



1000 Miles to Weather in a Reaching Machine

by Rae Simpson

In the mid 18th century, the tracks of Captain James Cook's ships inscribed huge arcs across the oceans of the world. His strict dietary regimens kept his crews healthy and he had new technology to determine longitude. Cook sailed three great voyages, each was extraordinary even for today's well-equipped cruising yachts. From the Atlantic to Pacific, and Antarctic to the Arctic, Cook boldly explored the world's oceans.

Cook embarked on his third voyage in 1776. His mission was to find a northerly passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic. He approached the largely uncharted west coast of North America from the west. He named his first landfall "Foulweather". After first sailing south to confirm his location with Spanish charts, he turned northward. While sailing up the California and Oregon coast, northwest gales repeatedly forced him to retreat off shore. Cook worked his way north with minimum risk by keeping his vessels well offshore.

Two hundred and twenty three years later, I was faced with navigating that same coast. Mustang Sally, a Pro Kennex 38 catamaran, was on the last leg of her 6,500-mile journey from Corpus Christi on the Gulf of Mexico, to White Rock, British Columbia, Canada. We waited out the northeast Pacific's winter storms and worked hard to prepare for the last 1,000 miles. We poured over pilot charts, satellite maps and weather statistics. The pilot charts showed a low likelihood of gales in May and though the summer months.



Waiting Out the North East Pacific Storm Season

On May 8th at 1800, Mustang Sally departed San Diego bound for White Rock. The plotted course was a distance of 1001 miles.

It was easy motor sailing through warm glassy seas near the rugged and beautiful Channel Islands. A stop at Avalon on Santa Catalina was delightful and the Annapapa Islands and were breathtaking. The second night we were

mesmerized by dolphins streaking through phosphorescence waters, leaving glowing trails behind them as they leaped and played in the bow waves. These days were great for gaining confidence and getting into the routine of 24 hour sailing.



Josh

Josh had sailed with me during most of my racing campaigns over the last 10 years. Josh was strong, fearless and slightly bored with the light motor sailing. My love - Sharon had less experience but the boat was half hers and she was determined to see Mustang Sally home. Leslie, an experienced sailor had traveled these waters previously from north to south. Joel had lots of ocean experience and a couple of Victoria to Maui races under his belt. His partner, Cheryl was less experienced but possessed the kind of keen outgoing, adventuresome-ness that sparks up a crew.



Sharon



Leslie



Rae



Joel

Local weather predictions of 25-30 knots out of the northwest inshore and 10-15 knots one hundred miles offshore supported my early strategy to follow Cook's lead and stay well off the coast.



Sharrill

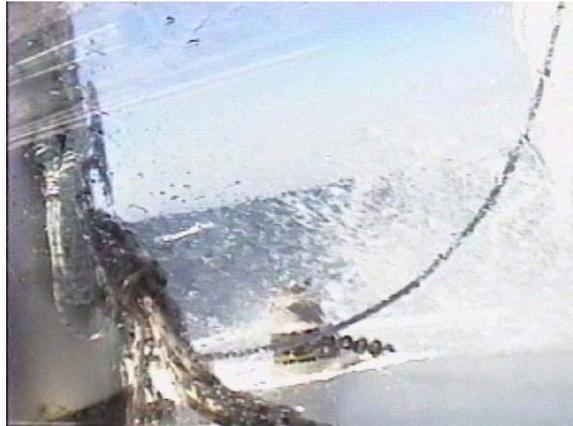
We sailed northwest as we cleared the east side of Santa Cruz Island. As night approached, we double reefed the main and set the storm jib in preparation for our first rough weather. Lifejackets and harnesses were required on deck. We were making 6-7 knots, close reaching into a freshening breeze with short choppy seas.



Beating Westward with the Storm Jib Set

to be any pattern to the waves. At night, all you could do was point the boat and pound through whatever hit you. Helmsmen were getting soaked as the wave tops blew over the boat and into the cockpit. As the day dawned we could see the waves and they were bigger than any of us had ever seen. Thirty and forty foot mountains with white tossing tops. They seemed to dwarf the boat. Onward we plunged - conditions should ease soon.

