

Round Saltspring Race, May 18, 2019

As see through the eyes of Tony Brogan on Radiant Heat:

It was a tough one again this year and again the finishers were largely the faster boats. My forecast of 10-15 days ago of not enough wind and a Red course , Port Hand rounding, turned out to be correct. Not that it helped Radiant Heat much, or at least, not enough.

The best laid plans etc are often not enough. The skipper had looked at the charts, studied the tide tables, perused the wind forecasts and determined a plan. We had two hours of good breeze to get through Captains passage. Then a further 6 hours of light wind (or no wind) to have the current take us around Southey Point and down to Vesuvius. Working on an average speed over ground of 2 knots it would be 12 hours before we reached Sansum Narrows. That is 2 hours before the tide change. The fast boats I figured would be long gone. Then we needed the night time forecast fresh breeze to kick in to get us to and round Beaver Point by midnight or a bit later and give us the Midnight to 6 am flood to get home in a dying wind.

Well, we got it nearly correct, but were 3 hours behind schedule, leaving us watching the sunrise as we did the wide circle route around Beaver point, only to be confronted with an early 4 am ebb and zero wind.

Back to the beginning. The day dawned cloudy but dry with a promised NW 6 knot breeze. This held up through the breakfast, the skippers meeting and the 8 or nine race starts needed to get the fleet going. Being in Div six, we wore the yellow ribbon hoping to be welcomed home on time! We opted for the easier tacking 135 over the 155 genoa and cruised around the harbour for an hour taking the sights, and waves from other friendly crews. Then, in the second start, it was our countdown to our 10.06 start. The Race committee was in good voice and the countdown impeccable. Approaching from the committee , starboard end we did a quick circle to eat up a minute, but came out for the line still early, luffed up the genoa to slow the approach, set the sails 15 seconds to go, and hit the line at accelerating speed just 2 seconds after the start signal. GOOD START! We were still in a mixture of like minded boats so at an opportune time took the early port tack to the clear air of the right side. After closing Walters Spit we tacked to starboard to begin a series of long tacks to get out past Second Sisters.

It was on this right of way tack that the we had our only brush with an altercation. A to be, and remain, nameless boat was approaching on port and seeing the possibility of a collision course, that quickly turned into a practical reality, we hailed the courtesy "Starboard" to alert them. It was not until I thought we were going to have to "crash tack" to avoid them that they tacked away, but too late. Radiant Heat still had the luff to avoid contact. The other vessel now had another boat on their other side that also was forced to tack.

Skimming by and continuing our course we left the other two boats recovering and headed across the left side of the harbour. No, we did not protest as we could/should have according to the rules, as we were feeling charitable to our visitors from foreign shores. No harm done.

Heading out we were happy as we retained a leading position out beyond Sisters Island and headed for Welbury Bay in dying winds. But we would not get the promised 2 hours of fresh breeze, and indeed all boats were affected equally.

The fleet behind was an impressive site as they made their way out of the harbour. Most of the first starters were still ahead but we were mingling with some of them. Getting through Captains Passage was not a problem as there was little adverse current. The plan was to tack out to Gabriola but the wind Gods' decreed otherwise and we and the fleet made our way in the increasingly lighter air and tacking was now caused to avoid the ever larger holes that opened up here and here and there. It was a long grind to get to Fernwood dock and already mid afternoon. One by one the faster boats sailed through the fleet and here we had our final sight of Westerly, Kairos and yes, Shingebiss amongst the others.

The wind now played tricks on us out of what appeared to us to be sheer cussedness. When was the last time your Genoa had a port hand wind while the main was on starboard? Or experienced tacks of 120-140 degrees instead of the usual 80-90 degrees, without explanation?

Southey Point continued to appear that be forever away now matter what we did. Why was it taking so long? It was close to 6pm and the first group of the faster boats had disappeared. We were now a part of the 30-40 boats in the second group but we were at the back end.

The breeze finally freshened and we took a long lifting tack towards the SS shore, followed by Blue Shift, towards the Southey Point light mark. We had to throw in a tack to get around while Blue Shift hardened up, took the chance and skimmed by in the shallows: Ron Turner, SNCYC FCR at the helm.

Finally around Southey Point in a freshened breeze we still had to clear Grappler Rock. We opted to wait until we were well clear to hoist the spinnaker and set the prescribed course down the middle toward the distant Narrows. There were boats to the left and boats to the right, but few behind us, as we set a broad reach course.

