

Chicago to Buffalo, Singlehanded, Nonstop – Part 1 by Bill Tucker

Introduction

On August 25, 2006 at 18:31 I passed through the breakwater at Chicago and started on a unique adventure: a singlehanded, non stop voyage from Chicago to Buffalo in my 30 ft. sloop GL³. On September 12, 2006 at 12:17 I passed through the outer breakwater at Buffalo, having completed the voyage in 8 days, 17 hours, and 46 minutes. The course as laid out on the chart was 799 nautical miles, but at the destination my log indicated I had traveled 946 nautical miles. To the best of my knowledge this is the first time anyone has sailed singlehanded, nonstop from Chicago to Buffalo.

Why do it?

In 2005 when we did the Great Lakes Singlehanded Society (GLSS) Trans Superior Solo we were told that it was the longest race in the Great Lakes. We all knew better! The GLSS Super Mac from Chicago to Port Huron or visa versa is in fact the longest race in the Great Lakes. In looking at the chart I thought a longer race would be possible from Chicago to Buffalo. As I discussed this crazy idea with various GLSS members there was little enthusiasm for such an idea. Responses included: “to long”, “to expensive”, “to difficult to navigate the rivers”, and “no one would sign up for that sort of race”. To get a feeling for what the issues might really be I decided to go for a sail and give it a try myself. In discussion with various people I discovered that the idea of such a race had been discussed for crewed boats, but had never been implemented.

Such a race would cover 4 lakes, 2 rivers, for a distance of 800 miles. It would, without question be the longest race in the Great Lakes, the longest freshwater race in the world. Navigating the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers would add an interesting challenge unique to any long distance race. If combined with the GLSS Mac and Super Mac it would really be 3 races rolled into one. It would literally be the Vendee Globe race for fresh water sailors. Such a race would undoubtedly be an irresistible personal goal for many freshwater singlehanded sailors.

The Big Picture

Although the course was about 800 miles it would take another 800 miles of travel to get to and from the starting and finish points. I had planned to take about 3 weeks for the entire project. I spent considerable time planning and preparing the boat for the voyage.

About a week before I set out on this adventure I was day sailing with a friend in the Detroit River near Belle Isle. We were having a good conversation and I was not paying much attention to depth. We went hard aground in the shallow area across from the western end of Belle Isle. It took about 30 minutes of struggle to get free, using the engine, as well as full sail to keep the boat heeled over. The strong river current made it more difficult. Somewhat embarrassed I thought to myself that this experience was a good object lesson before attempting my singlehanded, nonstop voyage. Such a stop would have spoiled my effort.

The course, 800 nautical miles, when considered against many salt water singlehanded races is quite modest in length. The truly unique aspect is dealing with the 73 nautical miles of restricted water associated with St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, and the Detroit River. These waters would be a challenge that would be encountered toward the end of the course and would require much more personal effort than the open waters of the larger lakes. Much of my preparation involved preparing for this portion of the voyage.

The trip is described in more detail below but summarized in the following table:

Leg	Course Distance (NM)	Log Distance (NM)	Duration (Hours)	Duration (Days, Hours)	Average Speed Made Good (Kt)	Average Speed per Log (Kt)
Lake Michigan	279.80	328.20	92.98	3d 21.0 hr	3.01	3.53
Lake Huron	237.30	274.30	42.67	1d 18.7 hr	5.56	6.43
St. Clair River	35.27	26.68	5.17	5.2 hr	6.82	5.16
Lake St. Clair	12.73	12.70	2.25	2.3 hr	5.66	5.64
Detroit River	30.75	23.27	4.50	4.5 hr	6.83	5.17
Lake Erie	203.20	281.00	62.53	2d 14.5 hr	3.25	4.49
Total	799.05	946.15	210.10	8d 17.8 hr	3.80	4.50

(Note: St. Clair River, Detroit River & Lake St. Clair log distance split estimated.)

Getting Ready

Preparation for the trip involved working through a list of several dozen improvements and fix-it items. A major portion of this effort was devoted to preparing for the rivers portion of the trip. In particular I reviewed extensively the charts for the rivers so I would be familiar with where I had room if needed to tack down the river. I marked up chart 14053 to show exactly which cuts in the rivers I intended to take and labeling the end of each page with the next page number. This effort was intended to minimize my having to fumble through the charts and allow me to concentrate on maneuvering the boat in the rivers. I also loaded a complete set of way points into my chart plotter for the entire course to assist in navigation. I considered mounting my chart plotter in the cockpit. It could be seen fairly easily from the cockpit so I decided to leave it in position at the chart table. When I run this course again I will move it to the cockpit. These preparations are described in more detail in Appendix B below.