Waves and white water were crashing over the bridge deck cabin. You could not walk around the boat. You hung on tight moving cautiously from one grab rail to the next. Nobody questioned the need for a tether. The violent motion, the noise, wind, waves and pounding made it all but impossible to rest. Sharon was seasick and retired to her bunk. Joel came off a watch soaked to the bone with first stage hypothermia. It was too rough to cook and our



Burying the foredeck

cache of hot drinks was exhausted. A leak sprung in the port window and rain trickled from the headliner. Frantic comments from one or two crew were laced with fear. And it was spreading. We were taking a licking and suffering. And the weather was continuing to deteriorate.

Deployment of the Paratech sea anchor went smoothly. The violent motion was replaced with a rough but much easier motion. The boat quieted, and the pounding stopped. Waves were still breaking over the boat but it did not seem near so violent. It was almost dreamlike to sit in the white-cushioned comfort of the big bridge deck salon and watch the sea. White and green waves cascaded on deck and around the salon windows.

I looked in my gut and saw a knot of fear. I had to steel myself against it. We had a strong boat, a good sea anchor, a VFH radio, a single side band radio, an EPRIB and a life raft. Things were serious but life threatening incidents were not imminent. Rest and easier conditions were what we needed.

With one person standing a two-hour watch, everyone got a good night's sleep. The next day dawned clear with 15 to 20 knots from the northwest and big confused seas. Talk of returning to points south was rejected. I would not go back. My preferred course was to continue northwest offshore, then tack east for San Francisco. But some of the crew were frightened and Sharon was sick and dehydrated. I plotted a course for San Luis

Sherrill cooked a big pot of breakfast porridge to warm and fortify us for the task ahead. A sneaker wave slammed into the boat and knocked the pot off the stove. We all laughed heartily seeing the porridge flying everywhere and dripping down the walls. The second pot made it to our stomachs.

After breakfast, Josh and I installed the dodger and bimini. Joel was safe from the weather in my cruiser suit. I checked the engines, rig and navigation systems. The weather fax showed gales north of us and gales south of us, but a band of 20-25 knots winds in between. The course up the middle to San Luis seemed the only viable inshore course.

We had to retrieve the sea anchor the hard way as the trip line had blown off. I motored the boat around and behind the chute and tried to ease up to it. Josh and Joel work hard to pull it back aboard quickly. But with the wind and seas coming from behind, I couldn't keep the boat in place and we rolled over the anchor line and fouled a prop. Three quarters of an hour hanging upside down in 10 foot seas and we finally freed the line. Not a great start, but at least no one had to go into the water to clear the line.



After the gale, sailing northeast toward San Luis

With a double reef, partially furled genoa and engines roaring, we were moving again - beating northeast toward San Luis. Bright sunshine, big waves and fresh breezes accompany us as we pound through the sea. The waves were smaller than yesterday and the dodger was keeping us dryer and warmer. Drivin' her like she's been stolen" became our motto.

The wind always seemed to shift in Josh's favor when he was on the helm. The boat would feel like a truck running down an old

pot holed country road.. Constant butterflies in your stomach as the boat climbed up and down the waves. Accompanied by patter-patter-patter sounds as the hulls flew over the smaller waves and the occasional bang as the bridge deck pounded on a big one. Josh's big ear-to-ear grin was contagious as he hung off the wheel, one handed like a steer rider. A chorus of "yahoos" and "giddy up Mustang Sally" would fill the air. "I think the seas are starting to flatten out" was spoken with increasing derision. And now the wind and seas are building again.

The crew is strong and determined and the only feasible way to land is to sail to it in a northerly direction. Everyone is motivated. We press on all day and through the night. We search for a weather buoy and discover it 10 feet off our beam without a light. The cockpit is quiet as the buoy disappears behind us and we reflect on the near collision. Winds and waves rise and progress slows. 6 knots through the water is translating to 3 and 4 over ground.



Seas are flattening out!