The ebb had already turned at the Sansum Narrows and would turn again against us at midnight. The wind was forecast to blow all night until early morning. Would it? Time and tide wait for no man, it is said. They are reliably predictable, but the wind has a mood of her own: Capricious.

But this time the wind held. We were approaching the Vesuvius ferry crossing position and it was now 8pm. Many boats were closer to shore heading toward Burgoyne Bay. We seemed to be doing marginally better. Two others closer to Vesuvius were doing better than us. Blue Shift and a coterie of others were still ahead. But we were closer. Dusk was approaching as we entered the narrows. The boats on the left, The Burgoyne Bunch, were slower with less wind. Across our bow 400 yard ahead came Spud, our sistership, a J-30, on the opposite tack. Blue Shift gybed to that side as well.

As we entered the narrows we could see the boats to the left falling behind and the handful of boats on the right in a brief hole. Blueshift and others were now astern. At some point, cloudy in my memory, we changed to 135 genoa. The crew were effortlessly working together as a team, the sail changes efficient. No words from the skipper were given or asked for!! The wind freshened and we were now moving at 5 knots. We had moved up into the middle of the pack.

The wind went aft as the sky darkened. Dancing, shimmering, twinkling lights of green, red and white, sails suddenly lit by flashlight, moving this way and that, filled our view. Many spinnakers we up but we stuck to no flying sails as the wind oscillated from beam to broad reaches, even occasionally causing a gybe.

We stuck to the middle of the channel as we passed Maple Bay. Glory of glories the slightly misted full moon loomed up over the mountains. The fleet was lit up, the wind freshened to double digits, we were now wing on wing and passing boat after boat, whether they sailed with spinnaker or not. We were moving this way and that. Mind the boat ahead, there's a boat coming abeam. boat speed now 6-7 knots. Exhilarating in the dark. We turned to pass Bold Bluff and had a run, current assisted, to leave Burial Island to port. Stay in clear air, stay in current, was our mantra. We passed more boats and those behind were falling back.

Most of the boats stayed inside Musgrave Rock but we opted for the wider channel closer to Separation Point as we made good speed passing Cowichan Bay. We were still under headsail, mostly wing on wing, and watched the fleet to our left, closer to the shore, slowly fall back.

There were a handful of boats ahead, but the first fleet of faster boats were long gone. It was now approaching midnight, and the coming change of tide to a flood. The first boats just ahead would be well placed to ride the current home. The rest of us, not so much.

We ran down the middle to pass Cape Keppel well out while the wind lifted us toward Swartz Bay on the far side. We were now on a close reach with the wind becoming increasingly lighter. We reached the far side and sidled passed Swartz Bay, then Piers Island. The fleet were inside us, closer to Saltspring. Would they feel the adverse current and find the infamous Fulford hole? We appeared to be doing better than them. We were now close to Portland Island. There were a couple of boats near us but the 30-40 boat fleet were, lately, looking slower.

We stayed out, taking a wide sweep around Beaver Point and as the sky slowly lightened with the approaching dawn. It was now 4 AM, the question was whether we would receive a lift from the end of flood as we got north of Portland.

The plotter said while we were still fighting current. But we were doing better than the majority of the fleet closer inshore who appeared almost stationary in what must have been even heavier current.

We crawled our way into Captains Passage, south of the Channel Islands, nearer to Prevost Island. We were now in broad daylight and could see we were in reverse.

The ebb had started early here at 04.30 and the wind had died to zero. We decided to anchor in 160 feet of water. It had been awhile since the anchor was used, so the rode was assembled before the anchor went overboard, and 250 feet of line payed out. We halted. We had noted Scooter, a 26' Thunderbird had sailed past us on the Prevost side but we could not match her course or speed! It turned out she was the last boat to finish. We were that close, but no cigar for Radiant Heat.

We were at anchor an hour when a light breeze appeared. We weighed anchor and were immediately being flushed backward. The tide was now at nearly a knot.

As much as we wanted to finish, unless we had two hours of breeze in excess of 10 knots, we could not make it before the cut-off. So, at just after 0700, we retired and motored in. No other boats behind us were successful either. Only those ahead made the finish line before the time limit. So, we might say we were the first of the boats not to make it. There were over 60 boats in our company.

Thanks to the dedicated crew. They worked well together. We enjoyed good company, many frustrations, and some exhilarating sailing as another "Round Saltspring" goes into the history books. Congrats to the finishers and especially to Shingebiss for taking the club honours and Trophy.

Tony Brogan