

Lord Howe 2020 – Report by Zorba777

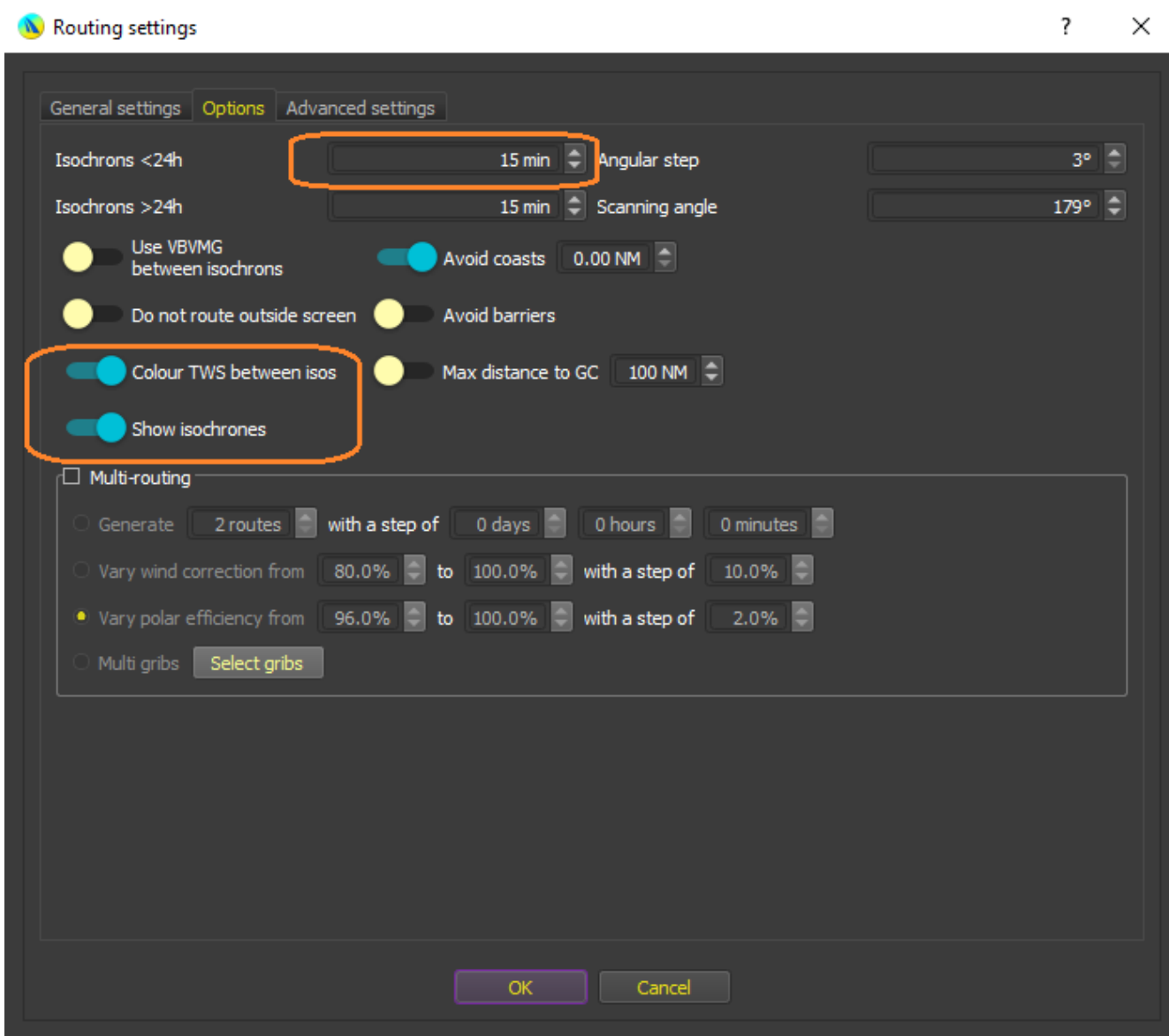
Do other SOLers also get better results with certain polars, and not so good with certain other polars? I wonder. I saw that this race would be done with the Sunfast 3300, which I still remember because I won my first SOL race with it (Hatteras Island Sprint). A bit like that famous first kiss...;-) Anyway, I was optimistic to start, also because I saw relatively slow winds, in which I tend to do better.

Lord Howe is a 400 Nm race, with some coastal navigation in the first hours, and one waypoint followed by a two or three day open ocean race to the finish. Long enough to offer some “chances”...

After winning a few races some colleagues start asking: why did you do this or that? I can't write a book in a race report, but I will try to show a couple things that I am using. Experiment and have fun are my first two rules of SOLing. But “luck” tends to come to the prepared.

