

No. I've never sailed.....so what?

There I was, swinging on the back porch and thinking of wooden boats. "Why not build a boat myself?" I mused. Why not a sailboat? my lovely suggested. Somewhere along those lines and while scanning the Internet for ideas, I came across the Texas 200. This was November 2015.

I chose the Michalak Mayfly 14. Looked to be reasonable for a first build and along with Mr. Michalak's excellent book, it was. Construction began sometime in December 2015 when I picked up the sheets of Hydrotek. The sail I ordered from Duckworks. Familial obligations and my general largesse saw completion (most of it) by mid May 2016. The 200 is less than a month away.

I rigged her exactly per Mr. Michalak's chapter on rigging. I familiarized myself with what rope does what, which way to point the rudder, etc....on Belton Lake, TX. Torrential flooding had closed all the boat ramps and I was only able to take the boat out three times. The 200 is next week.

There are several accounts from previous 200 sailors regarding preparation essentials. I have practiced primitive camping most of my life. The preparations for the 200 should be along these lines, especially for the soloist. Freeze dried, lightweight, etc..... I attempted a portable shower, idea courtesy of Duckworks, but broke the sprayer getting it unpacked. Baby wipes it is!

The travel logistics are easy. I would recommend booking a room at White Sands as early as possible. Reasonable rates, good restaurant and you don't have to schlep your gear as much. Rent a slip too. The bus ride after vehicles drop off was uneventful with a nice lunch sponsored by the club.

Day 1

Up before the sun with the first Cliff bar of many in my shirt pocket. I had prepped three Nalgene bottles with my sports drink of choice. Dry bags x 3 for clothes, food, and charts. Everything else was gently stuffed into the relatively watertight holds of the Mayfly. No need for the GPS today as I can distinguish between green and red.....and turn right.

Rowed out of the harbor. Lovely design, these oars. Square loomed, light. Straight from the book. Hoisted sail while remembering to tie off the downhaul first, and it worked! I was off with a slight wind off my right shoulder, fat, dumb, and happy. Two boats ahead of me made their turn into the channel and I intended to follow suit. That's where the wheels came off, so to speak. The wind, which had been such a sweet whisper, was now a gale (to me). In my attempt to change sail to port we almost went over. "Reef early and often", I'd read and decided on just that. In three foot waves with 20 kt winds. I put both reefs in, tied

my new “nettles” in grannie knots and pointed her northish, between the markers. During all this commotion the hand of God had guided the sail to port. And we’re off.

I do not know the wind’s velocity that first day, but it felt strong. Those two reefs I had put in stayed with me for the duration. I did make the turn towards the jetties, missed the channel, grounded, rowed, grounded again, and spent the first night alone on a spoil island. Three different participants stopped to inquire as to my well being. Went out of their way to inquire. I bathed, cooked dinner and was inside the tent prior to the mosquito invasion.

Day II

Up early, just as the sun’s peeking. Boats are already coming past from the jetties. Wind is blowing pretty well and I see white caps past the spoil island. Break camp, pack; prep my drink bottles and stuff two Cliff bars in my shirt pockets. This meal, fluid preparation will become a daily routine. Sunscreen, have to remember to reapply today. My ankles and hands took a scorching yesterday. Sure am proud I have this ridiculous hat (with chin strap).

All loaded up, sail’s up and I am ready to push off. What a joke! The boat wants to GO as soon as she breaks free. I get her pointed in the general direction of deeper water and jump in, grab the sheet, point the tiller, knock over my coffee press...I’m breathing like a marathoner. And we ground. So I do it again, and again, third time with success.

Today’s navigation is easy as yesterday. Point towards the town of Port Mansfield, turn right into the channel and follow the ICW until I see sailboats on the beach. I can do this.

The wind is strong, but it’s at my back. The sea is at my back. Could be much worse. I’m making my way NE, following the ICW and I’m surfing! The little boat is actually catching waves.....sometimes. Other times I’m working the rudder like a sawyer, trying to keep the bow perpendicular to the oncoming wave. We almost go over several times before the land cut.

During this time, and prior to the land cut, a bigger sailboat named “Pilgrim” pulls alongside with video camera rolling. The captain is saying something about my boat disappearing between the swells. Their cameras are snapping and rolling until they’re past. I’m trying to drink without most going down my shirtfront. This is great.

The land cut is mellow. Easy sailing, dolphins. I eat a Cliff bar, drink a couple liters, and even manage a chew of tobacco. I spot the other boats on my right; sail in without damaging anyone else’s boat. I made it! I made the second camp!

Day III

Today's a short sail. Less than 30 miles or so. Another easy navigation, so no GPS needed. Stay in the land cut for a while, cut towards the right after a bit and look for the sandy beach on your right, the one with all the sailboats. Oh yeah, it's a real shallow approach, so you may have to drag your boat a ways. No problem.

Morning's routine complete, I launch. I'm sailing today after one of the master's of the Mayfly has given me some instruction. This particular gentleman may be THE master of the Mayfly. Much appreciated. Anyhow, I'm rigged with a much better system for "tacking". Today was so uneventful, that's really all I've got. I didn't turtle, found the beach, had a cocktail and went to bed. I made camp three. Sweet.

Day IV

This is the one I have been dreading, fearing almost as much as day one. The ferries at Port Aransas! I will have to "tack", go INTO the wind, like a sailor, whilst dodging the good ferry captains and their human cargo. All that in a little narrow channel. Mucho apprehension.

