

## EVERGLADES CHALLENGE 2018

### *"First Light"* a John Welsford Pathfinder, Balanced Lug Cat Yawl Rig

There was much excitement leading up to the race this year. A year and half ago I finished building a John Welsford Pathfinder, a much bigger and more capable boat than I had used previously. Although I had great confidence in the boat having sailed her hundreds of miles around the Keys the year prior to the race, there was still a little bit of uncertainty whether I could manage the bigger boat as a solo sailor through the many race filters the EC presents. Luckily, the many channels, ripping tides and bridges found in my normal sailing grounds here in the Keys provide excellent training for the EC.

I knew going into the race my biggest issue would be rowing into wind and tide when required to reach the checkpoints. But I also had concerns of windward performance, although I had her pointing to acceptable standards of 110 degree tacks in a moderate chop, there might be circumstances that required better. Luckily, by accident during the race, I discovered the secret to getting First Light to point very well.

Having completed the race, I am happy to report that the Pathfinder performed very well and I have more confidence in the boat than ever. The boat was tested in big running seas, had to claw her way into standing waves and deal with very light headwinds steering herself while the skipper dosed off (that night she made 3 knots with her big main when other boats gave up). What was most impressive was that she handled these conditions without putting any stress on me. Running, she surfed easily without threat of broaching. Beating, she was dry and kept her speed through the chop; so long as the skipper steered her properly into the waves so not to slow her forward speed. I can confidently say that the John Welsford Pathfinder is an amazing, capable, comfortable and fast boat.



The first hurdle was getting the big boat off of the beach. But with the aid of Aere Beach rollers, this was a non event. The key here was roller spacing. With the bow pointed toward the water, i

started with the first roller about three feet back from the bow. This maximized the roll distance of the first roller and was still not too difficult to get the boat moving forward. I spaced the next two rollers about three feet apart. To stop the boats forward momentum once it hit the water without going for a swim, I tied two of my dock lines together with one end attached to the bow cleat and the other at the stern of the boat coiled up ready to grab. This allowed the boat to roll a full boat length into the water while I stood ashore ready to tension the line and swing the bow. All went well and as planned. The hardest part was keeping the boat out of the way of other competitors while I gathered the rollers. The wave action kept pushing the stern parallel to the beach even though I had the mizzen sheeted tight with an offshore breeze. I managed though, and had the boat going south in about ten minutes after she hit the water.

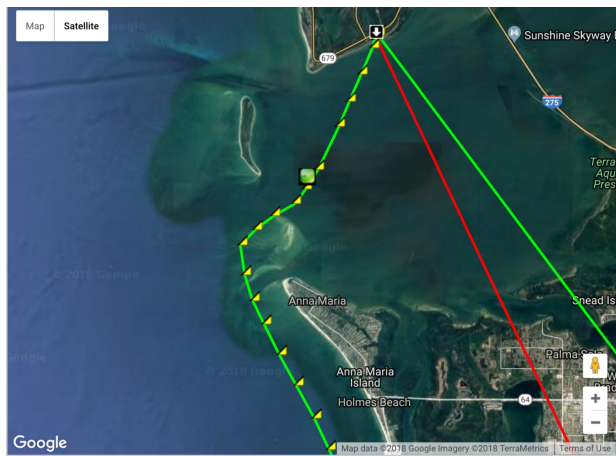


The first big decision to make getting to CP 1 is whether to go outside into the gulf or stay inside in the intercoastal waterway. Going outside is an easy straight course without channels, bridges or boat traffic to worry about. The problem is Stump Pass. It is a shoal layden area and with high winds becomes a surf zone. To get into the channel, you must sail past the pass to the south about one NM and then approach heading NE. You also must account for the tide, if it's outgoing, that's a full mile against current, and with an outgoing tide, surf could be worse. This is why Venice Inlet, 15 miles north of Stump Pass is often the better choice, especially if you can't make Stump Pass before dark. Many of the braver tribers also choose to just go right over the surf, straight into the pass from NNW and enjoy the wild ride!

