

# WaterTribe BootCamp- 2026

Preparation for the Everglades Challenge and Ultra Marathon and Ultimate Florida

## Welcome – A Little Background

Does anyone remember the first adventure race on TV? The Eco-Challenge was created by Mark Burnett and aired on the Discovery Channel in April 1995. It ran every year until 2002. I was fascinated and wanted to do the Eco-Challenge.

But there were some tough obstacles for a normal person who has a family and a job to overcome:

- You had to have a 4-person team.
- The team had to have at least one female and at least one male.
- You had to be someplace in the world for a month or two or more.
- The typical race had mountains, jungles, rivers, and more to overcome.

I was able to find a couple of races in Florida that allowed single entries and only required a day or two. At one of them, a group of three women asked me to join their team. That was probably the most fun I've ever had in these types of events 😊

I decided to do my own adventure race. I would rent climbing towers for the mountain part and use the trails and waters around Fort Desoto for the rivers and jungle part. I worked hard but finally figured it out.

We have the Everglades, we have Fort De Soto, we have the ocean route to the Keys, and who knows what the weather will dish out.

The WaterTribe Everglades Challenge came to life in 2001. We've been going strong since then.

The information in this BootCamp is designed to help you complete your First Everglades Challenge or Ultra Marathon.

## Your Most Important Piece of Safety Gear – Your Lifejacket – Chief

When the “STUFF” starts hitting the fan, your lifejacket is your most important safety item.

**ALWAYS WEAR YOUR LIFEJACKET!**

**Check-In-Day: Your lifejacket will be inspected as the first step in the registration process. At a minimum it must have the following:**

- PLB – This has saved WaterTribe lives. It must be attached with a lanyard. And you need to know how to use it.
- Safety Knife – This has saved WaterTribe lives. You must be able to deploy the knife with either hand. I recommend a fixed blade knife. But you can use a folding knife if you can open it with a single hand and both right and left hand. A good example is the NRS Titanium Pilot Knife. Another option is a SCUBA diving knife
- If you only have one knife, it must be attached to your lifejacket with a lanyard. If you have a backup knife, it is OK to have one knife on a lanyard and one knife without a lanyard.
- Whistle – This is a Coast Guard requirement. It should be on a lanyard so that you don’t lose it.
- Here is a link to see SOS’s video regarding the lifejacket:  
<https://bandbyachtdeisgns.com/blog/setting-up-a-pfd-for-small-boat-sailing/>

Of course, you can add optional items to your lifejacket. WaterTribe recommends the following:

- Strobe – the Coast Guard will have a much easier time finding you in chaotic seas and at night. This should be clipped to your lifejacket or be on a lanyard.
- Flares – to get noticed by boats if you see them.
- Compass so you can navigate in large breaking seas with no view of land.
- Basic survival items – space blanket, fire kit, survival kit
- Water – some even have a Camelbak attached to their lifejacket.

You can add more stuff, but don’t go crazy.

## Packing Your Small Craft - Calypso

### Guide to Packing a Vessel for the Everglades Challenge

Keep these 3 goals in mind when packing your kayak.

1. **Seaworthiness:** pack the kayak so that it will be well-balanced and properly loaded for a variety of sea conditions.
2. **Emergencies:** pack the kayak so that you can quickly perform self-rescues or assisted rescues.
3. **Efficiency:** Pack the kayak so that you can quickly reach important gear and supplies.

Note that goals 1 and 2 will override goal 3 in many situations. For example, it might be “efficient” to pack your water bladder on your front deck so you can easily drink while paddling but that makes the kayak more unstable. That water bladder could also get in the way during rescues and could even prevent the kayak from rolling up if you tip over.

#### Packing for Seaworthiness

This is the most important goal in packing your kayak. Your kayak must be able to carry you safely in a variety of sea conditions. An overloaded or poorly balanced kayak will not handle well and could put you in dangerous situations.

Keep these 3 goals in mind when packing for seaworthiness.

##### **1. Payload Capacity**

- a. Know the maximum payload limit for your kayak. You can find this information on the manufacturer’s website. This payload includes the weight of the paddler and all gear.
- b. Do not exceed 80% of the designed payload capacity. Your boat will perform much better if it isn’t loaded to the maximum capacity.

Example: Chief’s Epic 18x Sport Kayak:

The maximum payload capacity of an Epic 18x Sport Kayak is 380 pounds. Setting the limit to 80% puts the payload capacity at 304 pounds. Assuming Chief weighs 220 pounds in full paddling gear, his boat’s remaining capacity is 84 pounds. If Chief carries 9 liters of water (21 pounds), his boat’s remaining capacity for food and gear is 63 pounds.

##### **2. Trim**

- a. Pack your kayak so the heaviest gear is down low in the hull and close to the cockpit. Lighter gear goes in the far ends of the boat. Do not put heavy items on deck.
- b. Pack your kayak so that it is balanced forward and aft as well as port to starboard.
  - i. If your kayak is loaded more heavily on one side, it will list and not track properly.

- ii. In a perfect world, your kayak would be loaded evenly in the front and back. However, in the real world, you will likely have an uneven weight distribution. That is okay. If you have to choose, it is better to have a bit more weight in the stern than in the bow. If a kayak is too heavy in the bow, it can greatly impact your steering.
- iii. I pack camping gear in the back and food up front. My camping gear weight stays the same throughout the race. My food weight gets lighter as the race goes on. Towards the end of the race, the kayak may be a bit stern-heavy or I can move gear forwards to balance the boat.
- c. Pack your kayak so that gear does not shift. If your boat rolls or gets cartwheeled, your gear needs to stay in place. If you have lots of extra space in your boat, fill it with flotation to wedge gear in place. You can also keep the air in your drybags so they pack more tightly together.