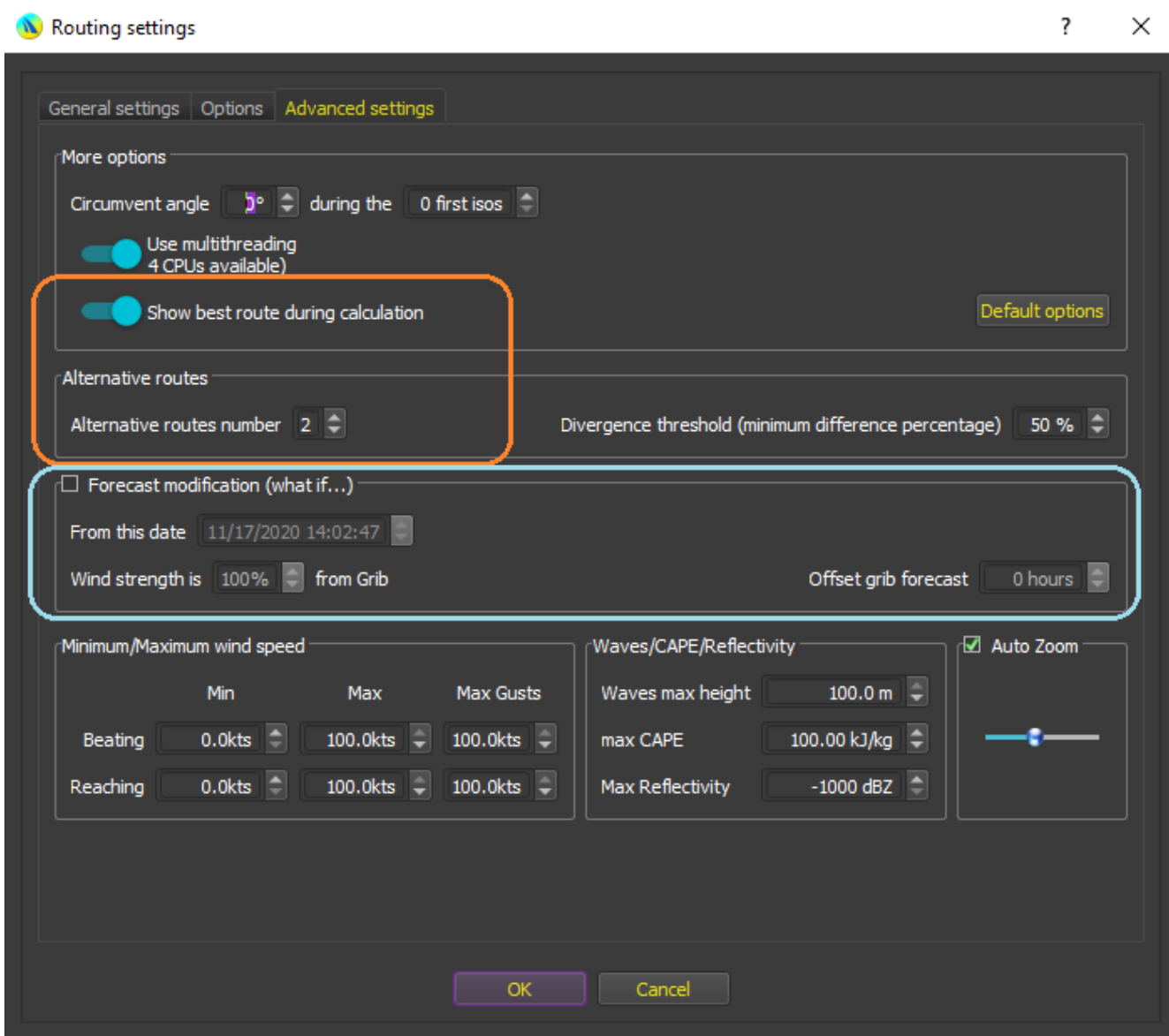
Like most SOLers I do use qtVLM routing software, but maybe I am using it a bit differently. Everyone is probably using it differently... Anyway, I am not just routing to get my DC-s to enter when I come back from the fridge to grab another beer. Watching what the router does and shows while it tries to find the quickest path is far more important than the final route it cranks out. How it moves and flips around during the routing procedure gives you important clues on where the tactical options are: where the boat will be slow or fast, where it accelerates, or comes to a standstill. Which other routes are (nearly) as fast... All that kind of things can be spotted from watching the routing very carefully.

For that aim I have a few settings that some newer SOLers may not pay attention to:



To see your router working the “Show isochrones” needs to be switched on. In longer races I normally use 15 minutes steps (sometimes even 30 minutes if the winds are very stable), but I may lower that to the minimum 5 minutes when there is a lot of tacking/gybing, or when there are a lot of small islands to avoid, or if you are defending a very small lead on the boats next to you with only 20 Nm to go. After routing I do “simplify” then “optimize”. And I may still do some manual tweaks.

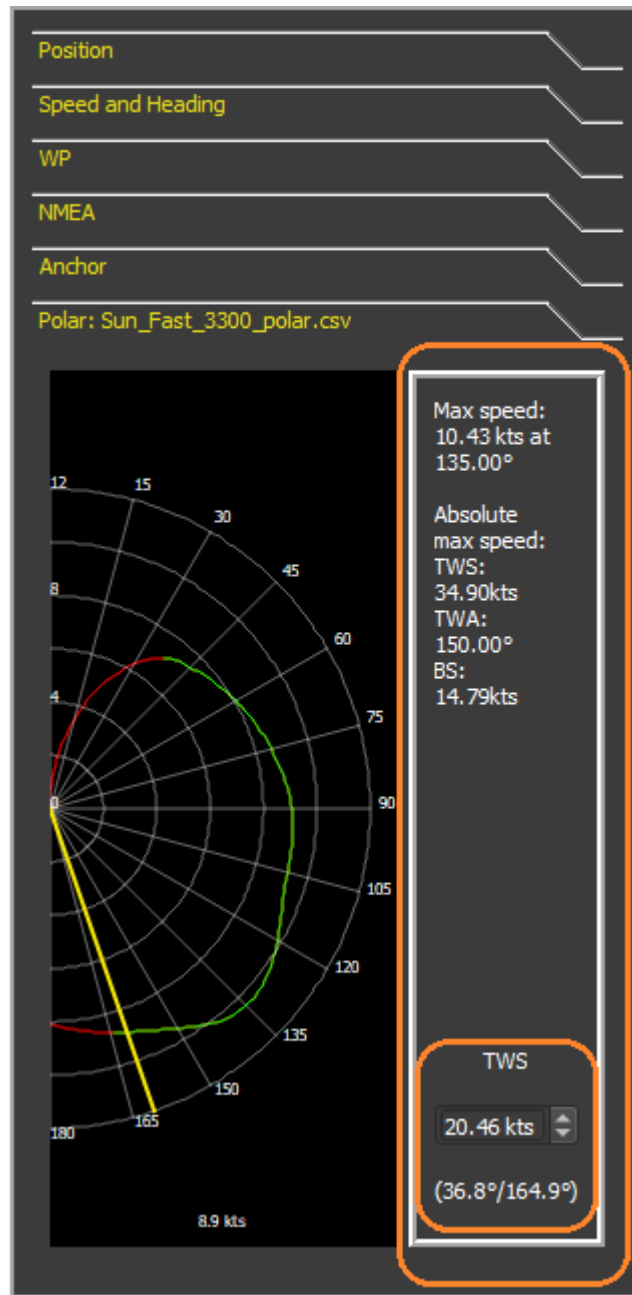
The “advanced settings” tab has some useful things too:



“Show best route during calculation” needs to be switched on if you want to see what it is doing. If the router changes “its mind” a lot during your routing then you will see it flip and get some ideas about different tactical options. Any path can become better or worse during subsequent WX updates. I also set the “alternative routes number” to 2. That means a few tactical options will be shown as white lines after the routing is done.

