

WaterTribe "Everglades Challenge" 2004

by Bob Williams, NorseBoat skipper

March 6, 2004

0500hrs

Upon arriving at the pre-dawn race briefing at Fort Desoto Park in Florida, our first impressions of the WaterTribe "Everglades Challenge" had more to do with the participants than the race itself. Soon after entering the room NorseBoat crew member Scott Smith and I became immersed in the warm camaraderie of men and women looking forward to sharing a test of ingenuity and perseverance during the 300 mile adventure race from St. Petersburg, Florida to Key Largo. A mixed group of sea kayakers, rowers and sailors, we had all spent months preparing for this race. During the briefing WaterTribe "Chief" Steve Isaac reviewed the race rules, safety considerations, and the required checkpoints. With his closing words of encouragement we were ready to begin.

0700hrs

The race started at 07:00. It was a beautiful morning with a slight chop and SSE winds blowing a steady 10 knots. Our NorseBoat 17.5 sailing and rowing cruiser was one of 27 boats at the race starting line. Everglades Challenge rules required that boats launch from the beach above the high water mark, not much of a consideration for the sea kayakers in Classes 1, 2 and 3, but a serious restriction for the sailboats in Class 4. Mechanical devices could be used to move boats across the beach to the water, but in order to limit the type of craft that could enter all devices used had to be taken with the boat on the race. Skippers and crew of the sailboats used an intriguing array of methods to overcome the substantial distance to the water at low tide. Block and tackle, wheels, slides, rollers and kedges were all used. Our NorseBoat fully loaded weighed close to 500 pounds without crew. We chose to move the boat across the sand with 2" PVC pipe rolling on a broomstick railway; this proved to be simple and effective.

Within five minutes we were off the beach and moving through the water. Scott rowed while I hoisted and set the main sail. We made the transition from rowing to sailing within yards of the beach. With the boat making a smooth 5 knots on a close reach Scott and I caught each others' grin and we let out a spontaneous whoop. I think we both realized at that moment that our lives, for the next few days at least, had been distilled down to the safe and efficient handling of the NorseBoat and our resources aboard. The complexities of our daily lives had been put on hold.

I should point out that Scott, being the valued friend and experienced sailor that he is, had agreed to this race without having seen the boat, much less sailed in it. In addition, neither of us had ever attempted a trip like this in a vessel under 40 feet. We were sailing in NorseBoat hull #1, and it had only been put in the water for the first time a few weeks prior to the race. Scott had not only signed up for the Everglades Challenge race, but for an extreme version of sea trials as well. His wife, Heidi, was one of several volunteers that covered our checkpoints throughout the race. I'm not sure who worked harder, us or Heidi.

0930hrs

After having decided to take the offshore route, we cleared Passage Key and were in the Gulf of Mexico. Only a couple of WaterTribe boats were in sight, but they were too far away to identify for sure. We were all working our way to windward in decreasing winds and increasing tidal currents. This would be the last time that we would see another boat in the Challenge while underway. The day turned into an afternoon of light air on the nose. Our tacks were getting longer and slower, but the boat still responded well. We soon made the transition to rowing while sailing, or what we termed "power sailing". This actually worked quite well and helped keep our speed above 3.5 knots.

1700hrs

The wind was dying, leaving us in dense fog. Just before losing the remnants of daylight we were startled to have a comparatively large ketch-rigged sailboat silently break through the fog, sail across our bow, and merge back into the fog without a sound. We ate our evening meal and toasted a fine end to our first day with a much appreciated Guinness. We then decided who would take the first watch while the other person slept, or at least tried to. Scott had volunteered to take the first watch as I had been up most of the night before preventing marauding raccoons from stealing food from the cockpit while our boat was on the beach.

The remainder of the first night of the race was spent light air sailing to windward and rowing, coming about onto the opposite tack whenever we could hear the beach surf in the fog. It's worth noting here that as the days went on we learned that just because one of us was laying down under the dodger, wedged between dry bags, rolling with the boat motion like a corpse, it did not necessarily mean he was asleep. Likewise, just because someone was rowing it did not necessarily mean he was awake. At times our own boat handling and navigational skills were supplemented by the new Blue chip GPS technology. In fact much of our blind progress through the fog and darkness was attributable to this device.

March 7, 2004

0700hrs

When the sun came up we had 12 knots of southerly wind directly on the nose as a cold front moved south towards us. At some point early in the morning we realized we were making very little progress to windward, even though our speed through the water looked good. After some head scratching it became obvious that we were making excessive leeway and that this was a result of our centerboard being too light to stay down all the way when the boat was moving at speeds over 4 knots. The eventual solution was simple—more lead weight could be put in the tip of the centerboard—but this would not help us during the race. In that the front was coming and soon the wind would be behind us, we would somehow make do. In the end power sailing proved to be quite effective at compensating for leeway, and we gained a couple of knots of boat speed as well. During power sailing the person on the helm controlled direction, which prevented the rower from straining their neck. While I rowed and watched an incredible sunrise with the surf pounding in the distance, Scott lit his MSR Dragonfly stove and brewed hot coffee and oatmeal.

1500hrs

After a long day of power sailing, the wind clocked to a more SW direction allowing us to parallel the coast on a close reach easily making 6 knots through the water.

