

Maryland to Alaska 2023

Borrowing extensively from my 2020 report on this race in which I finished a decent-enough 6th, here follows my report for 2023!

Another ocean race – eh no, not quite for the purists, just two short stretches of open sea (a few days on the North Atlantic to start with, and a few days in the Beaufort Sea) and a minefield of choices of bays and straits to navigate through and islands to avoid. So what went wrong for bonknhoot? Crossing the finish line in P2 after almost 21 (was 17 in 2020) long days of super-absorbing online racing, you'd like to think 'not a lot'. You'd be wrong.

Back in 2020, my incidental manual interventions in my DC-series were prone to error, either entering TWAs in my CC box, or the other way around. I hadn't switched yet to the HTML5 beta-browser, but this year the Beta had become the Alpha, and I had long become a user, so 'no excuses' from that source anymore.

in 2020, I immediately found myself in-dubio after the start. Coast or sea? West or east? Last time, the hotshots split pretty 50:50 on the issue (DIKKE and Mull and Limes etc out to sea; SKOV, Sime, Dingo and Rico etc close in to shore); I hedged my bets up the middle, and went P1.

This time, there was a massive majority that favoured keeping inshore. Ahead a storm (or hurricane) was swirling its way anti-clockwise towards Europe, but the forecast had it moving quickly, and thus our routers saw no opportunity to catch up with it, pass it to the south to get east of it to ride its front face north in a following F8. But team Italy disagreed, and SCARA, RICO and Aner headed south of east straightaway, backwards in terms of VMC (note: Qt only comes up with -ve VMC at the optimisation stage – initial solution only allow +ve VMC time steps/isochrones). After a while, sailing close-hauled from time to time and even putting in the odd tack north, I, following the consensus, went P1 and my Italian chums were vying for last place.

A day or two later, it began to begin looking like the massive majority were mistaken. Many (Dingo, Pit8008, to name but a few) ignored their routers' suggestions to bear off east and south of east. The storm's progress had slowed, but perhaps it would speed up again, and anyway they were 'committed', and apart from that, a route up to Scataire Island off Cape Breton, and then into the Gulf of St Lawrence and up the Esquiman Channel between Labrador and Newfoundland, was still an option.



Scataire Island Light – never seen in 2023

The alternative was to pass east of Newfoundland, straight into the Labrador Sea. Preferring the look of that and the prospect of reduced BBQ risks out on open water, I started to hedge my bets, ignoring both my router and the new leaders north west of bonknhoot, but every six hours I bore off more. So quite the 'scenic route', and I was more than a little amazed to find myself not much more than half an hour behind Donatello, Michealangelo and Leonardo by the time the next choice faced us all – north west for the Hudson Strait or northwards on into Baffin Bay.

As in 2020, I continued on north, remembering how badly unstuck Limes came in the Hudson Strait that previous race, and knowing that with the lines of latitude compressing rapidly on our Mercator projections, the track through the Strait on into the Gulf of Boothia and Foxe's Basin, out through the Bellot Strait into the Franklin Gulf, down to the Queen Maud Gulf and out through the Coronation Gulf finally into the Beaufort Sea is much longer than it looks.



Bellot Strait – not attempted either in 2023

So, on into Baffin Bay, which is a bit more than a bay really. At 700,000 km² it is larger than the Black Sea, and together with the 850,000 m² of the Sea of Labrador, the open waters ahead were bigger than the Gulf of Mexico. Ample opportunity then to get things wrong. And wrong I got them, at least initially, loosing a good half an hour further on the leaders by keeping a bit more east. But as we sailed on into Baffin Bay, a moment came where from my position it was going to pay to keep east and to the right of a zone of retreating blue goo. I was not alone, but neither were there very many near me for who this was also going to pay. Certainly there was Mirek, and Miggy too, I think, and it worked a treat, and I went P1 for the second time.

Two exits out of the Bay – Lancaster or Jones Sound – were now, as before, equally valid. Jones Sound, the high north route, at times had routed better, but now the weather forecasts favoured Lancaster Sound. Thank goodness, there being only one way out of Jones Sound, whilst the more southerly Lancaster route still left you options – straight on into the Melville Trough or hard left into either Prince Regent Inlet, Peel Sound or the M'Clintock Channel. And there was a shortcut into Lancaster Sound via Pond Inlet inside Beliot Island on the south east corner of the Sound, which I luckily never saw, as I had blocked it off on my router with a 'barrier'.

(The more you do the topographical research on these waters, the more the conclusion strikes you that 'oop North' here back in the 18th C it was just a little too cold for the average French explorer!)