### **3. Flotation**

Most sea kayaks have two or three hatches and watertight bulkheads. You should assume your hatches and bulkheads will leak.

- a. Pack your kayak with enough flotation that it will float even if you lose a hatch cover, crack a bulkhead or get a crack in the hull.
- b. Pack important gear in waterproof drybags. Double bag important items such as sacrosanct camp clothes, sleeping bag and electronics. Put desiccant packs in some of your drybags since your gear will be wet from paddling and just from the high humidity in FL. I use reusable desiccant packs that change color when they are wet. Leaving extra air in the bags keeps them more buoyant.
- c. Inspect drybags before the race. I always carry one or two extra empty drybags. When rolling a drybag, make sure there are no wrinkles in the seal, or the drybag will leak.
- d. Put flotation bags in the bow and stern. I use large, lightweight drybags full of pool-noodles. You can buy dedicated inflatable bow and stern bags but these are expensive and can leak.



Chief showing the capabilities of a properly loaded kayak. In this demonstration, Chief packed his kayak with a full EC load and spare flotation. He then took the hatches off and purposely flooded the hatches and cockpit to replicate a worst-case scenario situation out on the water. Because Chief's boat was properly packed, it continued to float and could be safely paddled.

## Packing for Emergencies

Even the most experienced kayakers run into trouble sometimes. Your kayak (and PFD!) should be packed in a way that allows you to safely perform self-rescues and/or assisted rescues.

1. **Accessibility:** Safety equipment such as spare paddles, bilge pumps, paddle floats and stirrups should be easily accessible. Your safety gear won't do you any good if you have it shoved in a hatch under a bunch of loaded gear bags.
2. **Safety equipment should not interfere with your ability to get back in the boat.**
  - a. Some kayakers carry their bilge pumps and spare paddles on the back deck. This is a great idea if your preferred method of self-rescue is rolling or side-reentry style rescues (assisted or solo). If your primary form of self-rescue is a back-

deck/over-the-stern reentry, then you may want to store your pump and paddles on the forward deck if possible.

- b. If you have too much safety gear on your PFD, you may have a hard time re-entering your kayak. VHF radios and safety knives are notorious for snagging on cockpit coamings. You can also crush/damage electronics by laying on them during rescues. You can carry these items on your PFD but you will need to figure out how to keep them out of the way during rescues.

3. **Your boat shape and layout will heavily determine where you store safety gear.** Some kayakers carry their floats and bilge pumps on deck or attached to a deck bag. Some store them in the cockpit. Some even keep them in the day hatch. All of these options have pros and cons. You must practice to find out what works best for your boat layout and for your preferred method of self-rescue.
4. **A note on paddle leashes:** Some paddlers like to use paddles leashes which tether their paddle to their arm or to the boat. Surfski and SUP paddlers often use leg leashes. While these can be great safety tools, use them with caution. You and your gear can get tangled in them and the thick style leashes can be extremely difficult to cut. Only use leashes with a quick-release feature.

## **Packing for Efficiency**

After a loooong day of paddling in the Everglades Challenge, you might be stiff, sore, hungry, grumpy, cold, wet and in serious need of rest. You will likely be setting up camp after sunset. The last thing you want to do is spend an hour digging through your boat in the dark on some muddy beach trying to find a lighter for your stove while the mosquitoes try to carry you off. To avoid this situation, it helps to pack your boat efficiently.

1. Have an organized packing system in place and practice it multiple times before the race.
  - a. Some paddlers put diagrams on the underside of their hatches so that they know the content and location of each bag in the hatch.
  - b. While organization is up to you, I like to organize so that I need the fewest bags and fewest trips back and forth to the boat to get my stuff. All of my camping gear is in the back of the boat. I bring an empty Ikea bag so I can throw all of my camping gear to my chosen campsite in one trip. The bag also keeps my drybags from getting muddy/sandy when they are sitting on the ground.
2. Weigh your gear, water and food and pack so that the boat is balanced. Keep the 80% rule in mind.
  - a. The heaviest thing you will carry is water. Keep that low in the boat and close to the center of the boat. I prefer to keep my water bladders in the day hatch so they can't fall out if I roll the boat. This also keeps my bladders away from other gear in case they leak.
  - b. The lightest gear goes at the ends of the boat. This includes items like sleeping pads and extra clothes.
3. Think like a backpacker. Pack to be prepared but do not “pack your fears”.