Drying Out In San Luis Obispo

Early the next morning a welcome San Luis appears on the horizon. I resist doing the math to calculate the distance and speed made good. Instead we hang everything wet out to dry and head ashore for hot showers and repair materials. On returning, Josh, Leslie and I disassemble windows and pump in 8 tubes of 3M 5200 to seal the leaks. We had planed about seven days to San Francisco where Joel and Cheryl would

depart. Five had passed and we had a way to go. Sad, but - they had a business and a job to attend to. With tears and hugs we bid Joel and Sherrill farewell. I know they had mixed feelings about leaving us, but they were not unhappy to leave - the sail was a lot tougher than anticipated.

I needed to build confidence in the smaller crew and find a way through these persistent gales. The best alternative seemed to be harbor hopping. When the weather reports offered a 8 hour window we were off the next morning bound for Morrow Bay. We made the harbor in the early afternoon, just before the gales started howling. A local fisherman said it was the 19th straight day of gale conditions. Based on a weather prediction that the gales would calm in the early morning and not start until the mid-afternoon, we were off again at 0400, beating our way up to San Simeon, reaching harbor again before the gales.

San Simeon is a beautiful bay. It sheltered a number of northbound sailors waiting for a weather window. Based on a 24 hour forecast without gales, we set off alone that same evening. Starting with light winds, conditions build through the night to 25 knots on the

nose. It is a real grind with the big pounding waves. Progress slowed to 2 and 3 knots. We round Big Sur in 30 knots headwinds out of the Northwest. But the windows don't leak! We are slowly clawing northwards.

Conditions ease and we decide to skip Monterey and press on to San Francisco. On the morning of the 17th, the engines push through an ebb tide as we pop champagne under the Golden Gate bridge. San Francisco Bay seems small after the ocean. We motor to Sausalito and dock at Spinmakers.



Celebrating the Golden Gate

The new VHF antenna I had installed in San Diego was taken by the gales. We picked up a replacement and a spare and installed it that afternoon. Fuel, fresh food and we were ready again.



Fairly Happy to Make Frisco

The best weather forecasts we have heard since Point Conception lures us out of the bay at mid-night. In light north westerly winds we motor northward making good progress toward Point Arena.

Here the winds freshen to 25 knots or so and we get a great day of brisk ocean sailing. The engines can't power us through the waves at better than 2 knots, but with the sails we make 6-7 knots. – We make long loping 20 mile tacks northward and

then short westerly tacks to stay off shore. It is exhilarating but exhausting. Hauling in the jenny tack after tack in 25 knots is hard work

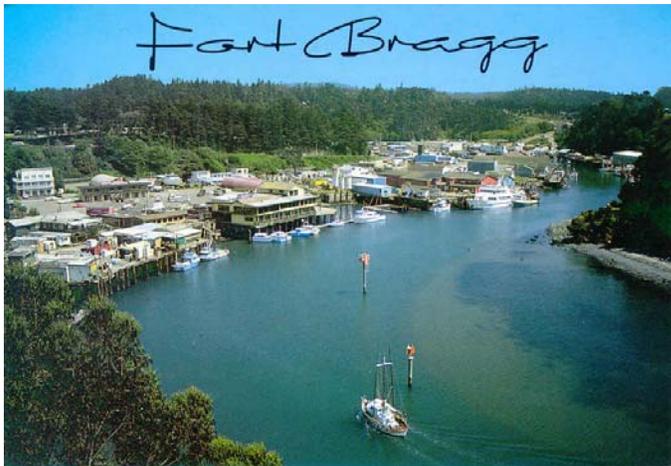
At home, after a day like this we would likely hit the bar for a few beers and stories then sleep late the next day to rest up. Here we just have to keep going. But our destination is close, and as night falls we decide to furl the sails and motor the rest of the way in.

We have our sites set on Fort Bragg and begin closing with the coast. We are 15 miles out and will arrive in the early evening. I study the pilot and pictures of the entrance. It looks tricky and I doubt my ability to thread the entrance in the dark. The crew falls out of the two-hour watches with landfall so close.

But we are tired and don't notice that progress has slowed. At 2100 hours I go for a rest. I am dismayed when I return at 2200 and find velocity made good is zero. How can we run two eighteen horse engines at 2000 RPM and go nowhere? The chart plotter shows a crazy track like we are going in big oblong circles.

