

The 2010 Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race

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Fells Point, Baltimore

Despite our misadventures, *Quintessence* had arrived in Fells Point, Baltimore late Monday (ok, very, very early Tuesday) as scheduled. Jay Irwin and I still had a clogged fuel line to contend with, but we had arrived in time for the Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race.

We spent Tuesday morning straightening up and getting the boat organized. During the afternoon, a friend of Jay's came by with his car and we ran some errands, including a run to get propane. We had run out of en route. We pulled up to the fill station and handed the tank over to the attendant.

"I think this tank is full" he said. "Kind of hard to tell with aluminum tanks, but I'm pretty sure it is full."

He checked the bleed valve to confirm. Yes, the tank was full. We hadn't run out. Something else was going on. We reinstalled the tank once we got back on the boat and tried to fire up the stove. Nothing. I checked the fuse on the solenoid switch panel and found that it had blown. I replaced the fuse and switched on the solenoid. The fuse blew again immediately. I did a quick check, but couldn't find any obvious problem. This was a fix that would have to wait until we got home. Fortunately, Greg Decowsky was able to lend us a portable stove for the balance of the trip, so we didn't have to go completely cold!

We headed over for dinner at Shucker's at Broadway pier for dinner and to find a seat for the Tuesday evening concert. A friend of Greg's, Tom Lewis, would be performing, along with several other singers. I was really looking forward to hearing Tom sing. He and his wife Lyn had traveled to the Chesapeake from British Columbia for a couple of weeks of concerts in the area.

We arrived at Shucker's to find Greg and several other mutual friends at a table with Tom and Lyn. We joined the group, had a wonderful dinner and thoroughly enjoyed the evening's concert.

First thing Wednesday morning Jay and I started tearing the clogged fuel line apart section by section. We

ultimately tracked the problem to a clog at the fuel valve. We cleaned it out, reconnected everything, switched the valve over and hit the starter button. The engine started right up and ran fine. I wanted to run the engine under load for a while, so we headed over to the Baltimore Marine Center to top off the tanks.

I assumed that *Nina* had probably arrived by now, so after fueling we motored around the harbor to see if we could find her. Jay knew of her, and her usual haunts, but she was no where to be found.

While motoring, I noticed a couple of stink bugs from our layover on the C&D canal on the furled sails. We hoisted sail to see if there were any more around. There were. Lots. And lots. And lots. The sail had dozens and dozens of bugs clinging to them. We spent the next few minutes banging on the sails to dislodge them, making this the first time I've ever had to "debug" my sails!

After completing our debugging, we headed back over to the Ann Street Pier. We had been the only boat there when we had left, but now several other familiar boats had docked. As we headed into the basin toward our berth we passed a nicely rowed dory which I realized was *Nina's*, manned by Ingrid and Dayton! They had come rowing over looking for us! They had dropped anchor in the only spot in the harbor we hadn't checked!

We tied up and helped Ingrid and Dayton secure *Nina's* dory. A couple of the newly arrived boats were owned by friends, and a couple of other friends had stopped by looking for us. Josh Johnson and Mike Wick, the rest of my race crew soon arrived. It was quite a welcome back from a run around the harbor! We spent some time catching up with everyone and started to get ready for the Parade of Sail.

I had started a tradition at previous year's Parade of Sail, of having musicians on board. This year I had invited Tom and Lyn along to help with music. I had asked a few other friends as had Jay. I started adding up heads and realized we would have a boatful. Not a problem, but I made sure to scrounge enough life jackets to stay legal!

The Parade is always fun and quite a sight. The whole fleet shoves off and congregates in the outer harbor.

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Sails are set and the boats get under way. There was enough wind this year to get everyone moving, but everyone also had their engines running for safety's sake. Lots of boats of all sizes were moving in lots of different directions! There have been times during previous Parades when I have had my engine running slowly in reverse as we were sailing to avoid running up on the boat ahead of us!