- a. The idea of “two is one and one is none” is good but make sure you don’t overload the boat.
  - i. Think about how gear can fail and what the consequences and solutions would be in each situation. Some boats have known failure points. For kayaks, it is often rudder or skeg cables.
  - ii. In some cases, duplicates make sense. For example, you should have a back-up paddle and back-up GPS. In some cases, duplicates don’t make sense. For example, you probably wouldn’t carry two full-size tents, but you could carry a secondary, lighter emergency shelter and/or a simple tent repair kit.
  - iii. Be realistic on what you pack in your first aid kit and boat repair kit. The purpose of a good first aid kit and good boat repair kit is to get you safely to the finish or at least to a safe drop out point. You aren’t out there to perform surgery or build a whole new boat. Also, those repair kit items don’t do you any good if you have no idea how to use them.
- b. Avoid overpacking your boat by not “packing your fears”. For example, during my first EC, I was worried I would not be able to find places to refill my water. I loaded my boat with tons of Gatorade and water. I probably had enough for the whole race. The full bottles took a lot of room and made the boat very heavy. These days, I carry Gatorade/Electrolyte concentrate and I know exactly where I can fill my water bottles. I usually only carry enough water to get me to the next checkpoint, plus a little extra.

A final note on packing your kayak for the EC...**practice!**

- Practice packing and paddling your kayak with a full expedition load.
- Practice doing rescues with a full expedition load.
- Practice camping.
- Practice using your safety gear.

The more you test your boat and yourself before the race, the better prepared you will be for the EC!

Comparison of how two kayakers pack an Epic 18x Sport kayak for the EC			
Chief		Calypso	
Compartment	Total Weight	Compartment	Total Weight
<b>Bow Hatch</b>		<b>Bow Hatch</b>	
3 liters of water		breakfasts, lunches, dinners, snack bags- 6 days	
Sleeping bag, pillow, long johns		Muscle Milk and Electrolyte squeeze bottles	
Tent, hammock, ground sheet		Mess Kit (jetboil, fuel, 2 lighters, spork, camp towel)	
Sil Tarp		Repair kit for boat and tent	
Wag Bags		sacrosanct camp clothes, spare lightweight shoes and hat, spare paddling clothes, spare empty dry bags	
Bow bag with thermarest or swim noodles for flotation	22lb 10 oz	Bow bag with pool noodles for flotation	26.5 lbs
<b>Cockpit</b>		<b>Cockpit/ Deck Bag</b>	
Chief with PFD		Calypso with PFD	
3 liters of water	227 lbs	Deck bag (VHF, GPS, e-flare, sunscreen, hand tape, ibuprofen, lip balm, bug net, spare batteries, spare bite valve for water hose, sunglasses, headlamp), SPOT, nav charts, tide charts, compass on deck	160 lbs
<b>Day Hatch</b>		<b>Day Hatch</b>	
storm cag, possibles bag		Up to nine liters of water (I rarely carry the full 9 liters except in the Everglades)	
pee bottle, toilet kit, wag bags, hand sanitizer		Ditch Kit (hypothermia kit, fire-starting kit, emergency poncho, first aid kit, phone, wallet, battery pack)-triple bagged	
lights and batteries		paddle jacket when not in use	
hypothermia kit			
Day food, Ensure, Electrolytes	13lbs 4oz		25 pounds
<b>Stern Hatch</b>		<b>Stern Hatch</b>	
3 liters of water		Foam camp pad, tent, fly poles, stakes	
food for 5 days		Military poncho, liner, double bagged	
cook kit with food for 2 days		Sleeping bag, pillow, double bagged	
paddling clothes		Toiletries (skin care, glasses/contacts, hair brush, toothbrush, bathroom kit)	
shower kit		headlamp for camp, lucy light	
sacrosanct clothes		head net, bug spray	
stern bag with pool noodles for flotation	24lbs	stern bag with pool noodles for flotation	14lbs
<b>Total Payload</b>	<b>286 lbs 4 Oz.</b>	<b>Total Payload</b>	<b>225.5 lbs</b>
Epic 18 Max Payload	380 lbs	Epic 18 Max Payload	380lbs
<b>Percentage Used of Max Payload</b>	<b>~76%</b>	<b>Percentage Used of Max Payload</b>	<b>59%</b>

Note that our actual gear weight is only about 10 pounds difference with Calypso carrying a bit more gear.

## Setting Goals - Very Important = Pelican

**“ONLY THOSE WHO WILL RISK GOING TOO FAR CAN POSSIBLY FIND OUT HOW FAR ONE CAN GO”** T.S. Eliot.

And if you do go too far, there are three things you need in order to endure: 1. Control 2. Predictive ability and 3. Optimism. These aren't innate traits, but skills you can develop and strengthen through preparation and experience.

**Control:** Not control over circumstances or others, but mastery over your own emotional responses. When equipment fails or the weather turns against you, your ability to manage fear, frustration, and fatigue will determine your next move.

**Prediction:** Fear often stems from the unknown. The more you understand about weather patterns, tidal flows, navigation, and your own physical limits, the better you can anticipate challenges. Knowledge transforms anxiety into preparedness. This is why your training, your route study, and your pre-race preparation are crucial—they give you the ability to predict and therefore reduce fear more accurately.

**Optimism:** Not blind optimism that ignores danger, but realistic optimism grounded in experience and preparation. It's the belief that you have the skills and resources to handle what comes your way.

This guide will help you develop the tools to push through adversity while maintaining the wisdom to recognize when continuing would be unwise.