It's going to be a long day, but I take my time leaving. I'm almost the last boat to launch. After putting it off as long as possible, I set her up, point the sail where I want it (courtesy of the Mayfly master), and jump in. What a difference a little instruction makes. This launch was actually pleasant.

Following the ICW. Green on the right. Oh crap. There's a barge. Not a ship, which I understand can be much more dramatic, but a barge. So I get out of it's way, get out of the ICW. The Mayfly is designed as a shallow draft boat and because of that can float in very shallow water, like less than three feet. Even with my arse in it. So the barge passes, no problem.

Marker 37. A lot of the boats have docked at this marina/café for lunch. Looks appealing, ice, hamburger, ice...but I'm making headway and have a relatively slow boat. I elect to stay the course. Green on the right...

It's GPS time. I actually have to plot a course. What we're looking for is a hole, "stingray hole", to be exact, in the island chain protecting the shipping channel through Port Aransas. There's a couple ways to approach this spot, both of which involve circumnavigating Shamrock Island. I choose an easterly approach, putting me close to some very shallow water between Shamrock and Stingray. But remember, I'm in a Mayfly 14.

As I'm rounding Shamrock a pair of gentlemen in a large yellow catamaran blow their air horn to get my attention, then practically luff their sails to slow to my speed (I'm still really comfortable with the two reefs, even though the wind has

slacked somewhat). Anyhow, they're asking me directions to Stingray. ME! What are they thinking? I tell them the obvious, that I have no idea and am following a ten-year-old GPS and fishing maps. They follow me anyway and we make it into the ship channel.

I pull up on a shell beach immediately. I'm prepping my sail, per the master of the Mayfly, for this dreaded, million-mile tack through the ship channel. Get her set and take off. Tack a couple times as per online suggestions and settle on a long tack going from right to left. This also mimics what I see the other boats doing. Highest form of flattery, right?

I'm making headway into this wind, not fast, but not stopped either. I get to the last ferry; the very last ferry, and lose momentum. Lose wind, momentum...everything. The ferry is about twenty feet to my left. I try tacking the other direction, nothing. Wait.... a puff of wind catches my sail.... and spins me in a circle. People on the ferry are getting out their cell phones to take pictures. I break out my by now well used oars. Sail is still up and it's flapping in my face, but I row. I row away from the ferry and the demonic photographers. I row far enough to get wind for the sail. She fills, and we make the turn into Lydia Ann. Green on the right...

Quarantine shore is our camp tonight and my GPS guides me right to it. Sort of. I see this lovely shell beach at the end of the LCD arrow and head straight for it. Beach the boat, climb a small hill, and off in the distance...sailboats. About twenty sailboats beached about a half-mile around a little point from where I am standing. Half a mile doesn't sound like much, but I'm staying right here, thank you.

Day V

And that ain't no jive...Morning routine is standard now. Water bottles, Cliff bars. Baby wipe ritual beside a nearby bush (they're called spoiled islands for a reason), and load up the boat. Loving my little Coleman camp stove and coffee press.

Today's of average length, 40 plus as I recall. Cutting across San Antonio bay after bouts with a couple lesser ones. I'm off. There's a couple fishing boats in the shallows but they didn't get a show today. I've about nailed launching to windward. Sounding pretty nautical aren't I?

Still have these two reefs in, but I'll have to take them out today if I want to get anywhere. Wind is what sailor's call "light". But I don't unreef right away. Not saying I was scared or anything, but after all the other boats had passed with full sail, I finally grew a pair and raised all 75 sq. ft.!

More GPS navigation today. I tried a path most direct and ended up grounding, hard, on an oyster bar. A series of oyster bars. After recovering from the last, I

saw the aforementioned Master of the Mayfly sailing past (He must have stopped to nap or something), and decided to follow. We crossed into San Antonio bay, wind was quartering I think, and watched as his sail got smaller and smaller.

Full sail, quartering wind, sailing what I think is a close reach for the next six hours. Made camp five right at dusk. Last boat, but I made it!

Day VI

Last day. Were I a betting man, and I am, I'd bet this one is in the bag. Woke up per usual and half the camp had already left. The remainders were making mighty preparations too. Something I didn't know? Oh yeah, the weather forecast. Almost zero wind this morning. Look's like the last day is going to be a long one.

Broke camp, loaded her up, spoiled the last island for the trip, and headed out. Two boats behind me, both fast cats. They'd be easing by soon. Crossed a bay whose name escapes, heading for a pass near Port O'Connor, following sails.

Got in the pass, really narrow and almost no wind. Barely perceptible forward movement. What could make this better? Powerboats! Yep, local aficionados plying their craft up and down this ditch with the reckless abandon common to the coastal redneck. Over an hour of this pleasantry and finally Matagorda Bay and a sweet left turn.

I'm on the GPS now. No sails ahead, certainly none behind. Winds are getting better and my full sail is performing. I've a slight following, quartering sea, about two feet. Land to my immediate left and in front, GPS says seven miles. Looking pretty sweet.

I get closer, following the LCD needle, and see a shell beach next to a small pier. Kids on the pier, appears pastoral enough. It's not. My chosen beach is not only devoid of other sailboats, but is closed secondary to an erosion problem. Apparently there's yet another point to sail around ala Quarantine Shore. Not happening. This section of Maggie Beach is mine!

Counting the six days and approximately 200 miles of the 2016 Texas 200, I have a total of nine days sailing experience. In a 14 foot wooden boat. That I built. How was I successful? Huge huevos? Questionable judgment? Possibly. Chuck Pierce tutelage? Michalak design? Probably.

Paul Sexton