As the parade start time approached, the boats headed toward the inner harbor, sorted themselves out into a line and headed in. Many boats have canons whose reports echoed around the harbor. We had sea shanties! If you are on board for the Parade, you sing!

The last "official" pre-race event is the Wednesday "all hands" party. It is basically a big buffet dinner with sea music for several hundred racers, volunteers, organizers and sponsors. We ate together as a crew, and then headed over to the Wednesday night shanty sing at The Wharf Rat. While not an "official" part of the festivities, it has become one of my favorite shore side events. Tom and Lyn joined us a short time later, as did Ingrid and Dayton from *Nina*.

The shanty sing is a whole lot of fun, but not for the faint of heart. The process is simple. Someone from each table in the bar is required to sing in rotation. Janie Meneely, half of a duo performing under the name "Calico Jack," manages the sing, going around the room, table by table. There are songbooks aplenty, and lots of help, but someone must sing. The singing had just started when Tom and Lyn joined us. Janie accused us of having a "ringer" at our table as Tom stood up to sing when our turn came around. She wouldn't let us get away with that, and strongly "suggested" that Greg, who is a pretty good friend of Janie's, sing. Greg is a pretty good shantyman, and regularly holds shanty workshops at traditional boat festivals. I was pretty happy that our table had been taken care of as I prefer to sing later in the evening, after everyone has been drinking for a while. It makes my singing much more palatable!

It was not to be! Janie looked at me and said "Ok Paul, it's your turn." I guess that was our punishment for having a ringer on board! I stood and sang one of my favorite sea songs, "Weavily Wheat." It is a relatively obscure song that few people seem to know. I like it a lot

and it is also very short! When I was done, Tom made the comment that it was the first "new" song he had heard in a while.

We spent the next few hours at the sing. The Wharf Rat quickly filled to capacity as schooner crews found their way over after the all hands party. Conscious of the fact that we had an early start Wednesday for the race, I quit early and headed back to the boat.

The Race

We had had absolutely perfect weather during our stay in Baltimore. The forecast for Thursday, race day, however had been the same all week: rain and colder. Weather forecasts seem to be wrong as often they are right, but in this case the forecast was completely accurate. Thursday dawned rainy. The three previous races I have been in have been "foul weather" races and this year's would continue the trend. We would start in rain, with winds out of the northwest. Rain was forecast to stop around sunset, but the winds would build as a cold front came through.

After the morning briefing, we cast off and headed out toward the start just below the Bay Bridge. The race crew consisted of Mike Wick, a seasoned and extremely skilled sailor and racer who has sailed with me on most of *Quintessence's* longer trips; Jay Irwin, an immensely experienced sailor who has spent most of his adult life sailing the Bay; Josh Johnson, a naval architect and another hugely experienced sailor and racer and I. As usual, I felt the least experienced sailor on board!

Josh has sailed the race before, most recently on-board a schooner, *Green Dragon*, owned by a dear friend Al Bezanson (and 1st place winner of the 2009 race!). Al wasn't racing this year, so I had offered Josh a spot on *Quintessence*. In a previous race, Josh had rigged *Green Dragon* with an asymmetrical spinnaker for the race, and had asked me if it would be ok to bring a spinnaker along. I don't have a lot of experience with spinnakers, but I knew Mike and Josh have both used them. Josh arrived on board with two asymmetrical spinnakers, two symmetrical spinnakers and a spinnaker pole. If the wind was right, they could help move *Quintessence* downwind nicely!

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We headed down the Patapsco River in steady rain, with around 16 knots of wind out of the North. We weren't exactly sure of the wind speed, as our indicator had quit working earlier in the trip. Once around Bodkin Point we headed toward the bridge and hoisted sail. The wind was just strong enough to allow us to set all plain sail without reefing. Any stronger and we would have had to reef. If this was what the rest of the night would be like, we would have a very fast race!