Jones Sound – again no way in 2023

So, a third split and into three or two and a half. Aner, accompanied by Badger and one or two others went for Jones Sound, most of the other leaders went for Pond Inlet, whilst RICO and SCARA and I went the open water route leaving Beliot to port into Lancaster Sound.

I sailed badly for the entrance to the Sound and lost the lead to RICO, with SCARA going into P2, but then the Pond-erers overtook us but only briefly as the anticipated tacking-fest to exit onto the Sound proved to be more time-consuming than Qt had forecast. Next though, Aner and the Jones Gang went into the lead. Enjoying considerably more pressure than the Lancastrians, the Jones Gang's lead extended to more than 70nm at times, but in the end, as in 2020, when Zorba (miss you, Z) and his Zorebastrians went into the lead taking Jones option, it ended badly for them.

By the time we transitioned from the Lancaster Sound into the Melville Trough, bonk, working the line of faintly better wind along the 74th parallel with the other Lancastrians, sometimes from abaft, sometimes from ahead, was back in the T3 together with RICO and SCARA, and many others not far behind. The Jones Gang were now going slow somewhere in the Maclean Strait or Massey Sound, and the Hudson-farers were very well out of it.

I remembered that in 2020, a passage south west from here down through the Prince of Wales Strait had worked for me, the three S's (Simi, Sax and SKOVS) and inevitably for RICO. But also I remembered that a number of other noteworthy names (DIKKE, Dingo, Mull, StIng, SCARA; I checked) had carried on straight into the Beaufort Sea, and had gone into the lead, only to be stymied by some new and very blue goo halfway across to Barrow.

As in 2020, feeding this dilemma was a long patch of stronger easterly breeze close in under the coast of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation lands along the 71th parallel. Would it work again? Mme. Qt didn't think so, and so we all carried on into the Beaufort Sea, aiming initially for another line of wind, now along the 75th parallel.

If you are reading this, well thank you, but also you may be wondering about this focus of mine on parallels, or maybe not. If not, then you will know that grib data is located at regular intervals of latitude and longitude. Those intervals can be as small as 0.05 degrees (c 3nm N to S, less E to W depending where on the planet you find yourself) when we are racing sprints. For this race, the grib resolution was 1 degree (c 60nm). In between the wind we 'experience' is linearly interpolated from these data points. So, if there are 2 data points next to each other that are higher (think of mountains with straight slopes to visualise linear interpolation) than the other data points, then there will be a ridge higher than the rest of the landscape/windscape around them and this will either be along a line of latitude (a parallel) or along a line of longitude. Since the gaining direction for progress was roughly east to west for a large part of this race, it was the parallel east to west ridges that drew my attention.

However, out on the open sea, there came a 22:30z WX that cutie Fifi felt was cause to gybe away south from 75oN early. I reckoned SCARA was well to bed and RICO too maybe, so I wasn't surprised they didn't react. I took her advise and after I gybed back I was P1 again on the inside of a long curving route with a further gybe or two south a few days in the offing. I felt it was looking good, ut alas two days later RICO hit some better pressure after all, and it was all over, bar the kind worth back and forth as we approached the finish.

So, well done RICOTINA. Grande!

And well done SRC! Once again, this has been a tremendous race. Thank you for having the gumption to repeat it, now with the more challenging polar of our new maxi, the Archer 78, a bit of a dog in light airs, but with serious afterburners for going downwind in a blow.

bonknhoot/September 2023



Beaufort Sea – Whales and Ice

Postscript / Repeat

Wouldn't it be great if in 2024 we had a series that consisted entirely of these sort of multiple choice races through volatile forecasts. And where might that be? Well, either between the Tropics or at High Latitudes. The more I think about it, the more High Latitudes seems to be the better choice. The ice is melting and so exploring arctic and antarctic waters has some relevance, and in Amyr Klink (<http://www.amyrklink.com.br/en/>) and Skip Novak (<http://www.pelagic.co.uk/>) we have two potential buddies, who might welcome the publicity that an association with a 6-Race High Latitudes Series could bring them. So, here's my proposal:

- Round Antarctica in three legs,
- the NE Passage
- Round Greenland, and
- the NW Passage,

all in fluky variable winds, on Mercator-distorted charts.

Subtle improvements that have been incorporated in the new HTML5 client by ij vis-a-vis the Flash client, which I understand will become the standard in 2021, make all these tracks feasible, as you can see from the 'breezy' snips below.

See <http://www.sailonline.org/board/thread/16941/?page=1#post-16941> for the full Race Proposal.

