A Summer On The Road

What do a bottle of rum, trailer tires and 1906 have in common? The answer to this brain teaser spans 6 weekends 1,500 road miles, and 3 Ensign regional championships.

The story starts back in January when I was looking to go to mid winters in Tampa. After trading a few emails with Zeke, I learned that this year they would be in North Carolina in April. Hmmmm, North Carolina is a very nice venue but we have a small hobby farm with lambs and kids due at the end of March. So while my wife Lizette was all for me going, timing was just not in my favor for long term marital bliss.

What to do. Looking through the yearbook and re-reading the write ups about the regional championships gave me a thought. What about going to a regional championship in addition to my own region’s? I had raced nationals at both Toms River and Cleveland and had a great time at both. As I recalled they were easy in and out of the water, great facilities and of course great hospitality by the host fleet and club.

Now the tough part, which one to go to. Toms River was close. I could trailer on Friday, race Saturday and Sunday, and trailer back Sunday night. Very economical and only 1 vacation day. Cleveland was a different proposition altogether. A full day journey on either side of the event. However, it had the benefit of being a 3 day regatta which can make the investment in road and vacation time more worthwhile. After a bit of dithering I came upon a brilliant solution – ask the crew. That way they would be part of the decision and more committed to going. Totally brilliant. I am sooo smart….

The crew, Eric Durrschmidt, Jenny Marco, and Jeff Taranto, of course were all for going to both and were really excited and enthusiastic about this whole idea. Brother! So once again the skipper’s brilliant strategic plan was thwarted …by the crew.

So now it was time to get down to planning and sending out entries. My own Niantic Bay Fleet 73 season starts Memorial Day weekend with our yacht club invitational regatta the first weekend in June. Toms River was the 2nd weekend in June and Cleveland the 3rd weekend. This was going to be a busy time. First things first, make sure the trailer was ready to go, which meant replacing a smashed tail light and the spare tire. My trailer back up technique is exceptionally good which I continue to hone by pulverizing tail lights at every opportunity. In the tire department, traveling to nationals the last 2 years I learned that any tire over 10 years old should be thrown out regardless of mileage or wear. So, time to upgrade the spare.

Next make contact with the host fleet and let them know I was coming. Initially the reaction was surprise that someone from outside the region would make the trip. I was surprised that they were surprised. These are great events both for the racing and for the social activities. The regattas are far smaller than nationals and even better for getting to know the Ensign faithful from different fleets. All you need are a trailer, tow vehicle, crew, and advance communication with host fleet. The upside is great racing in different places. So my public service announcement to the class is if you are on the fence about travelling to regionals, get off the fence and get going!

Toms River NJ Region I Championship June 9th and 10th:

Following my home club’s regatta on June 3rd we hauled out, de-rigged, and tied down in about 2 hours. The following Friday the crew arrived at 0700…ish and we departed. Arriving at 1230 we were met by Bob Warner, long time Ensign sailor and past ECA officer, and were in the water by 1600. The hoist at Toms River is set up with 2 pilings, one on land and one in the water with a horizontal beam across the top. Driving under the beam next to the land based piling you hook up to the hoist which rolls out along the horizontal beam over water to splash the boat. Ensign nationals will be at Toms River next year and the club is planning to add a 2nd hoist which should make getting in and out of the water very fast and easy. Friday evening the Club had a dinner and we enjoyed sitting upstairs in the air conditioning and relaxing before finding our hotel for the evening.

For day 1 the schedule called for 3 races on the Wannamaker course at the mouth of the river. Sailing out in light breeze I was reminded why I love this venue. There are 7 yacht clubs within about 5 miles of one another, many with active junior sailing and racing programs. Travelling down the river with so much sailing activity is a delight that’s hard to over state. This place is all about boaters and boating with a huge amount of sailing and racing activity. The river and Barnegat Bay depth is less than 10 feet and totally protected from ocean waves so smaller sail boats dominate the area. For me it is such a comfortable place to be out and about in an Ensign.

For race 1 the wind is westerly at less than 10 knots with favorable shifts along both sides of the course. As I’ve already established what a brilliant skipper I am I play the middle and end up 4th. Next race I smarten up and commit to the left side having to go almost out to the layline to get the shift with most of the fleet on the right. We finished 2nd. For the last race of the day we turned on the radio about 3 seconds too late to hear that we were over early so we kept on going. Doh! Going to the leeward mark the wind shifted so that it became a beat. The RC boat was on station for a course change. The only problem was a course change to where? We just finished going upwind on the downwind leg so did a course change mean we should go straight, left, right, do the hooky pokey and turn ourselves about or what? We made the turn back to where we thought the mark was now going downwind, put the chute up and then down and then tacked about 10 times while going in a straight line. Incredibly shifty winds for the last leg. We all had to sail in the same crazy stuff so there was no advantage or disadvantage. Allan Terhune won that one. I’m sure a great life lesson was hidden somewhere in the frustration of having to sail in super shifty winds. We ran out of beer before we could figure it out. Bill Murphey hosted a great party at his house after racing. Long time Ensign faithful Dick Torpey was there along with many others.