It was quite a sight as the whole fleet approached the start line. For about a half hour, the whole fleet was jockeying around behind the start line. Since *Quintessence* was one of the smallest boats in the fleet, that meant we spent most of our time avoiding everyone else!

The big boats started first, followed ten minutes later by the smaller boats. As our start time approached, we headed for the line. We were in great position, but soon realized we would cross early. We did a 180 turn away from the line, gave way to another boat heading for the line, and turned back toward the line. We approached the line under full sail, making very good speed, along with the most of the rest of the fleet. It would be a great start!

Well maybe not. We were about 50 feet from the start when the wind quit. It wasn't one of those situations where the wind slowly leaves. No, the wind just died. Instantly. One moment we were tearing along toward the line. The next we were becalmed. We watched as the wind left the bay leaving the entire race fleet becalmed! Not a breath of air could be felt. The start time came and went, and we, as well as everyone else, sat bobbing around in the residual waves and rain. The boats started turning circles as the current moved them around. One moment we would be pointing toward the line, the next away.

We drifted around for a while, thankful at least that it was close to slack tide and there was no tidal current pushing us back up the bay. We all scanned the water, looking for any hint of air. After a while we felt a merest ghost of a breath. It wasn't enough to register on the wind instruments, but it was there.

"Can I put up the small asymmetrical spinnaker?" asked Josh.

Sure why not. Maybe we can at least get across the line. Josh and Mike went forward, dropped the headsails and hoisted a light weight green and white spinnaker, flying it off the end of the bowsprit. It pretty much filled the fore triangle. It filled in fits and starts, but it was slowly moving the boat toward the line. We saw spinnakers being set on the larger boats down the bay, but we were the only boat from the small fleet flying one. We crawled across the line, the only boat around the start line moving.

"Can I set the big one now?" asked Josh.

"How big is it?" I asked.

"It's big."

Sure why not! There was virtually no wind, so maybe this will get us going somewhere! Josh brought the larger spinnaker up from below and started pulling it from its bag. It just kept coming and coming. It was big. The wind had increased slightly, and the small spinnaker was staying filled. The sail's head was at the top of the foremast, the tack at the end of the bowsprit. The large one would be set from the top of the mainmast, with the tack attached somewhere on deck around the foremast.

Once again Josh and Mike rigged the sail and hoisted it aloft. It filled the entire space between the masts, filling in fits and starts behind the foresail. We dropped the foresail and the sail filled nicely. We were actually moving!

The wind had picked up slightly, still less than five knots, but the double spinnakers were staying filled and moving us along. We slowly passed ahead of the small boat fleet and started to catch up on the larger boats. The bigger boats with spinnakers were moving away, but we were slowly moving up toward everyone else. We had been along the eastern side of the fleet and on a port tack heading southwest when we had set the spinnakers. We passed through the fleet, and the time came to tack around. Down came the spinnakers, around went the bow, and back up went the spinnakers. We lost virtually

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no time at all. The wind continued to slowly build, and we were now sailing a bit closer to the wind. Josh and I moved the large spinnaker's tack forward, fastening it to the samson post on my foredeck. We sheeted in both spinnakers to match the new heading. The spinnakers were now completely filled and slightly overlapping. The entire port side of the boat was solid sail and we were making decent speed through the water despite the light winds. I really hoped someone on another boat was taking some pictures of us!

There was a problem though. We couldn't see anything on the port side of the boat. Jay went forward, keeping a bow watch to make sure we didn't hit anybody! We ran under double spinnakers as the wind continued to build. As sunset approached, the clouds started to break up, the wind continued to build and the sun poked through. We were treated to a beautiful sunset, with both spinnakers fully illuminated by the setting sun. What a sight!

The wind continued to build as we headed down the bay with the spinnakers straining off to port. We were surging through the water, and I was starting to get concerned. The forecast was for stronger winds. We knew the large spinnaker would have to come down soon, and I was worried about handling the sail in the dark. A couple of stronger gusts, probably 15 knots, hit us. The boat surged and the rigging groaned under the strain. That was it, time for the big one to come down.