Wind forecast said North all day for the start, going from small craft advisory conditions to "forecasted" 10-15 knots from NNE. My gut said take the inside route. Sure I would need to de-mast at Stickney Point bridge, but with my unstayed Balanced Lug rig that is easy. Always listen to your gut, I didn't, I chose to go outside and target Venice Inlet.

Back to the start, because of the small craft advisory, the start was delayed until 0900. The night prior I had tied double reef in for the start, ten minutes prior, I decided to go more conservative and tied in my third reef. I made good progress across the bay and headed to the north side of Rabbit Key, making a steady 4 knots, occasionally 5. I kept watching the other sailors pull away, they appeared to have full sail, so I said heck with it, hove to, and shook out to a double reef. *First Light* responded well and started making 4.5 to 5.5 knots.

The approach to Rabbit Key is visually confusing. The north end is low and isn't visible until you get close. Why are the boats ahead of me heading farther to the right? As I got closer, the answer was clear, there were some decent waves breaking on the shoal off Rabbit Key. So I leaned right, keeping clear the breakers before heading south. Turning to the south, there were still some steep seas with their tops coming off, but *First Light* comfortably sailed downwind, her buoyant stern lifting high each time a big wave approached.



Progress south was good, I easily made 4-5 knots double reefed with a NNW wind and 2-3 foot following seas. All boats ahead were getting smaller on the horizon and flying full sail. Hmmmm, maybe I should shake out the reef. With winds forecasted to stay 10-12, and go more NE, that's what I did. With full sail I was now making 5.5-6 with ease, not surfing. I started getting pretty relaxed as I set in for an easy downwind sail.

Around 2 PM, I thought maybe the winds were picking up a little, I notice the top of the water had a more course appearance. The winds were definitely still NNW. Wait for it, wait for it, here it comes...hmmmm maybe I should reef.

Well I didn't, I was making good progress,

under control, and I told myself if it gets any worse, I'll reef. Well, conditions were already worse, the sea state just needed a few minutes to build. Because the winds were from the NW at 20 the day prior, there was already a swell from offshore running, so it didn't take much for mother ocean to take it up a notch. Waves were already closely spaced and went to 3 feet seemingly in a matter of minutes. About every few minutes a bigger set would come through that I would put in the 4-6 range with the tops coming off. I was still well under control until an opposing wake from a big boat stopped *First Light's* forward speed momentarily and the relative wind speed on the main sail seemed to double. I now knew I had to reef quickly. I've reefed in strong winds before, but not in open water with 4-6 foot seas. I sheeted in the mizzen, made it flat, and hove to, almost, I forgot one big step. Boat headed into the wind and I went forward to reef the main.

The process to heave to and reef is to first lower the centerboard, tighten the lazy jack lines, ease the downhaul, and then lower the halyard to the approximate reef height and tie the reef in. Well I forgot to lower the center board, so the bow of the boat created enough windage to put the boat broadside to the seas after I was well into the reef process, easing the halyard. So the main did not come down smoothly because of this and made reefing more difficult than it had to be. It was my fault. *First Light* however is a well designed boat with great roll stability. Although she was beam to the seas, she never became unstable, she just seemed to ride the waves like a drunk duck while I tied the reef in like a drunk sailor. This was a critical moment, that could have been disastrous in those conditions. A boat with lower freeboard and less stability likely would have rolled or taken on water. The Pathfinder handled this with ease and didn't come close to taking on any water. I was in a great boat.

Pointing the nose back to the south, *First Light* took off. She was now surfing, but easily controlled. Any tendency to round up was easily countered with the tiller, but mostly she just flew forward. I thought wow, that's fast as we surfed down one of the bigger waves at 8 knots - hah! Moments later we hit 10 and then 10.2! Now that's fast for this boat! The lesson learned here was, wait for it, wait for it.... to reef early! Also to follow the procedures slowly and methodically, putting the board down would have made reefing less intense. Lastly, this would of been a good time to probably lower the mizzen.

Entering Venice Inlet was uneventful, as was the remaining sail to CP one. As I entered the waterway at Venice, I came alongside another great Welsford design, a Scamp sailed by Marty, tribe name "*Off the Charts*". Marty had made the better choice of staying inside. And had I listened to my gut and done the same, I would of likely been farther south closer to CP 1.