1740hrs

We sailed (surfed, actually) through the five foot deep shoals in the pass to Placida on our way to our first check point. We pulled up on Bird Island and decommissioned our rig so that we could row the few miles up to an old railway bridge that we were required to pass under to reach the location of the first checkpoint. After signing in and taking a quick shore break to say hello to some of the racers and staff, we rowed back out to the ICW (Intracoastal Waterway).

2330

We were re-rigged and prepared for the frontal passage while sailing with a 10 knot, NW wind. We had decided to stay inshore but make up for some lost time when the cold front came through with a fast reach down the water way to Sanibel.

March 8, 2004

0100hrs

The cold front came through with little rain but a strong wind gusting to 25 knots. We were double reefed and still making 6.5 knots boat speed with a 2-3 foot following sea. Steering, watching the GPS, and confirming marker locations in the dark was quite fatiguing, so at 0500hrs we pulled in behind Sanibel and dropped anchor for a needed rest before sunrise.

0700hrs

We pulled anchor and shot out the Sanibel bridge on a strong tide, waves and wind behind us. We were traveling up to 8.5 knots over the bottom. Once offshore we had steep 5-6 foot following seas while sailing on a broad reach. Scott was finding that managing the helm in these conditions was becoming an aerobic exercise, but overall the boat handled well and we were staying dry.

1100hrs

We had blown past Naples and were approaching Marco Island. The deeper water spread out the wave frequency and sailing at 5-6 knots was, for a time at least, efficient and relaxing. Snacks and fluids were very much needed, and they could finally be retrieved safely from storage. After passing Marco Island we became aware that the sea conditions were building considerably as we approached Cape Romano. Looking over the back side of 10-12 foot seas spanning the 5 miles between us and the Cape it did not seem possible to negotiate the surf and safely hit the one small pass through the shoals. Instead we decided to head an additional 5 miles to the south and work our way around the shoals. In retrospect, shooting the surf would have probably been easier. Outside the seas became steeper and more frequent. It took serious physical effort on the helm to keep the boat from rounding up and broaching at the bottom of each trough. I knew, and Scott quickly figured out, that these were not conditions that the boat had been designed for, but still she was doing well. On more than one occasion we were moving in excess of 9 knots down the face of these waves.

About an hour into this carnival ride we finally broached at the bottom of two converging waves. The boat stayed on its side for a moment while we threw our weight to windward; she came up awash to seat level. We were able to immediately turn her back downwind while we demonstrated a high-adrenalin bailing technique. We were back fully underway in only a couple of minutes, with some weak attempts at humor on my part and Scott, an emergency room physician, making clinical observations about why we might not want to demonstrate that technique again. Unfortunately we ended up repeating the process twice more under the same conditions. Each time was a repeat of the first.

I must say that Chuck Payne did a great job designing an efficient hull with sufficient reserve buoyancy to allow the helmsman to recover from the boat being fully knocked down in heavy seas without losing control of the vessel. And congratulations to Scott for his diligence helping prove this point. Anticipating more knockdowns, we scalloped a course around the bottom of the shoals, finally turning away from the bigger beam seas. We finally made it to the lee side of Romano and onto a new course heading for our next checkpoint. It was an arduous and cold reach across the banks to Chokoloskee.

2000hrs

At this point the mangroves were blocking the wind and the tide was ebbing out against us. We were so cold we both wanted our turn to row just to warm up. Near midnight we pulled up on the mucky low tide beach at Chokoloskee. Heidi, ever vigilant, was waiting there in the dark, worried because we were only minutes from missing our 24 hour check in deadline.

March 9, 2004

0700hrs

Scott and I caught our first deep sleep and then left with the tide running with us. It was an incredibly beautiful morning, and we were making great time under sail in shallow, sometimes glassy water, with birds and dolphins surrounding us and only the occasional bass boat breaking the silence. These conditions remained for the duration of the day, and we had the opportunity to take turns napping, fix a meal, and share a Guinness or two while watching the sun set under the mainsail.

2100hrs

We rowed into our last checkpoint at Flamingo, signed into the checkpoint lock box, and headed back out with a lovely full moon to help light our way.

March 10, 2004

0100hrs

After midnight we were sailing through a surreal scene of hundreds of night hawks silently flying and hovering over the water catching insects just above the surface. Our navigation was dependent on the GPS because the tide was so low and the water so shallow. We were in the middle of what shows as a small fishing channel on the chart, with only inches of water below our hull that has an 8-9 inch draft with board up. The channel was marked by the occasional homemade, difficult to see markers that appeared to be black in color, even when we shone a light on them. If the chart seemed to be in error we would favor the markers and vice versa. This channel worked its way around and through a multitude of ringed shoals and mangrove islands.

0300hrs

The sailing was easy but navigating through the shoals at night was tedious. We finally broke out into open Florida Bay waters just north of Key Largo. The last few miles seemed to take forever.

0500hrs

We pulled up to the finish point exhausted yet exhilarated. The final challenge of the Everglades Challenge was trying to find the check in lock box. Our cognitive skills were on empty, but we knew we were following the written instructions to the letter. We finally found the box 100 yards from where it was described in the written instructions. This resulted in our official finish time being somewhat delayed from our actual arrival, but this was not important. We had finished the race and managed to get a First Place in Class Four, Third Place Overall in the process.

In retrospect the WaterTribe Everglades Challenge was a satisfying blend of exhilaration, trepidation and fatigue that culminated in a profound sense of accomplishment. Scott and I are very much looking forward to the Everglades Challenge 2005.