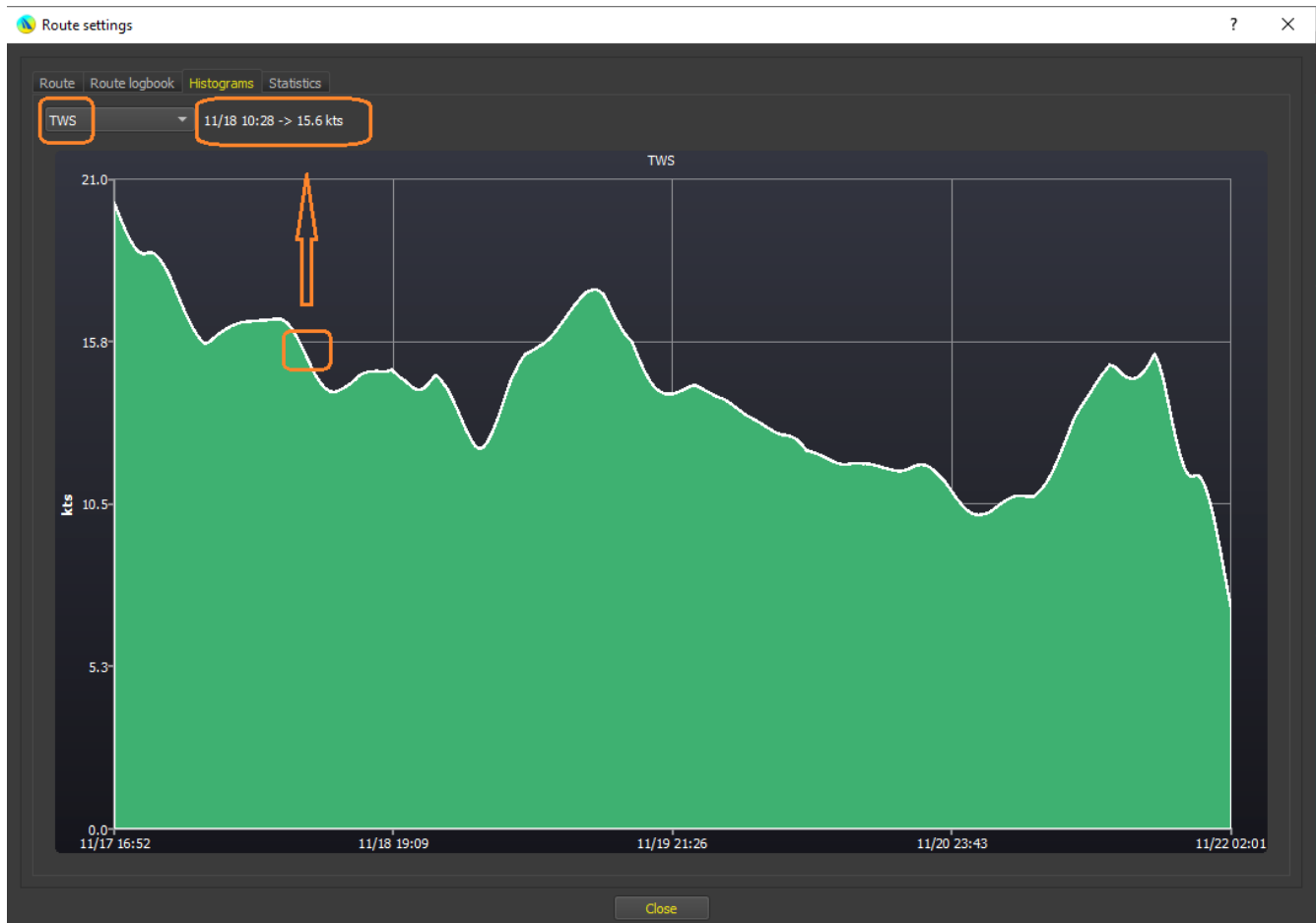
Circled in blue you see what is probably one of the lesser used functions in qt. Forecast modification. This is useful for learning. After a WX update the next 6 hours of winds are fixed, but after that there is uncertainty, sometimes big uncertainty. You can use this to see what happens to your route if the winds become a bit slower or faster than expected. I do not use this every race, because eventually you start developing some sense of what will happen when winds change.. But this feature can be your little secret practice lab :-)

Another qt feature that beginning routers may miss out on is given in the boat info box that appears when you click on the large boat icon:



The lower tab gives you a lot of important info related to the boat polar (and here you can also make sure you are using the correct one :). The maximum boat speed at different true wind speeds (TWS) and the optimal angles for tacking and gybing are right there. You may even write them down in advance. If NMEA is on then it will automatically update to current TWS. This can help you to be that little bit quicker during some parts of the race, and that can make a difference in the end.

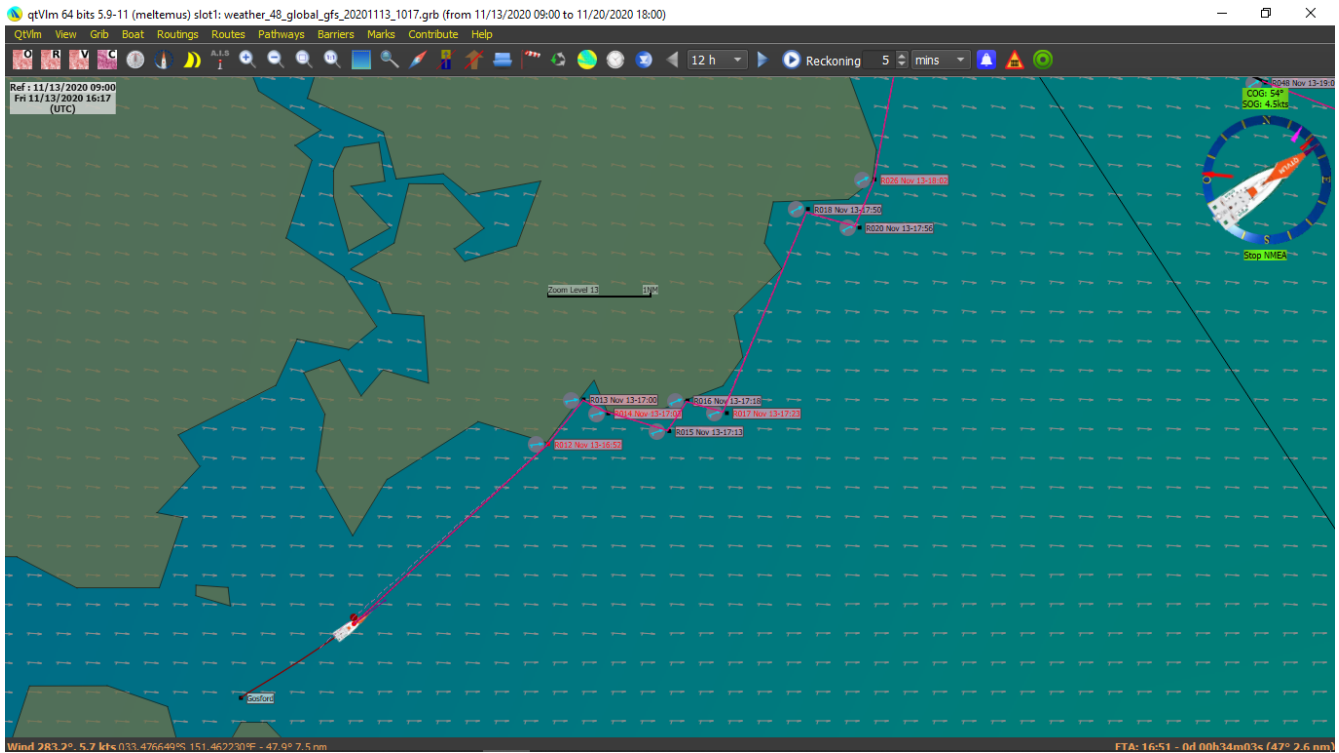
After a routing you can right-click on the route and open the “Route settings”. There is histograms tab and you have lots of choice there. TWS is useful if you have written down the optimal TWA angles for max speed and for tacking or gybing:



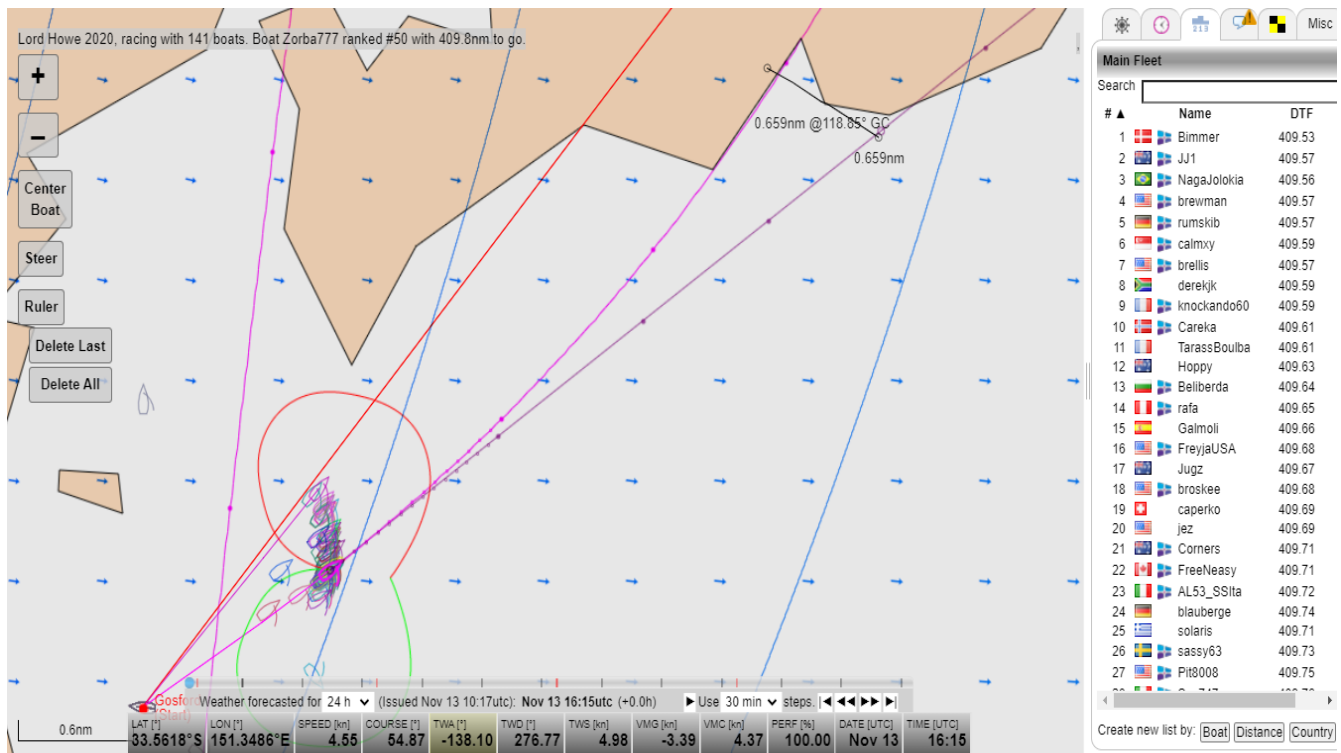
Clicking on the white line will display the date/time and TWS at that time. This makes it easy to spot when TWS will drop below or rise above key TWS speed levels at which the optimal TWA is changing. Depending on the conditions that can give you a little edge over the SOLers who are just copying/pasting the DC settings from the route logbook in the second tab.

As in every sport, or virtual sport, it can be very small details that make the difference.

OK, that's probably enough ideas that you can play with (or have been using already for ages ;-). Let's see how I used it in the race. The start was technical, so I did a 5 minute step routing. When there is a lot of gybing, as was the case here, I prefer to optimize my route manually. This is what I got:

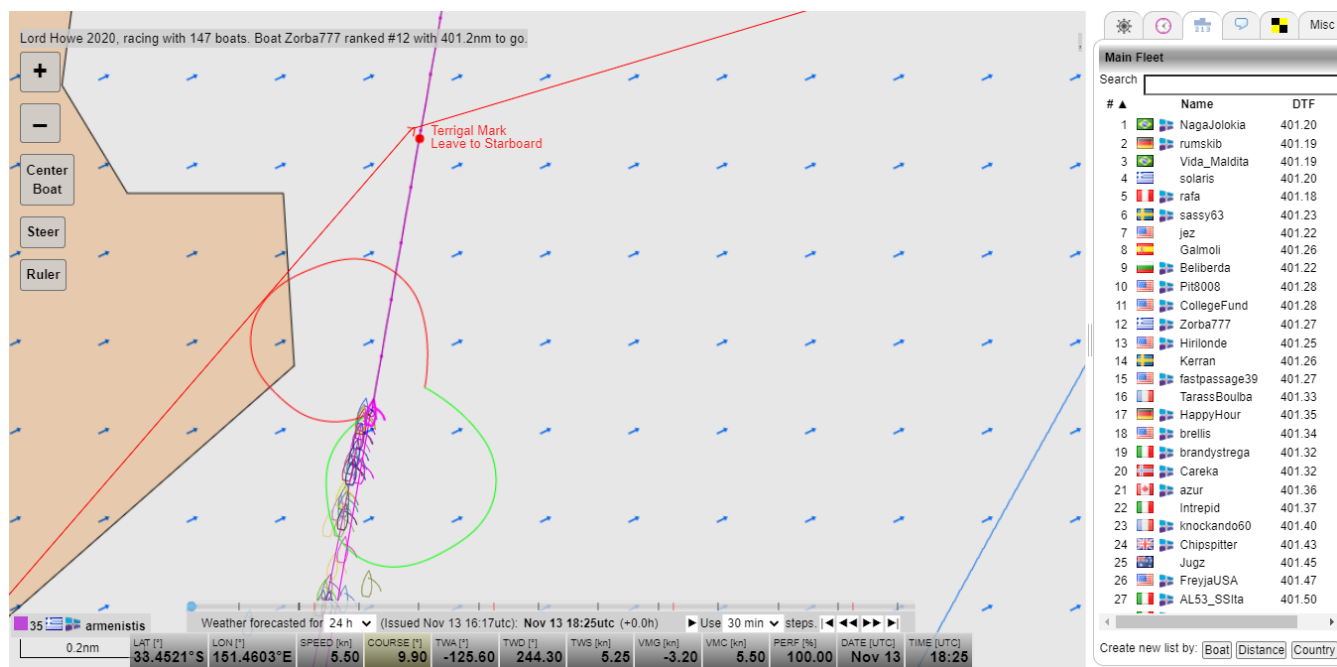


It's a long race. You will probably not win the race in this start phase, but you can already lose the race... So, at this stage: plan your race, and race your plan.

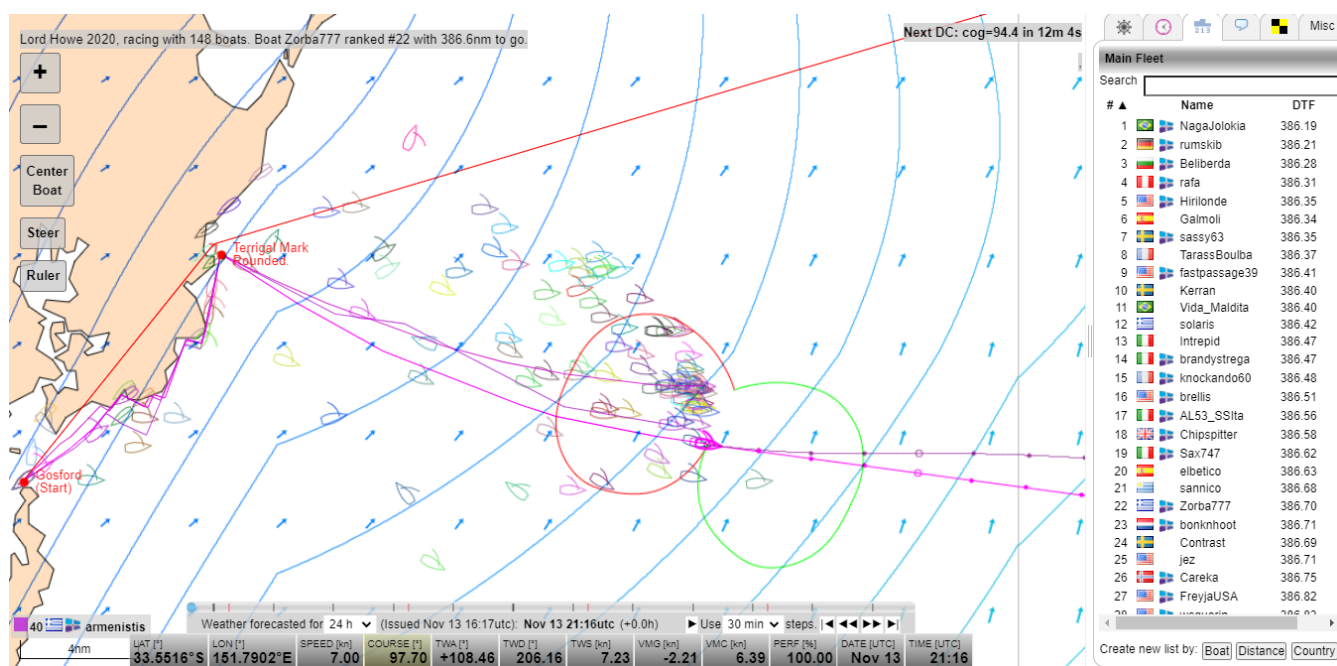


50th position after 15 minutes. My TWA was set to get exactly where I wanted. The ruler tool was set up to gybe near the optimal point. Be as perfectionist as you want to be...

