

Sailing the Virtual Vendée

by Derek Lundy, March 2021

*“You should write about Greg Slakov,” says Martin to me one day as he’s fastening the cover onto his rowing skiff. “He came in fifth out of 800 or so in the virtual **Vendée Globe**.”*

“I don’t know how you can make this interesting,” says Greg, a few days later.

“Don’t worry,” I reply. “Guys doing obsessive and irrational things with boats is always interesting.”

The *Vendée Globe*: single handed around the world; south of the Three Stormy Capes; a circumnavigation of Antarctica; no stops; no help; first home; one sailor, one boat, one computer ... er ... wait ... computer?

That’s what I said.

Sure, we’d all like to sail an Open 60 racing sled around the world through the Southern Ocean, zooming along on foils at 25 knots, deafened by wind-shriek, waves hammering carbon-fibre hulls, sleep deprived, scared shitless, Who wouldn’t? Well, for those of us who have other commitments—to sanity for example—there is an alternative.

Although it too involves some pain.

Two in the morning, awake, like clockwork, the body long ago used to this intermittent schedule, working up a sweat, wife waking up too—she’s tuned into this daily gut-stretching anxiety, can’t sleep through it—the daily dilemma: go back to sleep like a normal person (if you can), or haul your competitive ass out of bed, do a few stretches, always good to have blood going to the brain, download the GRIBs, study the isobars, the fronts, the highs and lows, try to figure out what the damn wind’s going to do over the next six hours, what could you count on, what was dodgy, take a look at where the other boats—all French, of course, all over the ocean, think as hard as you can at 2 a.m. The fateful decision: accept the software’s routing suggestion, or plot a new course—your own course, singular and uncertain—an hour gone by, then back to bed, go back to sleep (if you can).

He didn't do this every day Greg says, only about twenty-five percent of the time. The other nights, he slept right through, the sweet sleep of the blameless and the just.

“Ha!” says his wife, Holly the doctor, from the nearby desk where she's doing things with paper related to keeping people healthy, saving lives, while her husband and I talk about racing sailboats on a computer. Even when he didn't get up, he lay there ... thinking ... she could feel it ... like lying next to a tuning fork.

The rest of the day was normal. The GRIBs (satellite weather information) came in every six hours and by then, you'd had food, caffeine; your brain was in gear. Sometimes there were problems because the site was in French, which he's not fluent in by any means, says Greg, and the English translation wasn't reliable. But he has an engineering background and he's a very patient person so he was able to noodle his way through the problems.

The site in question is called *Virtual Loup-De-Mer*, literally “sea-wolf,” a somewhat enigmatic name for a sailboat race I thought, or perhaps, just very French. It is definitely not the *Vendée Globe Virtual Regatta* which hundreds of thousands of wannabe ocean racers take part in. There, you get to make a lot of choices: about the boat and its gear, sail changes, plot your course. This site is so popular that the winner of the 2008-09 *Vendée Globe* wrote a best-selling autobiographical account of his voyage. Needless to say, he was French. The 2020-21 version of the race attracted over one million participants.

The *Virtual Loup-De-Mer* is completely different. It's the pure, unadulterated version of sailboat racing. No gee-gaws, no fancy stuff, no bells and whistles. Everyone gets the same boat, and the same sail configurations in response to weather. The only decision you make is: follow the software's routing suggestions or strike out precariously on your own. It's like one-design racing, says Greg, clean and uncompromising. In *Loup-De-Mer's* recent virtual *Vendée*, there were 900 or so participants—the serious people, no dilettantes, no false advantages, no bullshit.

As the fleet rounded Cape Horn, Greg was just within the top 100. Up to that point, he'd mostly acquiesced in the routing suggestions. After all, most of it hadn't been that complicated: avoid the big stationary high-pressure systems—the Azores High, the South Atlantic High—virtually rollick along in the Trades. There was the one tricky bit where Greg sometimes plotted his own path: after you cross the equator, he knew you had to swing, counterintuitively, far over to the west, close to the coast of Brazil. That's

how you avoid the South Atlantic High and get to the Southern Ocean below Cape Town fast. The software doesn't know this; it's routing according to local weather conditions. So you made your own choices there. Then in the Southern Ocean, just hang on for the rough ride, run your easting down as fast as you can as the low-pressure gales and storms relentlessly chase you along.

But coming back up through the South and then the North Atlantic—that was where things got intricate. And that was where he began to regularly set his own courses, says Greg. The software kept the boats on a sinuous course close to the South American coast, but he broke away from the fleet, went father out. The winds were light, but they were there. Racing around his home waters, he had often been burned by calms so he focused on simply keeping his virtual boat moving.

And it worked. At the bottom of the Atlantic, he was 80th or so. By the equator, he was in the top twenty. He continued to set his own courses and as the lead boats neared the French coast in the Bay of Biscay, he had moved up to tenth spot. From there, Greg says, he decided to just stay on the rhumb line for the finish at Les Sables d'Olonne while the rest of the fleet followed the routing farther east. They found more wind but had to sail a greater distance. His straight-line gamble in lighter wind paid off. Luck too, he says, there's always luck in sailboat races.

At the finish, after 76 1/2 virtual days at sea: Fifth place.

Will he do it again? Not for a while, says Greg. At times, it was a real pain in the ass. He got down on himself, just didn't want to keep going. Especially when he was skirting the Southern Ocean Ice Gate—designed to keep the real sailors from diving deep to the south into the hazardous ice zone to cut the distance they need to sail. He lost twenty places there. Still, he's done some other virtual races—a previous *Vendée*, a round-the-world *Clipper Series*, a few shorter events—so, in another four years (the *Vendée Globe* is a quadrennial race), he'll probably do it again.

He laughs; Holly sighs.

I see Martin on the docks. I just interviewed Greg, I tell him. He sailed a really good race, kept his boat moving, found the wind, but most important, avoided calms, had a great finish.

Martin grins. That's what he's like around here too, he says. A smart sailor.