**A Recipe For Success:** My personal definition of success is *“Making consistent progress toward a worthwhile goal.”* This definition puts you in control provided your daily goal **is** making progress for a specified amount of time instead of by a specified time. This may vary from person to person depending upon your abilities and your target date to finish. For example, during both cycling and WaterTribe events I now select 16 hours **as my time for progress**, which allows me 8 hours of setting up camp and sleeping. Most importantly, progress means more than just forward movement. Progress includes:

- Studying your charts and refining your strategy during a weather hold
- Hiking to a source of repair materials or supplies
- Making equipment repairs that will enable you to continue
- Grinding out miles against headwinds, even if it's slow-going

When you make camp after 16 hours of this kind of progress, you've succeeded for the day, even if you covered only a fraction of the hoped-for distance. Maybe you didn't go anywhere. It doesn't matter because your planning while hunkered down still counts as “progress”. So

instead of setting specific deadlines for yourself, define success in a way that enables you to exert maximum control.

**Know More and Fear Less:** Fear is the emotion of the future and arises when you are unable to predict. That's why preparation should include knowledge about the course, the checkpoints, and especially the weather forecast. The more you know the more you'll be able to more accurately predict and the less you will fear. Unlike positive emotions, which motivate you to approach the source of pleasure, negative emotions, especially fear, motivate you to avoid the triggers. By the way, the word *emotion* is derived from the same root as *move* and *motivate*. Therefore, emotions motivate us to approach or avoid. During the EC, avoidance may well take the form of dropping out.

There's one other thing to keep in mind. If a crucial resource is lost, don't focus on what has fallen overboard or has been damaged beyond repair. Instead, focus upon what you still have and how you might utilize what remains to achieve your goal. The human brain doesn't respond to reality; it responds to the transduction of visual, auditory and other senses into an image in your mind. That image will be shaped by your beliefs, values, and past experiences, and in this modified form will drive your mental and physical responses. You'll remain far more optimistic if you choose to focus on what you still have instead of dwelling upon what you have lost. It's called loss aversion. When you focus on what you've lost, you're more likely to feel anxious and make poor decisions than when you focus on what you still have.

**Decision-Making Under Stress:** One of the most dangerous moments during the Everglades Challenge occurs when you're exhausted, cold, hungry, and facing a critical decision—especially in the middle of the night. Your body's energizing hormonal cycles are at their lowest point, the glucose your brain needs for clear thinking is depleted, and every problem seems insurmountable. Instead, follow Chief's Golden Rule; Never make major decisions when you are exhausted, cold, or hungry—especially at night. Instead, follow this protocol: 1. Set up your shelter 2. Eat a meal (even crappy dehydrated food will be delicious when seasoned with hunger and exhaustion) 3. Crawl into your sleeping bag 4. Sleep. The decision to stop or continue can wait until morning.

**The Power of Morning:** When you wake, you'll be rested, warm, and energized. More importantly, cortisol—a hormone that provides your brain with energy—rises naturally in the morning in response to movement and light. It's called a circadian rhythm, which means *about the sun*. In addition, spend 10 to 20 minutes doing light exercise, and you'll trigger a release of beta-endorphin. This neurochemical change isn't trivial; it fundamentally alters your cognitive abilities and emotional state. By the way, the word 'endorphin' means 'endogenous morphine'. Tap into your body's natural mood elevator through exercise. It's safe and good for you.

Along with rest, in this sun and chemically improved state, solutions are more likely to appear as optimism replaces pessimism. That broken steering system? You might spot some flotsam that can be fashioned into a rudder. That navigation dilemma? A fresh perspective might reveal

an alternative route now available due to a rising tide and tailwind that didn't exist the previous night. During 25 years of WaterTribe events, I've heard countless participants describe ingenious solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems after a night's rest.

**Two-Day Minimum Rule:** If you're contemplating withdrawal, don't drop out during the first two days of the EC unless you face genuine safety concerns. You've allocated a week for this journey. Stay on the course for at least 48 hours after the start before deciding whether to continue. The third day is one of enlightenment. It's only Monday, and you still have 6 days, which in most boats is plenty of time to arrive in time for the festivities in Key Largo! You can skip the three-day step if you've already been underway for more than two days. Here's why it works.

Research on wilderness immersion has documented what psychologists call the *Three-Day Effect*. After 72 hours disconnected from normal life, people show measurable improvements: heart rate drops, brain wave patterns shift toward relaxation, and the mental chatter that dominated their thinking on day one gradually fades.

What happens is this: Over the first day, your mind is still occupied with concerns from home—things you forgot to do, problems that might arise in your absence. By day two, these preoccupations begin to recede, gradually replaced by more recent sensory experiences—the patterns of water, the sounds of wildlife, the rhythm of your paddle strokes. By day three, your mind has cleared considerably. You're more present, more creative, more capable of finding solutions. However, this can occur only when separated as much as possible from the trappings of civilization. So hang out on a beach, not a hotel or someone's home. And bury your cell phone in a waterproof bag. Research has revealed that simply having your cell phone nearby can raise stress levels. Use your phone only for emergencies and your daily reports to your shore contact.

Even if you ultimately don't finish, during that 3-day interval away, you'll have gained something valuable: the experience of mental clarity that comes from solitude and disconnection. And quite often, that clarity reveals solutions that lead you farther along the course than you initially thought.

**Safety vs. Discomfort:** There's a vast difference between discomfort and danger. Discomfort is part of the WaterTribe experience and includes sore muscles, fatigue, cold hands, hunger between meals, frustration with slow progress, broken equipment that can be repaired, unfavorable but manageable weather conditions, temporary discouragement, and the general hardship of living in a cramped boat for days on end.

