

## Christmas Christmas 2020

In a festive lull between Christmas and New Year's, and domestically committed to no SOLing until the new year, time then to write a report on this year's annual Christmas Island, Pacific Ocean to Christmas Island, Indian Ocean race (X2X). High time, in fact, as I see from my files, I have never written a report on this extraordinary race before, probably because I've never made the podium. Moreover, I had said to myself I would write up all of my ocean races in 2020, and referencing my files again, I note I have not kept to that good intention either, having so far missed writing up a Great Whale Migration (GWM), probably for the same no-podium reason! So here goes...

### X2X

Last year, this race, unusually, was sailed west to east, and although with a lot of islands including Australia in the way, creating a plethora of geographic routing options, there really was only one way to go from a meteorologic perspective, south around the bottom of Australia.

The traditional race, however, is from east to west, and east to west there is more than one viable way to go, including the one around the bottom of Australia, which became an option a few years ago, when the racing area was extended far enough south to make it possible. It looks very much the long way round, but is actually barely longer than the route over the top of The Philippines, both about 7000nm in straight, well GC, lines. The shortest route of course is though the Torres Strait, on into the Arufura Sea and out through the Timor Sea into the Indian Ocean, which is less than 6000nm, but it is normally not the way to go.

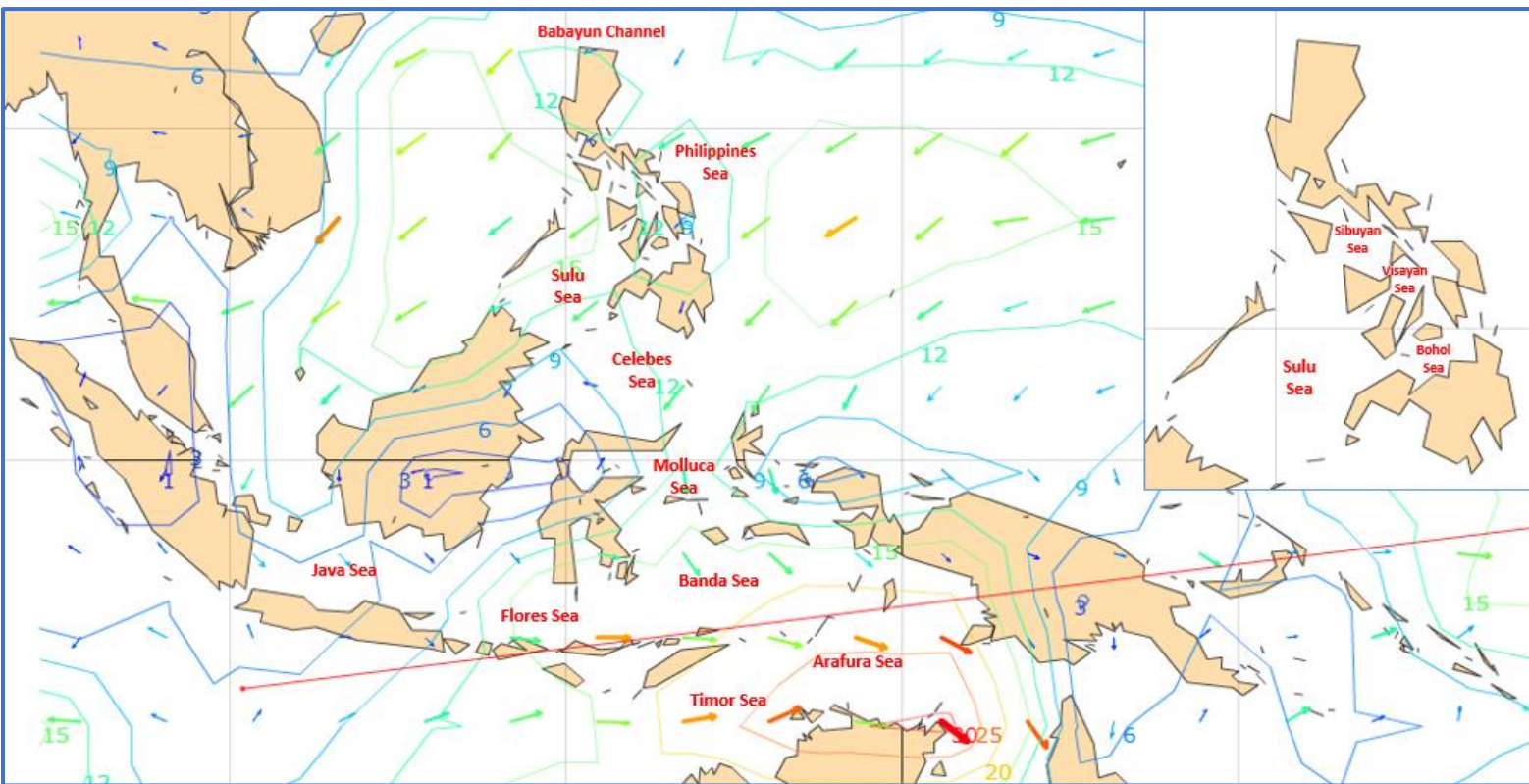
Because the race usually takes at least three weeks and often a day or two longer – this year it took me three weeks and a half a day – even if you have discovered how to obtain gfs forecasts beyond the easily available 15 days window, you simply can't 'router' it. You have to take a view from the very off. Which way do you want to go?