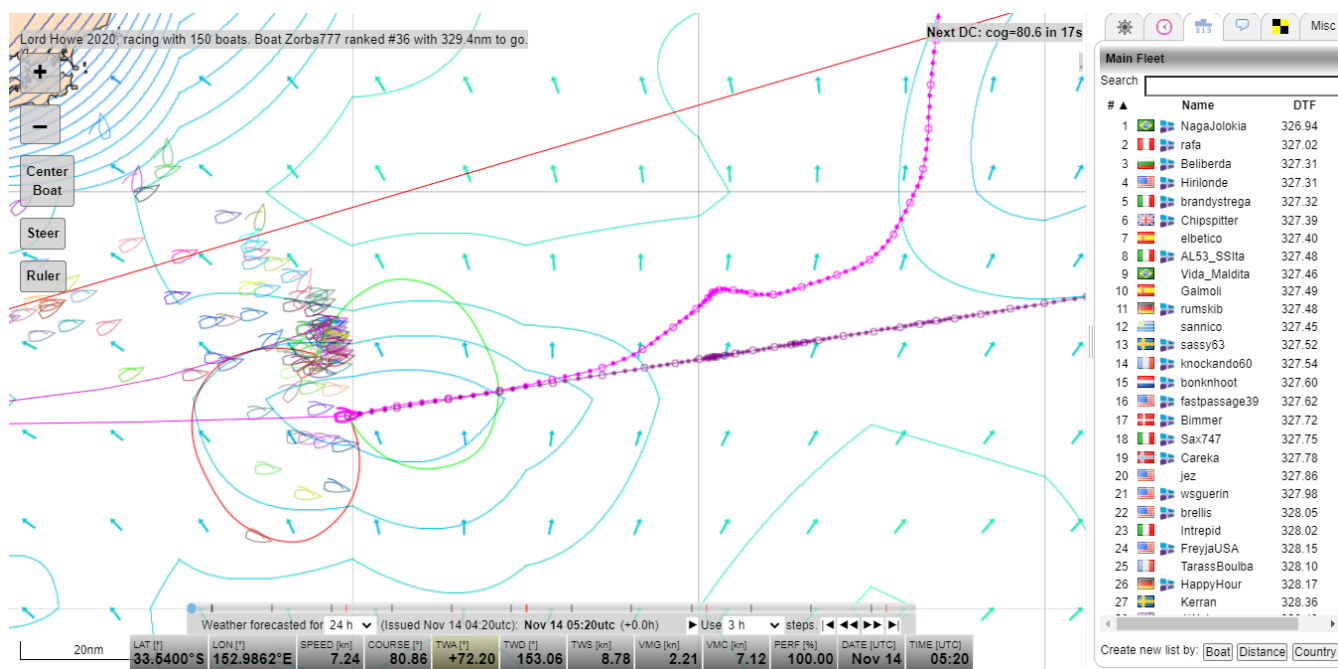
Just before the Terrigal Mark, the end of the starting phase where the boats were to turn into open ocean. I had climbed into 12th place, not far behind the leaders:



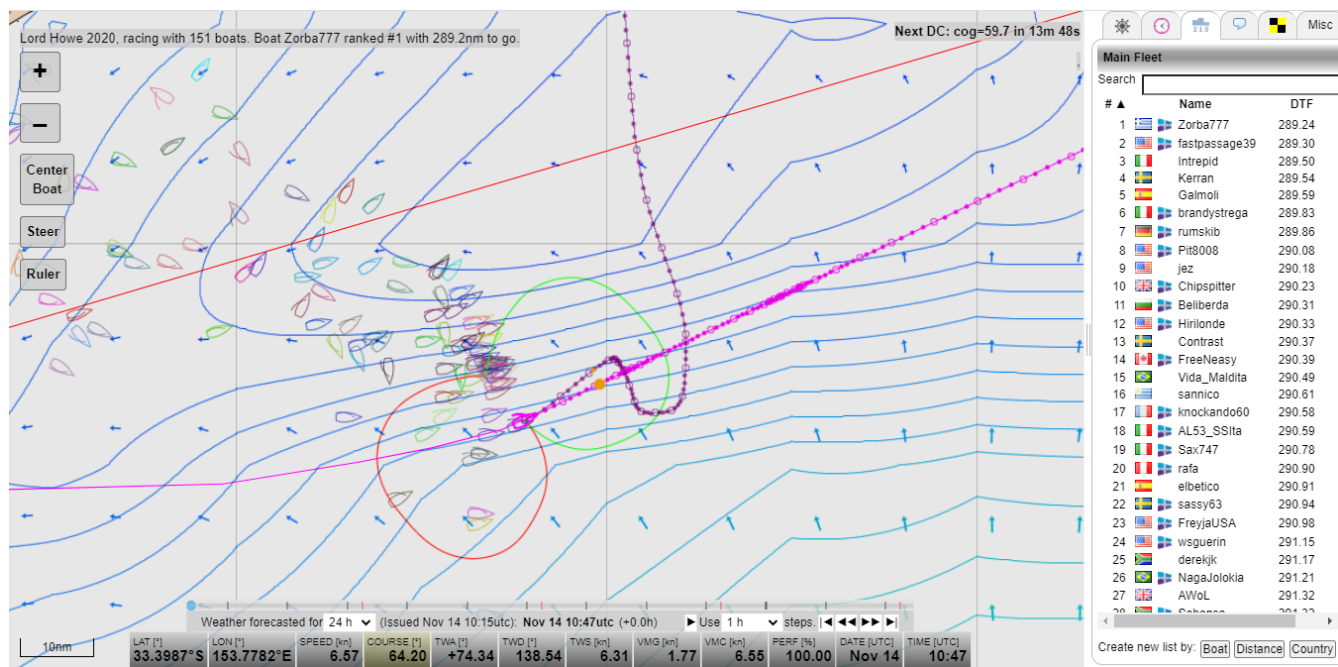
Still 400 Nm to go and the routing looked tricky. We were headed for a “blue wall” the next day with <1 kts winds. And much stronger winds after that. Fast winds are much more reliable than slow winds. The optimal route was very likely to change in the next WX updates. Since you can’t pass boats by staying right behind them, I decided to go more to the South than my routing indicated. It is a weakness of qt (and probably most routing software) that it will often send you too close to a pressure high with slow winds. The Southern route would take me into stronger winds more quickly, so taking that option came at a very low “cost”:



Three hours later. I hadn't given up much on the rest of the fleet despite going a longer way. The next day would decide the race. I woke up to this situation:



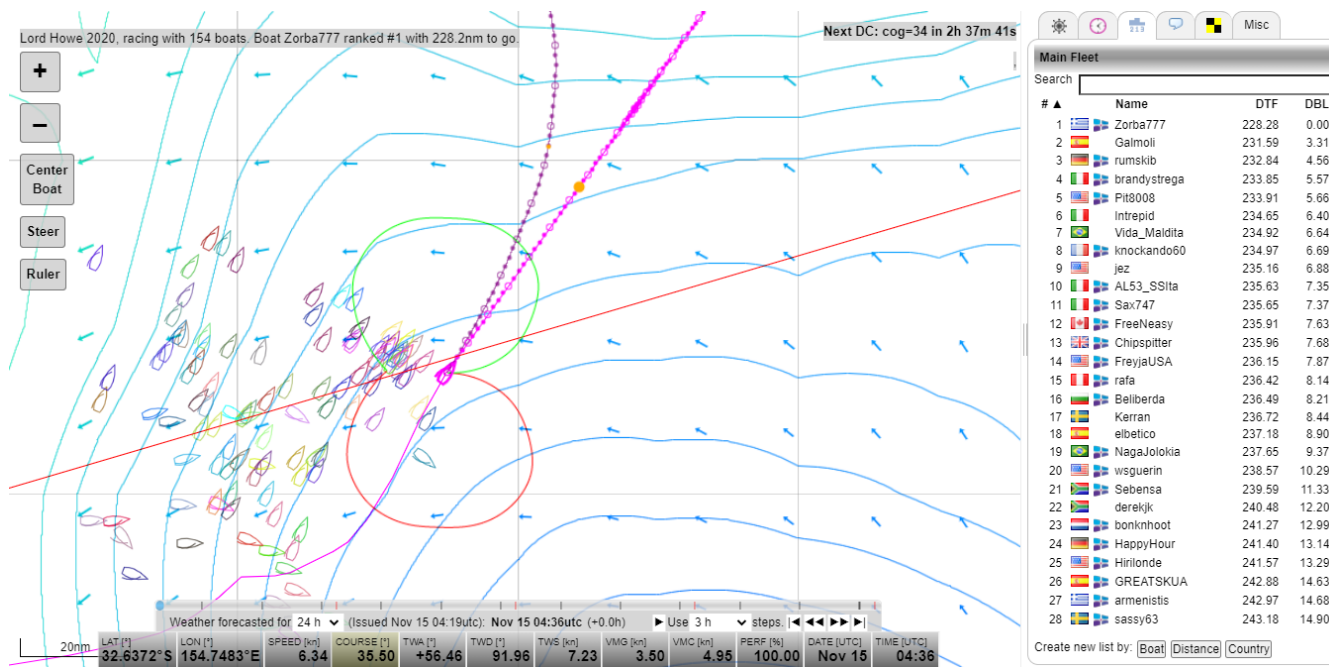
Ranking was down to 36th, more than 2Nm behind leaders Naga and Rafa at that point. All the boats were slowly turning more North towards the finish line, and I was more than 10 Nm more to the South. But that would soon turn into an advantage:



Two knots more wind speed than the main group allowed my boat to surge in the lead. Pit was right behind me and would go into 2nd place right after this screen, and we had a few

more good hours to go. The router had sent many boats too close to that no-wind zone. Staying a bit further away from it payed off very nicely. It's a strategy that will not always "work", but it's good enough for me if it works some of the time.

A blue wall was looming and it would take half a day to get through. That's always a tricky part of a race. More time can be lost (or gained) in near zero winds than in the parts where boats do 15 kts on max VMG. Here we emerged from the near standstill:

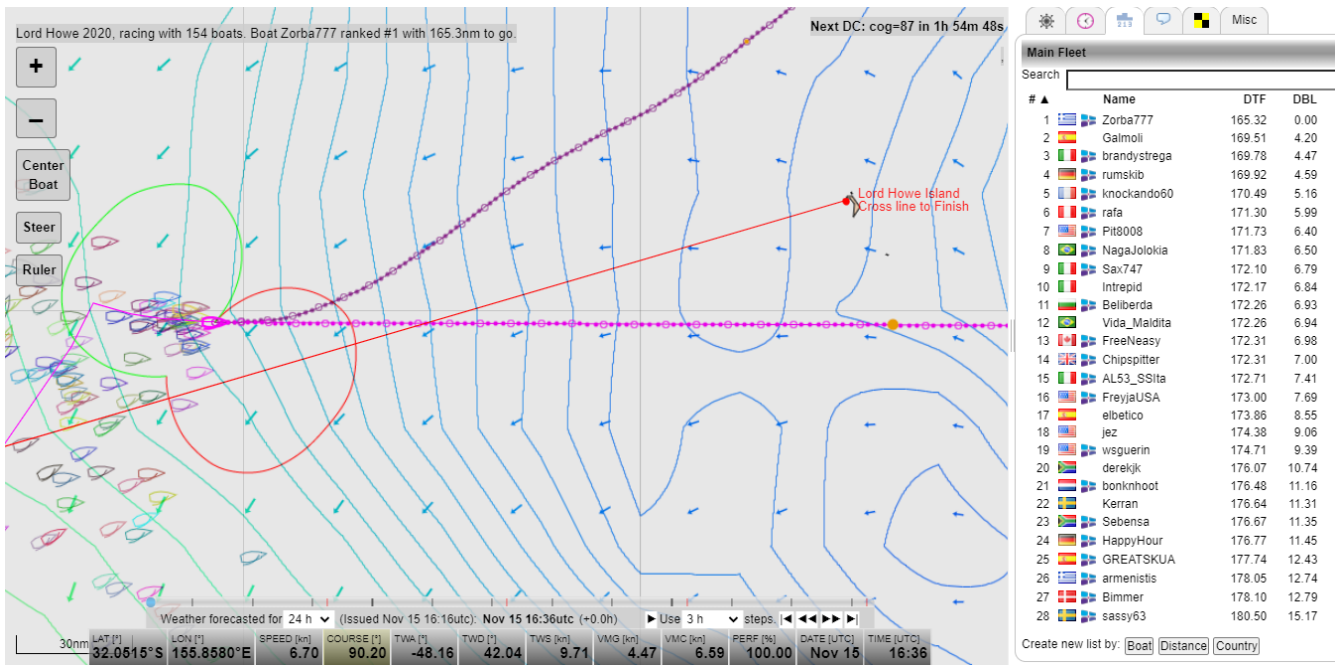


Came out with a nice lead and Galmoli, who was only in his 2nd ever SOL race, had smartly moved into second position by moving out of the main group at the right moment. Impressive.