These discomforts are normal and expected. It's why the C in EC stands for Challenge, not Cruise. Learning to persist through discomfort while maintaining good judgment is part of your growth. It's derived from adequate preparation and experience. However, you should withdraw immediately if you face:

- Medical emergencies such as chest pain, severe difficulty breathing, signs of serious illness or injury
- Dangerous weather conditions beyond your skill level or boat's capabilities
- Critical equipment failure such as structural damage to your boat that cannot be adequately repaired
- Hypothermia or heat illness that don't improve following initial steps
- Finding yourself in genuinely dangerous waters beyond your ability
- Sprains, strains, wounds or symptoms that significantly impair your ability to safely operate your boat

There is no shame in withdrawing when conditions exceed your capabilities. Survival and safety should always come first. Your choice is between having the courage to push on or having the wisdom to take a break until next year.

**What Will I Most Regret?** When you're trying to distinguish between wise withdrawal and premature quitting, ask yourself: *"Which decision will I most regret not having made?"*

Fear is immediate and powerful, but it begins to fade once the threat passes. Regret, however, persists and can even intensify over time as you keep asking yourself, *"I wish I had..."* or *"I should have done..."* If you're dropping out of the EC primarily because you're uncomfortable, tired, or discouraged—and not because you face genuine danger—that's a decision you may regret for years. But if you're withdrawing because conditions genuinely threaten your safety, you'll likely feel relief and gratitude for making a wise choice. When you are about to make your final decision, ask yourself if it's the one you will most regret then let the answer inform **your choice**.

**Tune Your Brain With A Knife And Fork:** Research conducted under the direction of neuropharmacologists at MIT (check out Richard Wurtman if you want the gory details) has shown that eating foods with approximately 90% carbohydrates and 10% protein increases brain serotonin levels. Through a complex but well-understood process, this ratio allows the amino acid tryptophan to cross the blood-brain barrier more readily, where it's converted into serotonin. As serotonin rises, your mood improves and sleep comes more easily.

Practical examples: pasta with meat sauce, lasagna, pizza, rice and bean dishes. These are "comfort foods" for a neurochemical reason—they literally provide comfort by restoring depleted serotonin.

Interestingly, you already know this intuitively. When stress lowers your serotonin levels, your brain signals a craving for carbohydrates. You're essentially self-medicating. Consult with experienced WaterTribers and I'll wager the majority turn to the comfort food options when selecting their menus for the Everglades Challenge.

Final Thoughts: Over 300 miles of open water, mangrove tunnels, and exposed coastline await you. This is not a race—it's a journey of self-discovery where mental preparation matters as much as physical readiness. Along the route, you'll face moments of doubt, discomfort, and difficulty. You may even consider dropping out before even launching! These moments are a part of what makes completing the Everglades Challenge meaningful. Whatever happens out there, you're undertaking something remarkable. Trust your preparation. Trust your judgment. And remember—the water will still be there next year.

## Your Shore Contact - PaddleDancer

Each of you needs to recruit a shore contact for the entire event. This isn't like the typical river race that has bank runners meeting you every few miles to deliver food and water. Typically, it will be a family member or friend. He or she will watch your progress on the tracker and keep a phone handy. This is the person who will be talking to the CP Captains and/or Race Manager when necessary.

You should arrange to have two specific times to call you shore contact each and every day.

Chief's wife knows he will try to make a call about 08:00 and about 20:00 every day.

He usually doesn't call early, but sometimes he must call a bit later and she knows this can happen.

She also knows that sometimes he won't have cell service, or he can't call for some other reason. In this case he will send an OK message or a Custom message via SPOT or inReach. Your tracking devices should be setup to deliver an email to your shore contact. **NOTE:** If you change your shared page setup, your link and/or XML Feed might also change. Verify that your link is still working after making any change to your shared page. And do this right away.

Sometimes you can't make a call, but you might be able to text instead.

Your shore contact may also have information to relay to you. The Race Manager may call your contact with information that you need.

Make sure your shore contact speaks English.

## Navigation and Route Planning – WaterScout

Navigation and route planning are not just for the racecourse. Your plan starts with how you will get from your house to the Ft DeSoto parking lot, and then to the start Beach. Your next plan is how you will get to your race finish line; it may not be in Key Largo. The last leg of your journey is how you get home. These routes will be unique to you as there is no one plan that works for everyone.

You need to immerse yourself in route planning. It needs to be an obsession. Route planning is only one aspect of your race preparation. Routes are the lines on a map that get you from start to finish. Navigation is how you move along your route. Your plan will be affected by tides, Check Points, bridges, campsites, weather conditions, boredom, exhaustion, and anything else that karma has in store for you. Your event can be won or lost based on how well you have created a plan and your ability to implement the plan.

Start your route planning with a set of updated waterproof charts and a usable compass. Thanks to hurricanes and tidal influences, the water features of Florida constantly change, and you do not want to navigate using outdated data. You are required to have all the charts for the entire racecourse. These will be a “show me” item for your race inspection. Learn how to read them because your electronics may fail. Trust me, they will fail at some point.

There are many different electronic devices you can use to store your routes for navigation. From tablets and phones with navigation software such as Navionics, to dedicated chart plotters and handheld GPS devices, all have been used successfully. It’s best to use something that has Blue Charts in it or an equivalent.