For day 2 the forecast was for light to non-existent winds. Very rare for this area as it’s known for solid 15 knots out of the southeast. After a delay at the dock we went out for the remaining 2 races. After day 1 Allan was ahead followed by Buddy Brown, a new comer to Toms River but a long time Galveston bay Ensign sailor recently relocated. Buddy put on an absolute clinic in the last 2 races to win the regatta. The OCS in race 3 took us out of the running so we had a great time figuring out how to keep up or pass the boats near us.

Back at the dock we were ready for the road in about 90 minutes and departed for home. We are looking forward to nationals next year with this friendly fleet, easy going club, and great venue. Many, many thanks to Allan Terhune, Bill Murphey, Bob Warner, and everyone at Toms River YC and Fleet 63 who made us feel so welcome.

Cleveland OH Region V Championship June 15th, 16th and 17th

Thursday morning at 0400…ish, about 80 hours after getting back from Toms River, the crew arrives for the ride to Cleveland. The night before I was loading gear into the truck and heard a hissing sound which turned out to be from the brand new spare tire. I had apparently placed a heavy object on the stem which had ruptured. I debated whether or not to tell the crew and decided why worry them, they were half asleep anyway. The trip turned out to be uneventful and we arrived after almost exactly 10 hours and 50 gallons of gas.

The Edgewater yacht club is only a few miles away from downtown Cleveland with a very large dockage area extremely well protected by breakwaters. The waterfront is staffed with professional marina personnel who splash boats using a travel lift. The $100 regatta fee covered the in and out and dockage, the racing, Friday night dinner, Saturday and Sunday beer and live entertainment, as well as the awards. Has to be one of the best values in boating ever.

Bob Conkey and Jim Collins from Mentor OH, about 25 miles away by water chose to come over the road, were also putting in at the same time as we were. We asked about getting a tire fixed which resulted in Bob sending his son over to pick up the tire with the message that it would be returned the next day. Sure enough the repaired tire was placed in tow vehicle the next day. Ensign folks are the best!

Bob Anschuetz arranged a host home for us on the east side of Cleveland. I’ve stayed in many host homes over the years travelling to nationals or regionals and found that it is the best housing that can possibly be had. Peter and Victoria Machlup were perfect hosts, even getting up to cook breakfast for us!

Regionals was run as part of Cleveland Race Week. Ensign racing was on the first three days Friday to Sunday. For day 1 we were out with the Tartan 10 fleet with separate starts. The courses were all windward leeward with the T10s windward mark set further out and the Ensign windward mark nearer in. With the T10s starting first the congestion began at the leeward gates where the T10s and Ensigns met up. The trick was not to get run over by a T-10. I suspect Magic would go a little slower if it was in two pieces instead of one.

We had three really great races with a 4th, 1st and a 2nd. In the last race we had a fabulous spinnaker duel with Bob Anschuetz in Vulcan. Bob was ahead at the top mark so we had to jib back and forth looking for an advantage. Bob started with a 6 or 7 boat length lead but within a 100 yards of the finish we jibed on port right behind his transom before jibing back to starboard to square up to the line for the last surge to the finish. We caught some waves which put us ahead by maybe a foot about 100 feet from the finish but the surge faded and Bob edged us out by 4 feet or so. Grrrrr. I remember commenting to the crew that that point might be important later on. In the evening there was a blender party out by the lake at the club. Everyone had a great time.

For day 2 we started out in first place, up by a point on Jager and Vulcan. However, in the first two races, disaster! We finished 6th in race 1 in almost no wind and then in the first leg of race 2 we were in the top 3 boats before strange things happened to the wind at the mark which we hit and ended with another 6th. Gad, what misery! Or as Bob Conkey hollered over “How do you like Cleveland now!” However, we ripped off three first place finishes by comfortable margins to round out the day. At the dock afterward we found out that in the first race the wind was so light Vulcan was unable to start within the required 4 minute window and was DSQ’d turning our 6th into a 5th. The upshot was that we ended the day where we started, in 1st place by 1 point over Jager. We had dinner at the Great Lakes Brewing Company followed by a quick visit to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

The last day had a forecast of 10-20 from the south which meant some shifts but flat water. Vulcan and Jager, were 3 and 1 points back respectively so our strategy hinged on covering them. Tie breakers were in our favor as a result of 4 first place finishes in the first 8 races. In race 1 we placed 2nd behind Vulcan but ahead of Jager so 2 points up on both. Race 2 we were 2nd to Jager so 1 point ahead plus a tie breaker. For the last race the wind really picked up and the RC set a 5 leg course to finish us near the club. Jager established a big lead and we were trailing Vulcan. This would give Jager the regatta. On leg 3 going to windward we engaged Vulcan in a tacking duel to no effect. But on the 4th leg we jibed away and got to the bottom mark with Vulcan on our transom. So after 41 legs of racing spread across 10 plus races it came down to the last leg of the final race. We saved the starboard tack advantage for the finish line with Vulcan coming across from port. However, we over stood and Vulcan slipped in less than 2 boat lengths ahead. Brutal.