I always head north, as that way it still leaves me a number of secondary options:

- a/ over the top of Luzon,
- b/ through the San Bernardino Strait between Luzon and Samar,
- c/ through the Bohol Sea between Samar and Mindanao and on into the Sulu Sea to keep north of Borneo,
- d/ south of Mindanao into the Celebes Sea and on through the Makassar Strait into the Java Sea,
- e/ south of The Celebes into the Flores Sea and on through any one of several narrow straits into the Indian Ocean, and
- f/ west of Papua into the Banda Sea, but if you go that way, you'd wonder why you hadn't gone straight through the Torres Strait in the first place and avoided all those extra miles.

These are all options that you can wait at least a week to make your mind up on initially, if you go north, since the first and only thing to then do is to pick up the Northern Pacific Trade Winds, which are always there, extending several degrees either side of c 10° North, and scoot along on these for about 2500nm.

In my experience a/ and b/ are equally valid choices, and in the past, I have gone both ways, with some, if not quite podium, success. c/, d/, e/ and f/ are progressively ever less likely options, and I've never tried them.



a/ is about 150 more nm's than b/, but as the first 2500nm to be sailed are basically the same for a/ and b/ and the last 1500nm are also basically the same, you are talking about a 150/3000 or 5% detour if you go for a/, so you need quite a bit more wind over the top and down the north western part of the China Sea than through the middle of The Philippines. And if you're racing a polar that continues to accelerate as the wind picks up, that also helps.

This year, I was fairly sure I'd be going a/ over the top, and having made that choice me there were two, well three or four, moments where I lost my chance of a podium.

1/ To get up to the wind, the course is north west. I have never got this quite right, and this time again, I managed to lose about 15 minutes on the early northern leaders. I am not sure if I will ever get this right, but my general impression is that I tend to put too much westing into my course for better VMC early doors, but to ultimately loose out.

2/ Staying with the herd, gybing down the 10th parallel, I regained most of the lost minutes, save for those on a group of four or five who held their north west course till they reached 12° North or so, where by the time they got there, there was significantly more wind than initially forecast. This small group included RICOTINA, Dingo, nordee and azur, and after enjoying the fresher breeze further north, nordee and azur came back to cover the rest of us who were now four and more hours behind. RICO and Dingo came south a little but then gybed north again, which turned out to be a mistake. I am not sure I would do anything different a next time – those northerners took a punt, and it worked for two of them.