For routes, you should have an inside the Intracoastal Waterway route, and an open water route. These may be broken up into segments as you see fit. There are many reasons for which way to go based on your current situation. Learn about all the passes and bridges and build them into your route planning. Along the way you may need to rest, resupply, repair, hit a Check Point, camp, or use the facilities. Locate these places during your planning and make them waypoints in your electronics. Mark them on your paper charts as well. Make sure the markings are also waterproof. You can use waterproof paper and ink to make your own custom maps. Make sure you have backups for your navigation devices. If you can’t find your way there, you can’t finish.

For a starting point for routes, you can mine the Tracker page on the WaterTribe website, or the Race Owl website for each year. The WaterTribe site only goes back to 2014. These are the historical paths of where previous racers traveled, camped, stopped, etc. There is a caveat to this method. Not every racer’s Spot or InReach will work 100% of the time so there may be some inaccuracies in their routes. Sometimes they have turned them off so they do not give away their super-secret camping spots. Look for a racer in your vessel type and see where they went.

Look at all these tracks over multiple years and you will start to see a common set of paths. Remember the odd ball routes as well. It's not crazy if it's successful.

The things you will not know about their tracks are what their weather conditions were, and what their tides were. Your results may be different so take them with a grain of salt. You can also contact previous racers by using the members services webpage and looking up their email. They may give you some helpful tips and things to think about.

You may notice that some tracks start at a location that is not East Beach at Ft DeSoto. Occasionally there has been a "Plan B start" due to weather conditions in Tampa Bay. You need to have a plan that launches at an alternate location somewhere between Anna Maria Island and Boca Grande. This could shave anywhere between 2 hours and 18 hours off your race. This means that your route planning also includes removing your boat from the beach at Ft DeSoto and moving it to your new start location. All your timetables may be thrown off. Plan accordingly.

A wise WaterTribe elder gave me a great piece of advice. He said, "If you have an out, you are more likely to take it." (Chief may have already talked about the rule for dropping out) As you are preparing your routes, you do need to keep in the back of your mind. "If I had to bail out at any given location, where is the closest place is to get my boat off the water."

Once you have a rough idea of your routes and before you have gone through the effort to create every way point, you need to validate them by using other mapping sources such as Google Earth, and local resources such as County, or National Park maps. You may find that you will need to move the waypoints slightly. The small passes in Florida Bay change all the time so stay flexible.

After you have crafted your route plans you need to test them. Following a line on a paper chart is easy. When you enter those same routes and waypoints into something electronic, you will need to be able to find them when you are in your worst mental state, in the dark, and in bad weather conditions. Practice all the possibilities. Have a simple naming convention that you can follow. In my experience, alphabetical or numerically named routes will show up easier in a GPS.

For my race preparation I would sit in my boat in my back yard and fly down the racecourse using my handheld GPS and chart plotter. I would change to the next route leg when appropriate. If you are a multiple person team, you all need to be interchangeable and share about the same level of proficiency in all areas of the challenge. If your teammate can't read a map, use a GPS, or operate your vessel, you may have a problem.

Along with the actual routes, you need to research some of the local conditions such as the tide markers and the tidal flow in the passes and bays. If you are in a sailboat; where are the bridges, what is their vertical clearance and horizontal width, what is the local VHF hailing channel, and do they have a schedule of openings?

For planning purposes, tides will always take precedent over anything else. If you need to get through a bridge or pass by a certain time, that is your priority. If you miss it, there may be a 6-to-12-hour time penalty as you wait for the changing tide. Plan your stops around them as necessary. This may mean you sleep at times that will allow you to use the tides to your advantage. Tide levels in the Ten Thousand Islands and Everglades National Park can leave your boat stranded on land hundreds of feet away from the water. Semper Gumby, always be flexible. Your entire race may be a lesson in how to use back up plans as a successful strategy.

### **Navigating to the Checkpoints**

**CP1** – On the way to CP1 you will see that boats will either take the ICW all the way down or come inside at Venice, Milton Pass, or Stump Pass. Stump Pass can be tricky as it changes every year. There are camping areas before and after the check point. Read the rules on which boats can land at the small beach, and which ones must use the marina. Keep your time at the Check Point as short as possible.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** The Palm Island vehicle ferry operates from about 6:30am to midnight and runs continuously across the ICW just South of the beach landing. They cross the ICW about every 20 minutes.

**CP2** – Everyone will need to get an Everglades National Park (ENP) Permit because you will be in the Park from Camp Lulu Key all the way to a couple of miles offshore of Key Largo. You can do this online ahead of time. If you are a Veteran, you can get a FREE lifetime pass.

If you plan on camping in the ENP at any of the established campsites, you will need to reserve specific locations based on your schedule. This includes if you plan on camping at one of the sites North of Indian Key Pass. You will have cell/data service on the racecourse from the start, all the way down to Marco Island. Everglades City is the last cell tower on the West Coast. It doesn't make sense to get campsite reservations until you get closer in geography and time.

You can camp without a campsite reservation as a sailboat, by anchoring away from and not within eyesight of a campsite.

There are only a few passes that you can use as a sailboat to get in and out of the Check Point. In a kayak you can use any of the passes and even dive into the backwater early to get to Chokoloskee Bay. In my experience, it's best to do Indian Key Pass on an incoming tide. If the tide is against me, I would wait at Indian Key or Picnic Key and take a nap until the tide switches. One year we had the tide with us but were sailing into a headwind. It took forever to tack upwind. The next year we raced in the same sailboat, and we missed the tide by minutes. This time we had a favorable wind and cruised right over the standing waves on an outgoing tide. We were able to sail wing-on-wing with the spinnaker and easily worked our way into Chokoloskee Bay. Sometimes the stars align and Karma smiles at you.