If there is an N in the forecast next time I will stay inside and relax the whole way. But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger and I learned a lot taking that outside route. Mainly, I gained great confidence in my boat.

Exiting CP1 around 2300 Saturday, the forecasted NE 10 knot winds were actually NE at zero. Time to go to oars. The

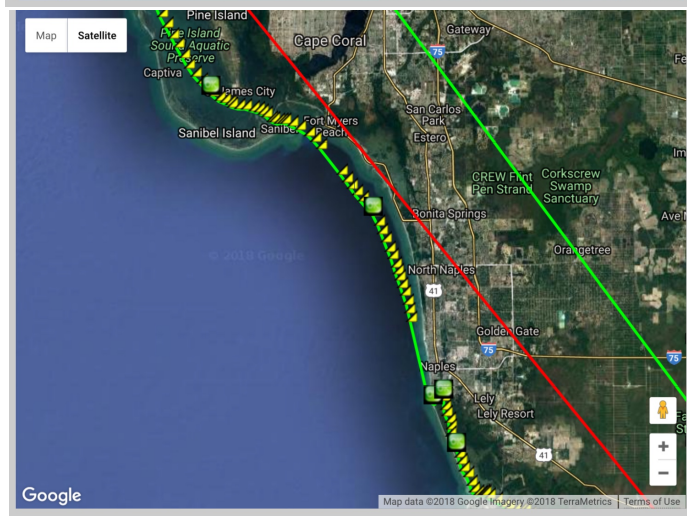
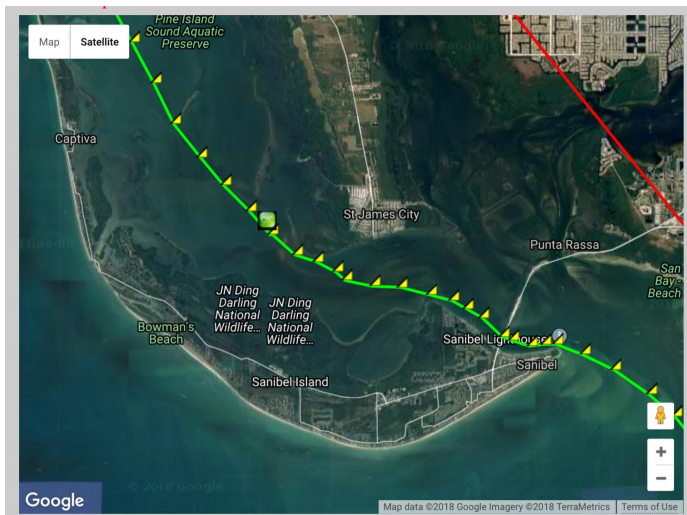
Pathfinder is not a row boat by any means,

but with properly sized oars (mine are 11'), she will pull along at 2 knots in calm water with an easy stroke. Around mid night, not too far south of CP 1, I began looking for a spot to drop anchor. I had wanted to go much farther, but with no winds, rowing and I was feeling tired not getting a great nights sleep the night before the race and from the self induced stress from sailing offshore earlier. I decided time would be better spent sleeping rather than rowing. I found a small protected area behind some mangroves and set camp.

