

Tall Ships 2021

"I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking."

Like "Is maith is cuimhin liom" (see the AAA 2020), the above opening verse from John Masefield "Sea Fever" is another fragment that has remained lodged on my hard drive of little grey cells, ever since some secondary school teacher lodged it there, many, many years ago. "It is well I remember", but the longer ago it was, these days, the better my powers of recall are. So, very chuffed though I am to have been victorious in Sailonline's 2021 7-race Tall Ships series, I will, of necessity, be brief.

Online racing of course isn't quite as evocatively exciting as conveyed by Mansfield's cadenced images, but it does have the advantage of costing a mere \$35 a year to compete for 'silver' ware, and of eschewing the 'thrill' of the spray, rain and wind in your face. And not too much boat prep is needed before you start. So, on a whim, I resolved to race all seven of this year's Sailonline Tall Ships races, something I had never managed to do in the past, partly because, usually grouped close together, the time commitment required is considerable, but partly also because SOL's Tall Ships are tricky things to steer and early results were often discouraging.



And this year too, my first result was discouraging – P9 in a race into the wind from Lithuania's Klaipeda to Turku on the Finnish south west coast; two early mediaeval ports still going strong today. Poland's limesinferior, benefitting perhaps from local knowledge, showed us all how it was done, by taking a strategic gamble sailing low and hard for two days into stronger breeze where if it worked out there would be a shift, which there was, to win by nearly 10 mins from Spain's GREATSKUA, and the rest of us closely streaming in behind.



With barely time to reflect on lessons learned, two weeks later and with our unusually-large-for-Baltic-waters Clippers now in Estonia's Tallinn, it was off and upwind again to Mariehamn in the western reached of the Aland Isles west of Turku, where we had only just been. A shorter race than the opening race, but my strategy – to get inside the lift and not sacrifice height – was the same. This time it worked, but it was close with only 22 seconds separating my P1 from Sax747's P2, and again local knowledge appeared to pay some dividends, Estonia's Olev and Poland's WRmirekd slotting in three and four.



Two weeks later once more, masters and crew were back in Mariehamn where our Clippers welcomed us back, now for a voyage south to Poland's Szczecin. With the rather large island of Gottland directly in our path, to port or starboard of it was the major strategic choice. To starboard proved right, which was the way I went, but still managing to only finish 8th. GREATSKUA, finishing 3rd this time did well again, thus taking the lead overall (before and after discard) as we prepared to leave the Baltic Sea for warmer climes. My eight and nine weren't great, but the P1 in between was keeping me in the hunt.



Those warmer climes were to be found in Yeosu on the southern coast of South Korea, where another fleet of Clippers awaited us. Once again the course was going to be upwind, this time across the Sea of Japan to a finish offshore Nanao on the west coast of Japan's Honshu Island, and a rather large island, Tsushima, lay across our route. But if you looked closely, the one island was actually two, with a navigable (only on SOL) channel connecting its bays of Aso and Miura Wan. But nobody, but the USA's awskelton, starting late, spotted it. Most instead chose to beat up to the island's northern tip, but some eased sheets considerably to pass it to the south and find fresher and more favourable winds when they tacked, and would have led, had it not been for awskelton's move. Alas for aw's, his lead was slowly eaten up, and in the end it was Italy's Sax747 who took the gun, with WRmirekd close behind. I recorded a 5th, steady but not spectacular, but GREATSKUA sailed a disaster, so that after discard Sax was now in the lead, but only by a point ahead of me.



We next jetted quickly back across the globe to England and a change of craft in Falmouth for a race across the Bay of Biscay to Galicia's A Coruna. Tall Ships are not renowned for their upwind performance, and our new vessels, 90-metre Barques, proved to be even worse upwind than the Clippers we'd left behind in the Far East. And once again, the course was upwind! But fortunately,

and very much as so often IRL, once Brittany was abeam, the wind turned abaft, and after a while a gybe was called for, the timing of which and the breaking down into two parts – hot then deep, gybe, then deep then hot – went very well. I took the lead, and a fresh and steady breeze kept me there. Lucky, a second P1, and with Sax recording a 7th, I was now in the lead overall after discard, by 4 points.



No sooner had we finished in A Coruna than it was back to Japan and back to Nanao, where our Clippers were still lying at anchor, now freshly victualled and equipped, this time for a race to Siberia's Vladivostok, again across the Sea of Japan. I recall missing an early WX in this race and finding myself off the beaten track more to the west of the rhumb line than my nearest competitors and never fully recovering from this. However, in the end, an error in judgment cost me some of the ground I had recovered and Sax747 beat me to the line with a P4 vs my P7, after we had been dead-level 12 hours late. rafa won the race, but three previous finished outside the T10 and a DNS meant he was out of contention.



Back in Europe, our Barques had now magically found their way down the Portuguese coast to Lisbon, for a final race, around a mysterious mark in the sea off Cape St Vincent, to Cadiz. With my worst result up till then, that P9 in R1, only Sax, just 1 point adrift of me after discard could wrest the overall victory from me. At the start, the winds were unusual – light, very light and out of the south. Progress on the wind was slow, very slow, but progress was important and mine was not so great. Incredibly, Sax got away even slower than I, and it was this misfortune and not any good race skills of mine that decided the Series in my favour. I finished 11 and discarded it to count my 9th, to win by 3 points from Sax, who also discarded his last race result of 13 to count a 12th.

It was very hard luck on Sax, but great to take the title. With 31 points from 6 counting races, my average place was no better than 5th. Behind me, only 3 points adrift, 3 boats – Sax, Mirek and Olev – tied for 2nd, which was decided for Sax on best discard. In other words, the racing was close, and many had at least one good race, and because of that, perhaps, the turnout for the Series was super strong, with 91 Sailonline Yacht Club members competing, and at least as many privateers.