Stowaway!

Detroit to Chicago

On August 19 at 1040 we, that is GL³ and I, got underway from the Edison Boat Club headed for Chicago 565 nautical miles away. At 2103 we passed under the Blue Water Bridge at Port Huron and entered Lake Huron. Wind and waves were on the nose so we continued to motor. During the night of the 20th the bow anchor locker was found to be full of water so went into Port Sanilac at 0235

to refuel and to tape the locker shut. Leaving Port Sanilac at 1050 we continued north under engine power against heavy waves and wind. Later in the day the wind and waves subsided and GL³ continued north at about 6 knots. Early in the morning of the 21st the engine was shutdown and we continued under sail for about 8 hours before starting the engine again after the wind died.

We arrived at Mackinaw City just after midnight on the 22nd of August. The boat was fueled at the fuel dock just after it opened and we departed at 0805. At 0825 we passed under the Mackinac Bridge and entered Lake Michigan. The trip down Lake Michigan alternated between sailing and motoring. In the upper part of the lake a small yellow bird took up residence on my boat. He tried a number of perches including the tiller and a brief stay in the cabin. I explained that this was to be a single handed endeavor. Although I wasn't sure he understood the singlehanded concept he graciously obliges by flying off into the Chicago skyline as we entered Chicago harbor. The last 50 miles was against head winds and waves on the nose. At 1437 on August 24 we passed the Chicago Harbor break water and at 1500 were tied up snugly against the pier at the Columbia Yacht Club. The trip from Detroit to Chicago had taken just over 5 days and 4 hours.



GL3 at Columbia Yacht Club in Chicago

Lake Michigan

It had originally been my intention to stay in Chicago for 2 or 3 days to provision and rest. The weather man indicated that if we left immediately wind would be more favorable before moving around on the bow. So with just a 27 hour stop we got underway from the Columbia Yacht Club at 1800 on August 25th. At 1831 GL³ passed the Chicago Harbor break water and light house under sail headed for Buffalo at a relaxed 1.7 knots with the wind on the port quarter. In spite of the slow start during the first 24 hours we covered 111 nautical miles. About half way



The Start: Passing the Chicago Break Water

up the lake, off Little Sable Point, the wind shifted to the nose and it was necessary to tack into the wind. As we approached Sleeping Bear Point toward the middle of the afternoon of the 27th the wind died down and we spent most of the next 12 hours with little wind drifting at a knot or less. I had intended to cut through the passage south of the Manitou Islands, but with the fickle wind wound up going to the west of these islands, and then cutting back toward the passage by going north of North Manitou Island. This portion of the passage was very slow at speeds of 1 to 2 knots. At 0840 on the 28th we finally passed Grays Reef Light. After passing Grays Reef Light in very light air we headed to the east just north of the shoals in the area. The wind died even further and I worried for a while that the current was going to take us aground. The wind finally picked up and we passed under the Mackinac Bridge doing a delightful 4.3 knots at 1510 on August 29th. After a fast start it had taken 3 days and 21 hours to go from bottom to top of Lake Michigan. One lake down and 3 to go! We were officially in Lake Huron.



Lake Huron

Lake Huron started as a nice relaxed sail past Mackinac Island on the afternoon of August 29th. I tacked to get around Bois Blanc Island. Gradually the wind picked up and by midnight we were doing 5.2 knots and still increasing with wind on the port side for a close reach. At 0115 on August 31 just outside the Goderich Harbor we turned toward Port Huron making 5.9 knots. During the run to Port Huron, where I knew there would be little shipping traffic, I made a point of getting some sleep in preparation for the river run where sleep would be impossible. At 0950 on August 31 we passed under the Blue Water Bridge at Port Huron leaving Lake Huron Behind and entering the St. Clair River. Two lakes down and two to go! Crossing Lake Huron had taken 1 day and 18.7 hours for an average speed over the bottom of 5.56 knots. What a great sail!

Two Rivers and a Lake

Now the interesting part of the trip was beginning. Conditions couldn't have been better with a nice stiff wind of about 20 knots from the north east to push us along the course that was mostly to the south west. Before entering the St. Clair River I moved snacks and charts up to the cockpit for easy access. In the St. Clair River we moved along at speeds ranging from 5 to 8 knots over the bottom according to the GPS. Boat speed through the water was 5 to 6 knots with a push from the river current of 1 to 2 knots. I stayed in the middle of the river to maximize the push from the current. In the St. Clair River we passed only 2 freighters.

Read Part 2 to find out what the rivers were like as the wind died and night fell, just how nasty can little Lake Erie get, and what was so important that I put it twice on my “things to buy for the next trip list”.