It's possible to ride the tide in, hit the checkpoint, grab a resupply, and ride the tide out. If you get to the Check Point at low tide, enjoy the 100' walk in the Chokoloskee mud. You will sink up to your thighs so plan accordingly. At high tide you can sail/ paddle right up to the island.

If you plan on doing the waterway in a kayak or small paddle craft, you may want to come in on the back side of Chokoloskee by the Marina and walk across the street to the Check Point. When you leave, you will not have to circle around the island.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** there are 2 hazards at the check point. As you come into the checkpoint the first one is named "Bat Man." This is a rock encrustation that is located just to the right by the condos as you approach the beach landing. At low tide it is visible, at high tide its underwater. He will defend his territory. I witnessed him putting an unrepairable hole in a Core Sound 17 at 2am in a howling wind. They just barely sailed back to the Check Point to ground it on the beach. The 2<sup>nd</sup> is the overhead power lines that are just West of the high tide line. Take your mast down first if you plan on pulling your boat up the rocky beach.

**CP3** – Choose your course to CP3. Take the Wilderness Waterway and earn an Alligator tooth or go outside. Class 1,2,3 AI, and TI's can all navigate through Whitewater Bay. You will have to take your mast down for a low bridge just before Flamingo and portage from the freshwater to the saltwater side. Watch out for the Crocodiles that may be waiting to greet you at the boat ramp. The larger sailboats will come into the marina from the Florida Bay side.

Things have improved since Hurricane Irma did some real damage to Flamingo. The AT&T Tower is still there, and the entire marina area is covered by Wi-Fi, so you can make Wi-Fi calls and use the internet.

Before you stop and take a rest, make sure to do a last-minute check of the weather and tides. Then decide when, and which route you will use for your last big crossing; Crocodile Drag over, Manatee Pass, the long way around, or somewhere in between, the odds are now in your favor. One thing to note is that if there is wind out of the East, it will blow water out of Florida Bay. The water level could be lower than expected.

**Finish** –As you leave Flamingo and are in the Western half of Florida Bay, be mindful of the channel markers if you are taking a more Northern route under the state. The actual channel may have moved away from the markers. You may encounter boats that do not come off plane. They are not being rude. They need to stay on top of the water to stay afloat and not hit the shallows. You can use the boats to locate the channels as well.

Be sure to have the finish accurately marked in your GPS. It is right under one of the 30+ cell towers you will see in the keys. At the Pelican Resort there are typically a bunch of moored boats that you will have to paddle or sail through to hit the finish beach.

Congratulations on your finish. The last step in your event plan is to rest at the finish line, cheer on your fellow racers as they come in, and contemplate what your next boat will be. If your race

ended somewhere other than in Key Largo, please don't go home early with your head hanging low. Your plan was to be in the keys for a period of time so keep making your way there via a land-based route. You have valuable experiences to share with others and we want to hear your navigation stories.

## Piloting Your Boat - Chief

I won't say too much about this because you are the captain. But remember that most of you do not have to be right inside the channel. You can follow the intercoastal or other markers, but you don't need to be IN the channel. Paddle on one side or the other. Let the power boats and big sailboats have plenty of room. Take advantage of your shallow draft to take shortcuts when possible.

We have a shipping channel that runs roughly parallel to our launch beach. It is not unusual to have one or more ships using that channel at or near our launch time. If we see a ship in either direction, we will hold off on the start until the ship clears our launch area. Remember, these ships are very large and cannot maneuver outside the channel to avoid your small boat.

If you are on the beach well after the official launch, it is your responsibility to not launch if there is a ship visible in either direction.

When crossing the shipping channel, it is best to try and cross at a 90 degree angle to minimize your time in the channel.

## SPOT/inReach – Do It Right Chief

Start the challenge with fresh lithium batteries in your SPOT. Make sure your inReach device is fully charged and you have a charging device/pack with you during the Challenge.

Have one or two sets of backup batteries. Keep an eye on your indicator lights to watch for a low battery signal.

**Mount your SPOT/inReach where you can easily see it and easily access the buttons.** This is very important. Tracking devices mounted behind you will stop working and you won't notice the problem. We see this every year.

**DO NOT place your tracking device in the cabin or a storage locker. It must see the sky.**

Always turn your SPOT/inReach on first thing in the morning while loading your boat. Put it in Tracking Mode and leave it there for the entire day. You can send the OK and Custom messages while in tracking mode. Your device will automatically go back to tracking after your message has been sent.

Send an OK Message every few hours. Usually, you can do this at major waypoints. But if you've been on a straight tack for several hours, send the OK now and then.

If you stop for a break, send an OK message and leave tracking mode on.

If you stop for camping or at anchor, shut off tracking and then send your custom message. After the light stops blinking, turn it off. **Remember, you must turn off your SPOT (maybe inReach Too) at least once every 24 hours.**

If you are at a checkpoint send OK or Custom whichever applies.

Remember, you are always in tracking mode until you shut it off when camped.

**After a Storm or Capsize or Whatever** – After the Black Wall of Doom passes or you recover from an interesting capsize, you need to send an OK message. Your shore contact, the CP Captains, and the Race Manager will probably know that you got hit by a storm. They will be watching for your OK. As soon as you are safe, send the OK. If it was a capsize or something, it would be fun to have the location marked so you can tell your stories better.