I think the instrument must be faulty. I pick out a light on shore and watch it. It doesn't move. I am puzzled but too dog tired to see the solution. Josh has been sailing the big circles trying to make forward progress. Leslie thinks the GPS has failed and has been keeping the boat between the moon in the west and the lights on shore. I am doubting my sanity when it hits me. We had contrary winds so far but not more than two or three knots of current. Now we found a big current! Its 2 am and I throttle up the engines to 2,600. The GPS starts to show progress over ground and the light recedes.

Now to find Fort Bragg in the dark. Sharon has been in her bunk – seasick for most of the day, but she is feeling better and hears us taking gibberish. Josh and Les have been up all night and I've had 1 hour of sleep in the last 24. Sharon gets up to offer us fresh eyes and a clear head. She picks out the light at the entrance in seconds.



It is 0400 by the time we reach the light and we stand off until daylight. In the misty morning we thread the needle and enter the harbor.

We find an empty berth at the marina and decide to toast our arrival with Drambuie and Grande Marnier. Both bottles are drained in short order. A very good restaurant seems unconcerned at the troop of loud, inebriated, salt

stained Canucks that sit down for a hearty breakfast. After breakfast I seek out a welding shop to repair our helmsman seat. The metal on the mounting pole has fatigued and broken. Chris Van Peer's Boat Works does an excellent repair and advise me that a river often runs through the ocean off Fort Bragg at this time of year with 3-6 knots of current. They can't predict where or when or how wide the river will be, but it will be. The local solution - horsepower!

After grabbing a half days sleep, Josh and I install the seat and pump out the boat. The forward cabins and aft compartments leak in the rough weather. The leeward hull seems to make the most water.

The weather forecast is good for the evening. Gales to the south of us and gales to the north of us. But for a hundred miles or so between, the conditions are predicted to be favorable.



So long to Leslie, now we are three

Leslie has to get back home to her job. I believe she would rather stay and help but if she wants to keep her job she has to get back. She is a brave and formidable sailor.

The next leg will likely be a longer one so if she is going home it has to be now. Josh and Sharon whip up a gourmet meal of fresh Fort Bragg shrimp, cod and pasta. We happily stuff ourselves knowing this might be the last good meal for a week or so. Leslie waves good-byes from the Fort Bragg Bridge as we depart at dusk.

Once again we are running between the gales. After an easy night of motoring through near calms, the morning brings favorable winds. 15-20 from the southwest. Mustang Sally lopes along with an easy motion at eight and nine knots. We should make Cape Mendocino by noon the next day. The southwesterly fades too soon and we light up the diesels to maintain speed. We get a break with an easy passage around Mendocino in near calm conditions.

Now we are three. One on watch, one on standby, and the other sleeping. We stand two-hour watches. The Autohelm is getting more use now and requires frequent repairs. Like much of the Autohelm/Raytheon gear it seems, the ST4000 has trouble with offshore conditions. Our lives become a rhythm. Drive, standby, eat, sleep. We looked forward to our happy hour tradition at 1700 hours.



This is why nets are best for offshore cats

Sharon is over her seasickness and is determined to get this boat home. She is bundled up in so many clothes we have to help her climb into the helm seat. Then pry her cold fingers off the wheel after her watch.

The break from the northwesterly is short. The engines are working hard as we motor sail north. The inside motor mount on the starboard engine fails. I jury-rig it with wraps

of line and tape. Drive, standby, eat, sleep. Fuel is low and our choices are Newport or the Columbia River. We decide to push for Newport.

A radio call to the coast guard to check bar conditions brings an offer of an escort in. We chuckle when they asked us to put on life jackets for the bar crossing. We hadn't been without life jackets or harnesses for days. The three of us are exhausted, but we try to be polite as they scowl at the non-US coast guard approved French and Canadian safety gear.

The next morning the weather reports say gales to the south will arrive in Newport tomorrow morning. And to the north of us, 15-20 knots of wind from the northwest. We complete fueling and repairs and are out of Newport by dusk - running from gales again.