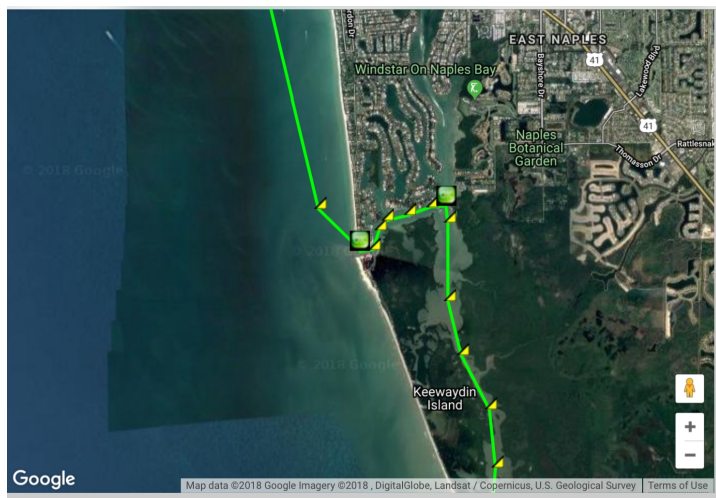
Having an efficient sleep system and cook system is essential for a race like the EC. When you do decide to stop, you will be tired and your camp system should be simple and not take much effort. The Pathfinder design really works well here. The floor space forward it plenty big enough to sleep on. I simply throw the anchor, roll out my REI 3.5 sleep pad, Woolly Mammoth blanket and pillow, brush my teeth and go to bed. If there is any rain forecasted, and I rig my

Hennessy rain fly. The rain fly takes about two minutes to stretch between the masts and clamp to the gunnel. Making a quick meal, I use a MSR reactor stove. But I ate at CP 1, so I went straight to bed and got a good 5 hours. The camp breakdown is also quick. Blanket and pillow go in a stuff sack, sleep pad roll and stowed, heat some water for coffee and oatmeal, prep water, snacks, raise the anchor and go.

After sunrise, NE winds persisted all day, I made quick progress to the south. Winds picked up crossing Charlotte Harbor, so I triple reefed the main and still made 5-6 knots easily and comfortably. Pine Island Sound has a good bit of easting, but I was able to make the SW bridge without tacking. Getting under the bridge required a good bit of rowing with headwinds and opposing current, but I got through ok. It was now mid afternoon and I needed a game plan. I could make Wiggins Pass easily by sunset, but I would have to stop if I went in there because there isn't an intercoastal. Winds were forecasted to pick up to twenty around 2000 from the NE. I really would rather not be offshore with twenty knots of wind and have to



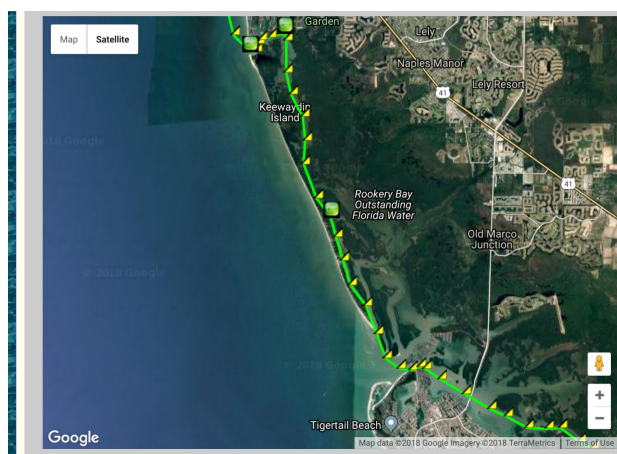




tackle a pass a night. Big Marco Pass would be a midnight arrival at current speed. I started looking at Gordon Pass. I had been in there before and it is an easy, straight pass without shoals. I would get there after dark around the time winds were forecasted to pick up. The best part was there is a ditch from Gordon to Marco through the mangroves that is

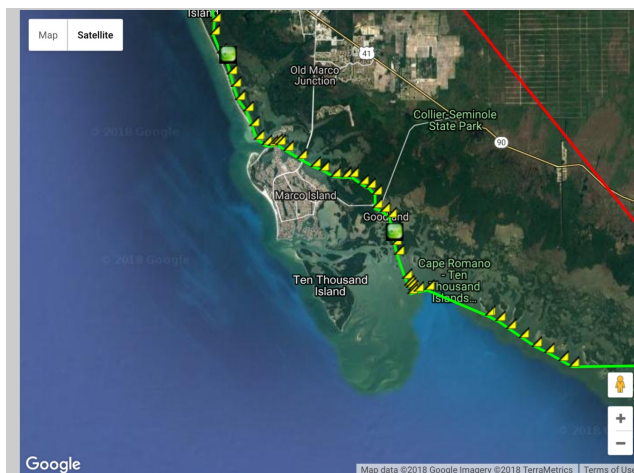
well marked and with a NE wind it would push me straight through. So I made that my goal, keeping Wiggins Pass in my back pocket in case winds picked up earlier than forecasted.

