

Team Hornblower

Interviewer: Jesse Wiegel

Interviewee: Dan Culpepper

Q Well, Dan, you're back.

A I'm back.

Q Indeed. We've seen you before. We know your game, and we're excited to have you. Are you planning -- first question, are you bringing the same horn?

A Yes, I'm bringing the same horn. Definitely the same horn but a slightly modified boat.

Q Modified in terms of you're going to have a proper mount for your horn?

A Oh, yes, exactly, how did you -- definitely. It's going to be hanging off the back of the boat ready to go at a moment's notice.

Q Yeah, sometimes we saw you last year and you had to take a minute to dig out the horn.

A Right.

Q And that was unacceptable.

A Absolutely. Inefficient. Exactly. When it's needed it's needed.

Q You're on a Rowcruiser, Angus Rowcruiser?

A Yes.

Q It seems like whenever I see someone come back with an Angus Rowcruiser for another race –

A Yes.

Q – they say, oh, we've made some pretty big modifications. So what's the modifications you're making?

A Well, in a way the modifications I did originally kind of went against his design. I only had one mast. I had one mast with a very large sail. And the problem with that ended up being that in certain conditions, which I had a little bit of experience in but I didn't quite get the wind against tide, pretty good sized seas, trying to tack the boat, and how unbalanced it was. I had made the rudder a lot

larger. And of course, my problems by a few days in was that I had broken the lee board. So I had in dagger board, lee board, whatever. It had broken twice, and so I didn't have any kind of -- I couldn't stop myself from side slipping. And so trying to tack with a single sail that's pretty far forward. So I've solved that and I put another mast. So now I have a little mizzen on the back, about half the square footage of the mainsail. I've made the mainsail smaller and just balanced the boat a lot more. So little details like that. I made a big list obviously and went down each aspect of the boat and saw where it could be improved.

Q Where do you usually sail your Angus Rowcruiser out there? You're in Connecticut?

A I'm in Connecticut, so Long Island Sound, right down a few miles away from me, and there's a lake, Candlewood Lake, which is a great place to start out. First season, try out things like

that because it's sort of lake sailing, which my father's quote about lake sailing was you know, some guy opens up a garage door and the wind changes, which is pretty much what it's like on a lake. So it's really good for -- it's a lot more predictable wind-wise sailing on Long Island Sound. You can anticipate there's not a lot of effects but on lakes there is. So it's good training for that. Yeah, Long Island Sound, along the coast right there, across Long Island, which is only 7 miles away from Connecticut.

Q Sure.

A So it's a pretty good cruising ground.

Q It's good cruising ground, but it also can get kind of rowdy in there.

A It can. It can. You don't want to be anywhere near the land if it starts blowing down the sound or up. But it gets a lot more raucous outside the race when you get to the east and

then you get out towards Block Island and obviously Nantucket, which is kind of like a different weather system.

Q Yeah. But you've also been out in the big waters of the Atlantic a bit. Can you tell us about some of those experiences?

A Well, not in a Rowcruiser.

Q Well, I mean that's the next thing. But we're curious to hear, even if it's a little bigger boat, it's still interesting.

A Yeah. I've had two boats that I could go on the ocean with and one was an old Pearson 35, which is fine. Then I got a bigger boat, this Beneteau 50, and that's capable of basically going anywhere. And I thought this will be fun, let's take this across the Atlantic. And we did. Stopped in Bermuda, the Azores, got to Europe and left the boat there for three years. And we'd come back each summer. So I left the boat in various -- Italy, Morocco and Spain,

Portugal. And we'd leave the boat for a year and go back in the summer and sail for a couple of months. But that was really frustrating. I'm a very hands on kind of guy when it comes to boats. That's the reason I have a sailboat because I can work on it and it's fun. So I eventually had to get the boat back. I just didn't enjoy having others working on the boat and managing it from afar. So we brought the boat back 2018. We brought the boat back across and spent more time in the Azores and sailed the entire way. It was a great, great trip. Fun, relatives, father, sister. It was a great time.

Q Yeah. Well, okay, so ocean sailing versus something like Race to Alaska.

A Yes.

Q Just flat out, do you have a preference?