Pushing north, Washington state is within striking distances. Since leaving California we have made slow but steady progress. We are getting numb to the weather. Drive, standby, eat, and sleep. The weather reports indicate that the gale conditions are following behind us at about the same speed we are moving. It seems if we stop we will get caught.

The outside motor mounts on the port engine fails. Josh jury rigs it with wraps of



Don't need a suitcase, I'm wearing everything

webbing. Our actual progress is agonizingly slow and I don't volunteer our velocity made good to Sharon and Josh. Most days it is 3 - 4 knots made good, occasionally more and sometimes less. The knot meter is always 5 or better. The diesels get powered up if the knot meter speed slips below 5. The headwinds have built up contrary currents that make for a slow go. No one complains. We just drive, standby, eat sleep. We are making progress. The days meld together.

We have to dodge a fishing fleet just south of the Columbia River at 0300. They must be using long unmarked gill nets. I'm on the helm alone and I give a group of fish boats about a mile clearance. But a big 50 foot trawler comes down toward me - obviously to force me off my course. Maybe I missed a light on the end of the nets and distances can be deceptive at night. I don't trust the autohelm with the trawler in close proximity and can't leave the helm to get to the radio.

I curse the son of a bitch as he forces me down to a broad reach. The big mainsail powers up and drives my speed up to 10 knots. I hear his engine roar as he stays with me and comes ever closer, forcing me further off the wind. Ka-BANG - the boat shudders as I crash jibe. I am moving southwest and the trawler departs. Even though he may have saved me from fouling my props, I cursed the fishing fleet again and leave at least a five mile gap before tacking back to my northerly course.

At the mouth of the Columbia River we are trapped in another southerly flowing current. I am worn down physically and even though we are 30 miles off the mouth, I feel the current is probably largely tidal. I hold our position on the engines and wait for the tide to change. It releases early the next morning and we finally make Washington. The weather report calls for northwesterly gales at the mouth of the Columbia in the afternoon but only 10-15 further north. Keep on running.

We are back to the short off-shore tacks again with long northerly tacks. We are making good progress in 10-15 knots of wind from the northwest and a long low swell. Drive, standby, eat and sleep. We are in Washington State and the weather is the best we have seen since the Channel Islands.



Welcome to Juan de Fuca

Unbelievable exuberance as we enter the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Champagne, dancing, masks and music. We look a deprived lot in our salt encrusted sailing gear and Mardi Gras masks. Stereo blasting 'Mustang Sally' and speakers buzzing. Singing dancing and yahoing as loud as we can. We know these waters, we are finished beating and it will be easy from here to home

The annual Swiftsure Regatta sends 220 boats out to meet us. This is the first year in 10 we are not entered, and it is fun to see the boats all coming out. We surprise a few of the leaders as our spinnaker fools a few into thinking we are racing and headed home. When they get close and see the rows of diesel gerry cans, the truth is obvious.



Party time at the entrance

We dodge the outgoing boats throughout the evening and early morning hours trying not to interfere in the race. At 0500 a voice from a very slow boat, cries out "give way - we are racing don't you know!" Sharon shouts back in frustration - "You are last! - go home, we have the right of way!"



Happy couple with their new toy

Another day and a half motoring in the calm friendly inland waterways of Juan de Fuca, Haro Strait and Boundary Passage. Our inland waters seem so small. Across the Straights of Georgia to White Rock and our home harbor at Semiahmoo. Our friends welcome us home with joy. We are over 8 days behind plan. Very tired but very happy to be home. It has been almost a year

since we decided to bring Mustang Sally home to White Rock - and we finally finished it!

A northerly passage on the west coast of North America can be tough. Stubbornness and brave support from Sharon and Josh finished the voyage. And without the courage and expertise of Leslie, Joel and Cheryl, it would have been much more difficult.

I wonder if it might have been easier if we had followed Cook's off shore example. But he had experienced career sailors and a 110 foot vessel that probably out weighed Mustang Sally by one or two hundred tons. The next time I sail north on this coast I will choose between an un-hurried two months of harbor hopping or sailing 100 miles off with a more experienced skipper and crew. The delight in that - is that - to get that - experience, I will have to sail around the world first.