**HELP** – **We can't and won't help you.** You and your shore contact need to know what to do if you send a Help message. Your shore contact needs to call the Race Manager with details. When I use Help, my wife knows that I am OK, but I need to interrupt my normal track and go to shore to fix something or take care of something. She knows I will be calling her with details as soon as I can. She also knows I am not in danger – see SOS. As soon as she gets my call, she will call the Race Manager with details.

**SOS – As a last resort!** If your life is in danger, you should hit your SOS button on your SPOT/inReach and/or deploy your PLB. Remember, try to save yourself first. Kayak roll, re-enter, give first aid, etc. If that isn't possible, then hit the SOS. **Make sure your SPOT/inReach and PLB can see the sky.** If they can't see the sky, they can't send a signal. Literally lay back in the water and hold it up and look at it. Turn on your strobe if necessary. Try to stay with your boat and/or start back swimming to shore if you can.

## Check-In and Launching – Chief

### **New WaterTribe Beach Access and Launch Rules at Fort DeSoto**

In an effort to be consistent in all parks under their jurisdiction, Pinellas County has advised WaterTribe that starting in 2025 we may no longer utilize the Ft. DeSoto beach road to unload Classes 4-6 vessels onto the beach. Because of this, new rules have been developed for placing vessels on the beach on our Friday check-in day and for launching on launch day.

Here is the new link to [Special Launch Rules](#)

Here is the BLUF:

1. Challengers in Classes 1, 2 or 3 must transport their boats from the parking lot to the beach by hand. A boat cart may be used but must be pulled by hand. No type of power vehicle may be used.
2. Challengers in Classes 4 and 5 and some Class 6 may transport their boats from the parking lot using a cart pulled by hand. **If your vessel is less than 900 pounds, AndyMan and his crew have a special dolly that is available to help get your boat to the beach.**

Or, if that is not possible due to the weight or size of the vessel, you may launch from the Park boat ramp or other area ramps of your choice and sail to the launch beach. For those sailing to the beach on Friday:

- a) A motor may be used and should be removed prior to maneuvering the boat onto the beach.
- b) Arrive at the beach no later than 1:00pm
- c) Place your boat on the beach from the water. You may receive as much help as you need to position your boat. Winches are not permitted. Volunteers will be available to direct you.

3. For all Challengers on Check-in/Inspection Day
  - a) Place your boat on the beach no later than 1:00 pm
  - b) Check-in at Pavilion 14 for lifejacket inspection, pre-inspection and forms processing and, if required, have your boat/gear inspections completed by 2:30pm
  - c) Attend the mandatory Captain's Meeting in Pavilion 14 at 3:00pm

Please see my post regarding the Scouting of the Park. You don't want to miss the "sand berm" info.

A best option for most Class 4, 5, or 6 boats is to join AndyMan's solution. I strongly suggest this option, but it is your decision.

### **Saturday Launch**

1. 7:00am: The Park opens (there is no access prior to 7:00am)
2. 8:00am: Roll Call for ALL Challengers on the beach.
3. 8:30am: Boats on the beach will launch

### **Saturday Boat Ramp Launch**

Those in Classes 4 and 5 and some Class 6 **who have successfully launched from East Beach in one or more previous Florida events** may launch the same boat from the boat ramp on Saturday **following Roll Call** at the beach.

- a) Those launching from the boat ramp will not qualify for a record.
- b) Park Boat Ramp rules must be followed including waiting your turn along with other boat ramp users. There will be no special ramps assigned to WaterTribe.
- c) You must hit an OK and have tracking enabled just before you set sail from the boat ramp area. This will begin your event timer.

### **Class 6 Challengers**

Class 6 Challengers must follow the rules for their base class. For example, a Class 3 boat will be placed on the beach from the parking lot. A Class 4 or Class 5 boat may sail from the boat ramp to the beach on Friday or launch from the boat ramp on launch day if the Challenger has launched from the East Beach in one or more previous Florida events.

### **Why is launching from the boat ramp on Saturday restricted to challengers and their boats who have launched successfully from the beach in one or more previous Florida events?**

This is because WaterTribe events are for “Small Boats.” What is the definition of a small boat? That is very tricky. It could be length, beam, displacement, or any number of factors. Rather than pick numbers out of a hat, it was decided that launching from above the high-water mark **with no assistance** would be a good determination of a small boat. First time challengers need to pass that rule. The good news is that you can sail to the beach on Friday, **and** you can get lots of help getting your boat onto the beach. Then on Saturday you can launch from the beach unassisted and prove you are in a small boat 😊

## Plan B – Chief

Have your own Plan B ready. Where will you launch your boat? How will you get there? My guesstimate is that there is a 20% chance of Plan B becoming necessary.

Checkout this link:

<https://WaterTribe.com/PDF/MustRead/FloridaEvents2025PlanB.pdf>

Here's the BLUF:

- If a Small Craft Advisory is in effect, you will be informed to go to Plan B at the lifejacket inspection.
- If called, there is no boat setup on the beach.
- All inspections will be done in the parking lot.
- You will need to launch south of Tampa Bay as long as no advisories are in effect for your launch point.

**Last Thing** – Before you leave, checkout the launch beach and specifically look for shoals at low tide. See where you want to setup for the launch.

Fair Winds and Following Seas.