3/ A day or two after nordee and azur cover gybed ahead of the main peloton, the moment came to decide a/ or b/ and indeed c/ or d/. The fleet's votes were fairly evenly distributed across all the options, but, as said, it was always likely that I was going to favour a/ - over the top. I now made my second mistake, allowing aner59 and DIKKEHENK reduce the lead I had on them considerably. Basically, they headed off on the north west gybe early. azur and nordee, contrariwise, went late,

and I went in the middle. nordee found some great breeze halfway across, but I hit a dull patch and even put in a short gybe in the middle of it to avail of some angle, which didn't work either. Lesson: there comes a point when loose cover hedging your options doesn't work – make a choice, commit.

4/ Halfway down the China Sea, aner59 having already got past me as we passed through the Babuyan Islands at the top of Luzon, DIKKEHENK also got past me, by sailing hot and fast into a lifting but softening breeze that turned out to hold up better than forecast. He said it was just luck. I'd be inclined to disbelieve him, but on the other hand, I can't really say I made a mistake.

5/ Having cleared through the Selat Strait between Java and Sumatra, taking care to avoid crashing into Krakatoa, azur's coursing started to become a bit ragged, and a few of us managed to overhaul him, but nordee never flagged, to take the gun, for the first time ever. What a race premiere! Well, well done.

And Merry Christmas and Happy New Year one and all.

## GWM

The penultimate ocean race of the year was of course the Gray Whale Migration from Alaska to California, which I have given the acronym GWM, with the MWG being the same course in reverse. I don't apply a similar abbreviating convention for the X2X, for obvious reason.

The GWM is an ocean race, but only sort of, as it is divided by a number of sharp corners and two chicanes into four distinct coastal races each of 3 to 4 days duration:

- 1/ from the Bering Strait to Mount Westdahl
- 2/ from Mount Westdahl to Middleton Island
- 3/ from Middleton Island to a chicane between Rose Spit on the NE corner of Graham Island and the mainland
- 4/ from Rose Spit to a second chicane at Cape Blanco
- 5/ from Cape Blanco to the finish at Isla Magdalena

Coastal 3 to 4 day races are a different proposition to 15 to 20 day ocean races, as they require a high level of precision conversion of fairly reliable routed suggestions into best possible DC-series, whereas success in ocean races is much more dependent on making the right long-view strategic choices.

So, whereas I was pleased enough to finish fourth in the X2X, the same result in the GWM as far as I was concerned was only so-so, determined as it was on the one hand by a few aberrant DCs on my part dropping me down the fleet, and on the other by various steering errors by my rivals dragging me back up the rankings. So, what went on? In brief:

1/ from the start to Mount Westdahl, which side to pass St Lawrence Island required a fairly immediate decision. The router had said leave it to starboard nearly every time I had pre-checked it, and those who didn't lost out. I did what the router told me, but at some point north of the island, found myself on a slightly aberrant DC when I woke up my puter, and so rounded Mt Westdahl in P6 I think it was.

2/ from Mount Westdahl to Middleton Island, holding north closer in under the Alaskan coast was the shorter route with better VMC, but only initially. The router didn't recommend it, but one or two early leaders went for it anyway. I followed the router's advice and held further offshore to pick up a few places.

3/ from Middleton Island to the chicane between Graham Island and the mainland, if I recall rightly, it was again downwind, and according to the router it paid to come in late from out at sea to the Rose Spit mark, which I did. I think I probably suffered one aberrant DC finding myself on the wrong gybe, but whatever, I think I'd fallen back a place or two as we came away from Rose Spit.

4/ from Rose Spit to the second chicane at Cape Blanco, it was first necessary to transit the Hecate Strait between Graham Island and British Columbia, which required some rock hopping along the eastern coast of the island, before clearing out back into the bigger offshore breeze. This went well, and I picked up a few places. One or two competitors took a punt and instead of sailing south down the strait went out to sea over the top of the island straightaway after rounding Rose Spit. It nearly worked, but didn't. By the time we got to the rounding mark offshore Cape Blanco whatever I had gained, I'd lost again.

5/ from Cape Blanco to the finish at Isla Magdalena it was once again all downwind, and the winds were stable. Without any cards that could be played, my opportunities were likely to be others' misfortunes, and if I'm not mistaken that is how in the end I managed to pip SKOVSER and WRmirekd. Belated hard luck, guys!

bonknhoot/December 2020