We dropped the big one, left the small one up, and hoisted the foresail. The small spinnaker didn't fill well with the fore up. We dropped the fore, the small spinnaker filled and the boat picked up speed. We were getting our best speed with a full main and the small spinnaker. The boat was sailing well and well balanced.

Hours came and went. The rain had stopped, the wind continued to build out of the northwest and the clouds had completely disappeared. We were sailing as fast as I had ever seen *Quintessence* sail as the moonlight filled bay. It was gorgeous!

The seas had continued to build, hitting us on the starboard quarter, making steering a bit of a challenge. Jay and I had the watch, with Mike and Josh below sleeping. Around 2300 we got hit with what I can only

describe as a wall of air. The wind speed jumped by at least ten knots in seconds. With the sound of a gunshot, the head of the small spinnaker blew apart and *Quintessence*, now horribly out of balance, slewed around up into the wind as Jay fought to bring her back on course.

I shouted down the companionway for Mike and Josh and ran forward to assess damage. The spinnaker was streaming off the bowsprit horizontally. I grabbed the sail, gathered it up in my arms and waited for Josh or Mike to make it forward to handle the tack and clew lines. A few moments later the remains of the sail was unbent and bagged.

Quintessence was essentially out of control. The wind was now screaming and with all the sail set aft it was virtually impossible for Jay to bring her off the wind. She would start to respond, the main would fill and she would immediately round up. I knew we would have to get some sail set forward to balance her out and allow us to heave to and put a couple of main sail reefs now made necessary by the strong wind.

Josh and I started hoisting the foresail with great difficulty. It flailed wildly in the wind and when *Quintessence* came off the wind with the fore half way up, the gaff and boom was pushed against the shrouds and the gaff jammed completely. In the dark, we couldn't see exactly what was going on. We couldn't hoist it up, and we couldn't get it down. *Quintessence* swung back around into the wind and the gaff pulled loose. We dropped it back down, and as my hand slid along the gaff, I realized it had split just aft of the jaws. We had to get things back under control before we did more damage.

We had started the engine, but had left it out of gear. I had Jay put it in gear, bring the head around into the wind and hold us there. We quickly double reefed the main and hoisted the staysail. We headed off the wind, shut the engine down and started back down the bay. We set the jib and were once again tearing along down the bay. Race rules require that engine use to be logged and documented. We noted the times and realized it had only been ten minutes since the spinnaker head had blown out. Wow, time really goes slowly when you are having that kind of fun!

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Quintessence was now well balanced with the double reefed mainsail and headsails set. We were back up to speed, but not overpowered. We settled in, once more looking like a traditional schooner.

We knew our biggest challenge of the night lay ahead of us at the Potomac River. The mouth of the Potomac River can be a bear in a strong northwest wind. The wind sweeps down the river virtually unimpeded. The long fetch builds up seas quickly, and the shallower water near Smith Point, the southern cape of the river, pushes those seas up into nasty steep waves.

As we cleared Lookout Point, the northern cape of the Potomac, around 0100 the seas and winds picked up noticeably. The further across the mouth we got, the worse the conditions became. I was on the wheel, as we were getting hit broad on the quarter by steep five to six foot waves. At the time, we had no idea how much the wind had picked up, since we had lost our wind speed indicator, but other boats recorded wind gusts in the high thirties. Steering was incredibly difficult. We were being shoved all over the place. It was a constant battle to keep us heading in the right direction. The motion was so erratic that the chart plotter and GPS didn't react fast enough. Relying on them would have had us going in circles. Steering by compass proved to be the only reliable way to maintain our course.

Our watch keeping schedule had fallen apart when the spinnaker had blown, so none of us had had much sleep. After having been battling the wheel for several hours, I relinquished it about three quarters of the way across the Potomac. My arms and shoulders were shot.