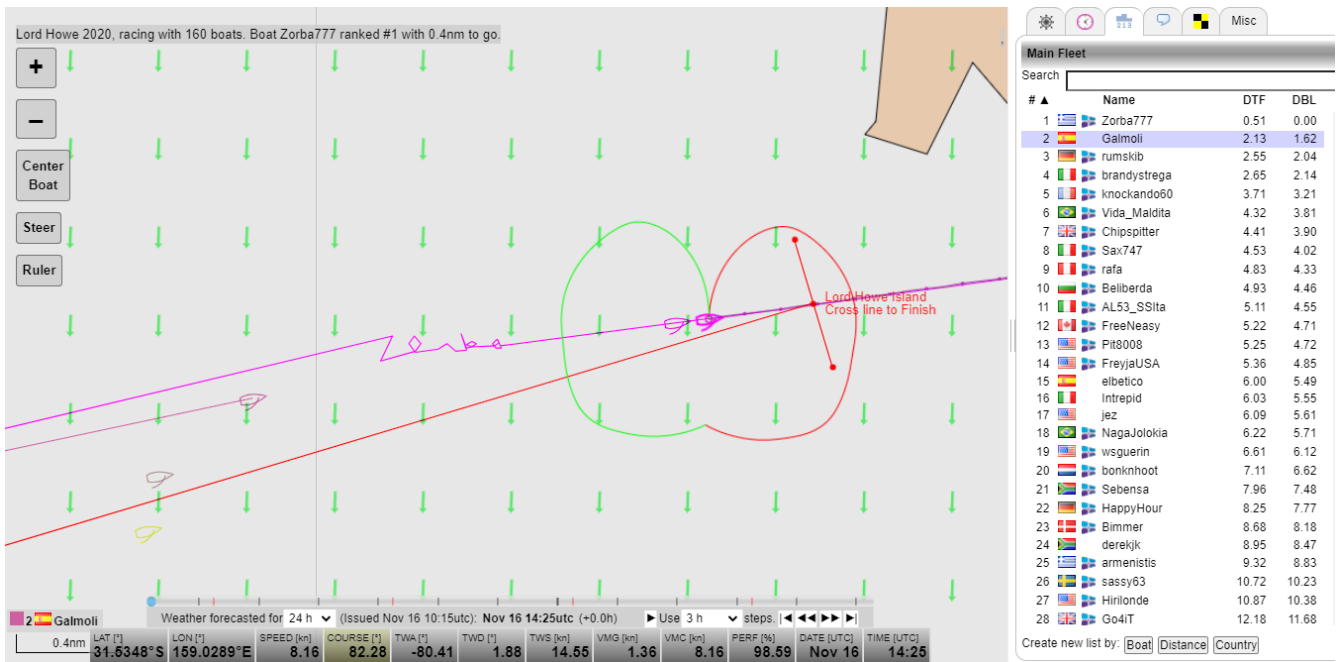
Pit had looked a solid 2nd place at some point, but probably waited too long to turn North and unfortunately got stuck in the blue goo. That blue stuff can be very unforgiving.

Still 200 Nm to go, but the rest of the race became straightforward with few position changes and even fewer WX changes (not that I was waiting for any :)

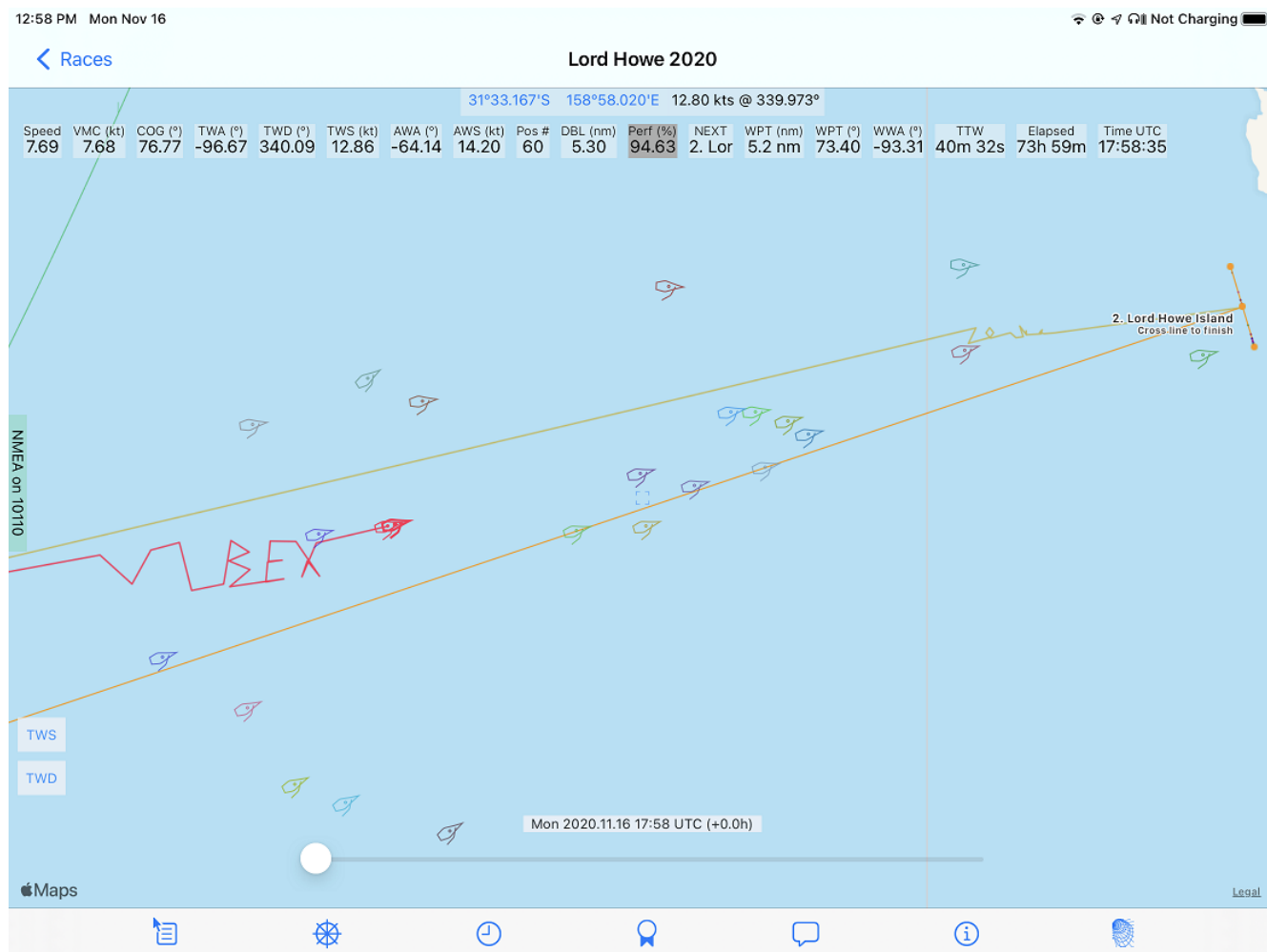
Last tack towards the finish:



It gave me the luxury space of trying to write a little sig. Just some fun in lockdown times. The result was readable, but with a pre-made set of tested DC one could probably write a better sig, time permitting:



Vibex made and posted another nice one. That deserves a mention (re-posting without permission):



Congrats to Galmoli for an amazing second place in his second race. And to Rumskib who took third place after a close battle with Brandystrega.

Thanks all participants and see you next time.

Zorba777