We got out of the water and collected the 2nd place trophy which appropriately included a bottle of rum. It takes a while to shake off a loss like that so a drinkable trophy is a good thing. That evening we took Peter and Victoria out to dinner and made ready for an early departure the next day. The ride back was without incident and we were much more secure with a functioning spare tire. Many thanks to Bob Anschuetz, Bob Conkey, and especially Peter and Victoria for hosting us for 4 nights.

Mattapoisett MA Region II/III Championship July 14th and 15th

The Mattapoisett YC was established in 1906 and is conveniently located in a marina with the clubhouse about 50 yards from the travel lift. Mattapoisett bay is a long and wide inlet running north with good consistent afternoon winds out of the southwest.

The organizers rented a travel lift by the hour and at $50 in and out this was a good deal. Magic was first to launch but before this could happen some sharing of Ensign know how was required. Apparently this yard had always put the aft strap under the very bottom of the keel. After pointing out that the strap can go under the hull and over the rudder all 5 Ensigns were launched. We hopped on the boat and went out for a really nice afternoon sail in 12 to 14 knots.

The welcome party on Friday evening was well attended by many friendly sailors. 12 boats from the local fleet entered the regatta along with 8 travelers from Newport, Stonington, New London, and Niantic Bay. In talking with the home club members two things became clear. 1. This young fleet has lots of energy and knows how to have fun and 2. While they may be new to Ensigns they know boats and know how to race.

For day 1 we sailed out for a 1030 start which would have been great except for almost no wind. The RC decided to get the racing going and we drifted our way out to the first mark. As in Cleveland we were very slow drifters. The wind came up and in race 2 Rick Conley in Friendly Spirit, who was over early, took 1st by going all the way to the right hand corner on both upwind legs. At the start of race 4 there was the first of several notable collisions. Bonanza was in the process of luffing up Challenger when the “Men From When” decided that a 3 foot gap between the two would be wide enough to squeeze through and then miraculously emerge ahead at full speed for a spectacular start. Ahem, there wasn’t and they didn’t. What did happen was a three boat pinwheel waltz as Challenger pivoted around Bonanza’s bow with When tangled in the middle. For our part we had a fabulous committee boat end start, followed by a general recall. Bummer! After the three boat salsa dance concluded we started again and this time we were over early, major bummer! However after restarting we were able to finish with a very satisfying 2nd place.

At the start of the last race Firebird with the Macina clan, father two sons and daughter in law, were in the process of restarting after being over early. During the maneuvers 80 year old John went over the side but with a foot trapped under a hiking strap. A combination of self inflating life vest and forward movement of the boat caused a momentarily serious situation as the water cascaded over Johns torso and face. After freeing his foot Firebird was able to recover John who had some ankle issues but was otherwise unhurt.

In the final race of the day Friendly Spirit was leading at the end of leg 2, lowered the spinnaker and rounded the leeward mark to begin leg 3… of a 2 leg course. The RC had posted a 2 leg course instead of the usual 4 which meant Rick and crew had to reverse course, re-round the mark and finish properly. They accomplished this very rapidly finishing 4th.

At the end of day 1 we were surprised to find ourselves in 3rd place. However, after 5 races almost everyone had had at least 1 bad race. The exceptions were lead boats Friendly Spirit and Nightwind. One throw out would be earned by everyone on the 6th race so 3rd through about 12th was up for grabs.

The party was held at a house on the water at the end of a point overlooking the bay. Warm air, live music and a rousing singing of Happy Birthday for several of the hosts made for a very pleasant evening. John Macina was limping but upright which was good to see.

At the start of day 2 Ward and Rick battled it out for the top spot while we looked to hold onto 3rd. Firebird had a replacement crew which turned out to be the aunt of one of my crew who lived in the area. “Come on out and race an Ensign for a day, it’ll be great!”… or maybe not. At the first mark of the first race there was a significant port starboard collision involving Firebird which resulted in both boats withdrawing for the day. The good news was there were no serious injuries. After three more races Ward had passed Rick for 1st overall and we solidified our hold on 3rd place.

We hauled out and were ready for the road in about 60 minutes and after a very nice awards ceremony we were all back on the road again. Many thanks to Jim Broadwater and the entire Mattapoissett YC for a great, great weekend of sailing. You guys have one of the best things going in Ensign racing today.

Finally, a huge thank you to my crew of Eric, Jeff and Jenny whose energy and enthusiasm for these adventures made it all possible.

People, Places, and Races

So…any closing thoughts you might ask. I don’t know that there were any overarching life lessons learned. We definitely lived Ensign life to the fullest in a short period of time. We took advantage of opportunities to see different parts of the world through the lens of racing Ensigns and from the physical perspective of being on the water. While racing was the central activity, the title of this section very deliberately starts with People and ends with Races. The people we met along the way, the experiences we had from going to different places and the memories of great races (and great stories) are what we’ll remember for a long, long time.

Robin Durrschmidt, Ensign #363, “Magic”