We fought our way past the worst of the conditions off Smith Point, recording some of the fastest boat speeds I have ever seen on *Quintessence*. With a 25' waterline length, her theoretical maximum speed is around seven knots. I don't think we dropped below seven the whole width of the Potomac. At the height of the wind, we were hitting speeds well into the eights, and hit speeds of 9.8 knots several times surfing down the face of some of the larger waves. Once past Smith Point, we immediately found calmer water and easier winds. In short order we were back to relatively calm conditions. It had been a wild ride across the Potomac.

The calmer conditions didn't mean a slower ride though. The wind was still strong, and we continued to hit speeds over 7 knots as we reached down toward our finish line off Windmill Point, the northern cape of the Rappahannock River.

At one point Josh suggested that we may be able to set the foresail if he used a boathook to fish the split fore gaff. I asked him how much faster he thought we could go, since we were already significantly exceeding our theoretical maximum hull speed? We didn't bother with the foresail and continued on with main and headsails set.

We continued on and crossed the class "C" finish line at 04:17. Our finish times in the two previous races had been 04:47 in 2009 and 04:08 in 2007. I was somewhat surprised at our finish time, considering how slow the race started. We had maintained good speed all through the night to end up that close to our 2007 finish.

Our race was now over, but we still had around 40 miles to go to reach Hampton Roads and another 10 or so beyond that to Portsmouth. We could fire up the engine and motorsail directly to Hampton Roads, but we opted, as we had in the 2009 race, to continue "racing" to the big boat finish line at Thimble Shoals. A couple of awards are given out for Class "C" and "B" boats that race the whole way, but our reasons were different. We had to go that way anyway, so why not? Wasn't that the whole point of the race down the bay?

We had settled back into a watch keeping routine and after being below for a couple of hours sleep I came on deck to find *Quintessence* sailing slowly along in very light winds. The front had passed, the winds had backed toward the south and were diminishing. We were now sailing fairly close to the wind and heading down the bay, well off our course line to Thimble Shoals. The finish is a line of latitude, so it doesn't matter exactly where you cross the line, but I was starting to worry that we may end up very far away from Hampton Roads by the time we did. It soon became apparent that we might not cross the line until well south of the Bridge-Tunnel. Josh didn't like that idea, took the wheel and steered what had to be one of the most focused turns on the wheel I have ever seen. He steered to every slight change of wind, slowly working us more to windward than I

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would have thought possible. We ultimately crossed the line above the bridge with room to spare!

We were, however, a pretty good distance downwind from Hampton Roads. We fired up the engine and headed closer in shore to pick up some lee and get out of the steep waves that were still running. As we entered Hampton Roads a short while later, we were hit by a screaming squall line that had us heeled over, even without any sail set. I was extremely glad we were off the bay and under motor when that hit.

The rest of the run through the Roads and the Elizabeth River went by quickly and we were soon tied up alongside another schooner at the ferry landing in Portsmouth, Virginia.

Our run down the bay was done. It had certainly been yet another interesting trip. We had blown out a spinnaker and split the fore gaff. Somehow, we had also managed to snap a bronze belaying pin in half. As we wandered around speaking with other crews we found we weren't the only ones with some damage. The *Meerwald's* main gaff broke just behind the jaws. The *Martha White* had virtually all of her sails damaged when her topsail rigging fouled both the fore and main mast running rigging. *Farewell's* pinrail, with all the associated halyards had broken loose.

At the pig and oyster fest on Saturday we were awarded 3rd place in Class "C." We were pretty happy with that. We were even happier when on Sunday morning we found out that a scoring error had been made, and we were actually in 2nd place. It started to seem a bit ridiculous when on Monday we found out that we had actually finished 1st. I didn't know what to expect on Tuesday!

We had finished eleven minutes ahead of the second place boat. Josh's spinnakers at the start had made all the difference. I guess I may have to talk to my sailmaker about making a couple for *Quintessence*!