longer legs that were going to be tricky – from Cape Town to Cap Digby and from Heard Island to Cape Reinga.

As it turned out, I raced the first longer leg to Cap Digby poorly enough, but managed to recover most of what I had lost on the short leg to Heard Island, only to lose it all and more on the longest leg to the Cape Reinga mark, until 24 hours or so before arriving at that mark I accidentally took a punt which paid out in spades, and if I remember rightly I rounded 3rd. It was now all precision routing again, and, since the leader Kipper1258 clearly wasn't investing the same amount of time into the run-in, I just pipped him, for only my second victory ever in an ocean race.

Race 3

On to Race, 3 which was indeed from where we had arrived in New Zealand to South America, the mouth of the River Plate off Punta del Este in fact, but unusually a passage through the Straits of Magellan was going to be allowed as an option, and, of course, there was also a tricky exit out of the Hauraki Gulf to contend with.

The missing SOLers of Leg 1 were now – pandemic driven – all back, so with more than 250 on the starting line, this was going to be a critical one. Obviously, I was pleased and feeling very confident passing the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula in P1, but by the time I got to having to make the call inside or outside Cape Horn I had fallen back into the 30s. Inside turned out to be the way to go, and all those who either didn't want the hassle or had positioned themselves too far south to make it a viable option lost out permanently.

I went inside and found myself a fairly decent route via the Canal Barbara into the main Magellan Strait and out into the Atlantic, in the process picking up 17 places. Back on the open ocean, I once again lost a bit of ground (sea) to finish 14th. SimeMali won this one. Thank goodness we weren't racing to Brazil!

Race 4

So 6, 1 and 14 was fairly consistent, and gave me a c 20 point lead on Mullionman and Jawz in P2 and P3 overall, with SKOVSER in P4 a further c 10 points behind, who obviously all had been less consistent. We were back onto open water, with not a mark and barely an obstruction bar a few well-known island groups between Punta del Este and the Cascais finish, more than 5000nm north. So, a lot of water to go the wrong way in.

And the wrong way I did go, deciding relatively late to keep close-ish in under Brazil, putting me several hours adrift of Mullionman and Jawz who had routed for this western option much earlier. At some stage it became clear that we had all (there were many of us) made the wrong call and the winner was going to come from amongst those who had kept right and were planning to beat up the West African coast and then pick up an unlikely southwesterly gale when they reached the Canaries.

SKOVSER was in this easterly group, and, when I was still more than 20 hours from the finish, crossed 7th. At this stage, somehow I had managed to overtake both Mullionman and Jawz, but I had to finish 38th or better to take the Series, and there were fast guys (all gone the wrong way) all around me. I finished 37th. Phew!

batatabh won this last one, by three quarters of an hour to slot in 3rd in the Series just behind SKOVSER. Well done you two, as well!