I enjoyed a beautiful sunset, putting in a triple reef just after sunset. That's right, I reefed early! My progress



slowed to 4 knots, but I felt ready for higher winds and I wouldn't have to reef in the dark.

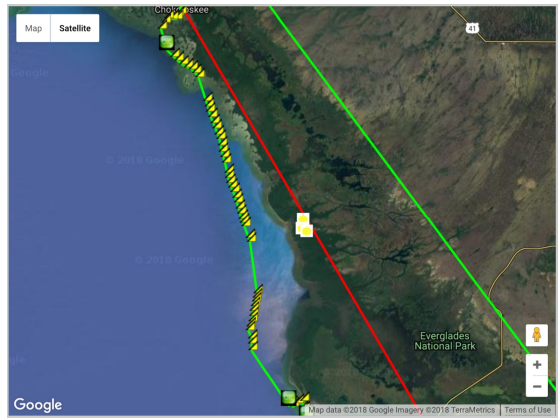
I made Gordon Pass without issue and after tacking back to the north to get around the corner for the ditch, I sailed easily downwind making 5 knots toward Marco. I arrived at Marco around 1300 and got about 5 hours of good sleep.



For the first two days, racers were lucky to have a wind mostly from behind the beam. Waking early that morning to light east winds, I had to decide to either go through Big Marco River against the tide, or try to go around Cape Romano. I decided it would be better to fight a dying tide than go around and have a long easterly sail in light winds. I was able to short tack thru the beginning part of the Marco River, and once farther along, I motor sailed the river against a light current most of the way. About half way the current went in my favor. I exited the river and entered the Gulf at Coon Key Pass.

Entering the Gulf again, I encountered very light and variable winds. I became increasingly frustrated unable to get any positive VMCG to CP2. I tried everything, but all I could manage was a course SSW about 2 knots. I needed to go SE. Eventually I managed to get *First Light* to go SE by motor sailing with the port oar and the sheets trimmed in tight. I started making 3

knots the right way and eventually retired the oar. Things were looking up and it appeared I would make Chokoloskee Pass with an incoming current. By early afternoon, the winds filled in from the WSW and I enjoyed what had to be the easiest transit up Indian Key Pass, with both a direct tailwind and an incoming current. I made CP 2 Monday at 5 PM.



After a quick shower at the fish cleaning station and picking up some Powerade at the store, I was ready to catch the outgoing tide. I exited Chokoloskee Pass along with fellow racer Off the Charts, Marty in the Welsford Scamp. He had beat me to CP 2 by sailing farther that previous night all the way to Caxambas Pass.

Entering the Gulf, winds were relaxing for the night and it was time to formulate a game plan. I decided that since the winds were forecasted to be headwinds the next day, I would keep sailing south as long as I could maintain course. Having a big main sail helped here. Initially I started out on a close reach making about 3-3.5 knots. By around midnight I was close hauled making only 2 knots, but I was on a course for West Cape Sable. I decided to sail all night.

That night *First Light* did most of the work. She loves to steer herself close hauled. I continuously dozed off throughout the night while she steered herself with my hand lightly on the tiller. I think I looked up every minute or two to glance at the GPS and only a few times had she strayed from course. I arrived about 5 NM abeam West Cape shortly after sunrise. Conditions quickly started to change.

Winds started to blow and shift to the south east. I went from pointing at the Cape to holding a course to the south and then to the SSW. Winds really started to pick up and I didn't like the idea of going too far towards Key West. I tacked the boat and initially she went NNE. I didn't like that either, so I tacked back. What to do? I was very tired, having been up since I left Marco at 0600 the day before. I wasn't sure how to get around the Cape efficiently.

I opted to try and tack towards the beach on the Cape and see what the conditions were like. Heck I was even thinking about just walking the boat leisurely along the beach to South Cape. That's funny now. As I approached the beach I was in a protected spot from the wind near Mid Cape. I walked the boat around the corner and saw extremely unfavorable conditions. Walking the boat in the surf was not an option, and I was definitely not confident I could sail in what I was looking at. I had heard about standing waves at the Cape and now I was looking at them. They were steep, 2-3 footers very closely spaced due to the shallow water, sometimes the tops





were breaking. I walked back around the corner, exhausted and unsure. But it boiled down to sitting on that hot beach for a full day and night to wait for forecasted SW winds or just getting out there and trying to sail it.

Even if it took 50 tacks, I would rather try. I took a quick boat shower, hydrated, and ate a power bar. I knew that I would need some good sail power to drive into those seas, so I opted for a tight double reef vice a triple. This would turn out to be a very lucky discovery.

After leaving the beach, immediately I could tell the boat was pointing better than

ever. I was making great headway, I still had a positive VMCG to Mid Cape. I tacked to see what would happen on the starboard tack. What? 100 degree tack in those conditions? Positive VMCG? Awesome, I was suddenly getting there. Sure I had to play the bow off to keep my momentum up on the really steep sets, but this was great, things began to look promising. If I could just get around South Cape, I would be home free. You're probably thinking that the ride sucked though, probably wet with lots of spray and pounding. Nope, hardly any. Occasionally I would misjudge a set and pound and stop the boat, but for most of the sailing I kept her moving steadily forward at 3-4.5 knots. I had discovered that her best sail for driving into a moderate steep chop, was tight, double reefed main and full mizzen sheeted fairly flat. Now I was really impressed with *First Lights* ability to handle those conditions and get me where I needed to go without beating me up.



After rounding South Cape, I made CP 3 around 5 pm. I slept 12 hours that night.

I woke at just before sunrise and listened to a very favorable forecast, SW winds 10-15. I quickly broke boat camp, ate, and pressed on. After a quick row out the Flamingo channel, I stowed the oars for the last time. I averaged 5.5-6.5 all day, eventually triple reefing the main. I thought passing a bald eagle at End Key would be the highlight of the race, but then two Dolphin joined me for about 15 minutes I was absolutely having a great time. I arrived at the finish in Sunset Cove at 1340.





Arriving at the finish...



### **So what are my lessons learned?**

1. The Pathfinder is an awesome, absolutely awesome design. Fast, seaworthy, stable, comfortable, and just damn good looking.
2. Wait for it, wait for it.....reef early. And follow your reefing procedures, I.e. put the CB down.





3. Trust your gut.

4. I think that the seabreeze couples with the main pressure gradient in the afternoon near the coast resulting in a higher than forecasted wind. I need to research this.



5. I use a mast collar with a hook that I attach the top yard to with a loop. I need to rig a catch on this so the top yard won't pop off if it gets caught on the lazy jacks coming down.

6. Consider dropping the mizzen downwind over 20 knots.

7. Using two Garmin 76sc's side by side works great, one in compass mode with a waypoint arrow going, and the other in map mode.

8. You need to add 10-15 degrees for leeway, this makes a big difference in Florida's bay

when trying to sail a tight channel or make a channel entrance, add this into your wind cone chart. Direct to a waypoint on the gps keeps you pointing to low.





## **Best pieces of kit....**

1. My Hunt seat pad, absolutely awesome gear for your butt. Warm on cool mornings and good butt cushion.
2. My quicksilver sombrero hat, love it.
3. My nuboom speaker, solar powered, good tunes, double as a battery to charge phone and go pro
4. My large ice scoop bailer, makes an awesome piss pot, especially when rough
5. Woolley Mammoth blanket , awesomely warm, but you also don't sweat using it.
6. Kohl wool pull over



7. Mast pennant, very useful to tell wind relative direction
8. Streamline spotlight
9. Stormr Foul Weather gear
10. Good set of salopettes
11. Kokatat Splash Jacket

## **Worst pieces of kit**

1. Mountain House meals...forget it
2. MSR dromedary bags, difficult to use to top off water containers, gave water bad taste, one leaked, I'm switching to 1 liter bottles.