A Depends upon what kind of trip I want. In terms of a preference, I loved being by myself on the Race to Alaska. I like the solitude of doing

it. I spent a profession performing in front of thousands of people, various halls and tough like that. I always valued my alone time, and that was wonderful. It's just a very, very different experience. I loved crossing an ocean, the zen-like thing, the boat is going, steering by the stars, turning all the electronics off and just sailing. There's a zen moment. I didn't feel that in the Race to Alaska. It's a lot more technical thoughts going through your head. What's going on with the tide right now? What's the wind going at? Am I going to be rowing for the next 12 hours? And et cetera. Where on the big boat, it's very different, and of course I'm having a relative serving their beef goulash at 10:00 p.m. so it's a very different sailing experience. And I love both. I really do.

Q Hey, at what point did you become aware of Race to Alaska?

A It's interesting you say that. It's probably like a lot of the guys say, 2015, 2016. The whole origin story. I remember seeing it in a magazine someplace. I forget which magazine it was. And then following it, following Angus of course. I was following him for other stuff, and then when he did this, and that sort of started the infatuation with the whole idea of yeah, okay. I'm getting up there. I'm ready to do this kind of stuff. And COVID retired me in many ways, and I was -- I had the time to finish the boat at that point. And it was always in the back of my head. Why build a little boat like I did it in my garage if I'm not going to do something with it. And I knew I wasn't just going to sail around the lake. It's just too technical a boat. It's really built for voyaging, not out for a day sail.

Q Colin Angus of course is a big part of the history of Race to Alaska, and I just love

thinking back to his last Race to Alaska
attempting the proving ground.

A Yeah, he got his ass handed to him.

Q He got his ass handed to him and I love it
because everybody knows Colin Angus is this
bad-ass human-powered circumnavigator, lovely
guy, and he spent something like nine hours
clawing his way just barely out of Port Townsend
and back again.

A You know what it is, he's fucking human. It
goes to prove, exactly. You know, for what he's
done in his life, exactly. It proves that he's
human. It makes all of us feel okay, fine. If
it happens to him, it's also terrifying too. If
something like that happens to him and he makes
those decisions like that, okay. What would I
do in that same circumstance? They're
experiences to learn from, and I've always done
that over my whole sailing career. I've read
the books, listened to the people talk about

this because people have experience and they're going to tell you one thing. For instance, the start of the race, the proving ground, I was told under no uncertain terms not to keep east. You know, don't go north. You're going due north but don't stay on the east side. Get to the west as soon as you can. Go around the corner, head over to the west and make your way straight up into Victoria. Don't go on the east side. You'll get nailed. So what did I do? I leave, I go north. I stay on the east side. I'm having beautiful wind. Sailing along. Then I eventually have to turn west and I start turning west, row, row, row, row, row. And then Haro Strait starts sucking me into it for hours. What an idiot. I was warned and told to do this but instead I just got sucked into it. So it's little stuff like that. You learn, and so it takes me 22 hours to get there.

Q You did get there.

A I actually felt good. You arrive, I rowed I don't know, 16 hours. It makes you feel good that you've accomplished something. But at the same time I was kind of kicking myself as I was trying to get west across there. I was warned.

Q It's funny to me that, you know, all of the racetrackers for Race to Alaska, they're all still available. If people don't know that, they can go to the R2AK website and poke around, you'll find them. And if you look year after year, you'll see what works and you'll see what doesn't work. And yet, year after year we get people getting sucked right up Haro and it's pretty fun to watch. I'm a big fan.

A Yeah, so was I. At one point in Haro, I was sailing along perfectly fine. I mean, the sail was completely full. I was sailing along, I actually had the autopilot -- I have an autopilot. It was set, I was sailing and sailing and going nowhere. I was in exactly the

same GPS spot for three hours. I went down below underneath, sat in the cabin, reading a book. And I'd look out every once in a while and the water was going by as if I was sailing along at 5 knots, but I wasn't going anywhere. I was stopping. And I started slowly going back towards Orcas Island. Kind of I need to do something different right now. I'd see boats on the horizon kind of go by me and three others got sucked into it along with me. I'd see them just kind of going by. It was -- yeah.

Exactly. I had been warned.

Q It's a great place for people to really truly learn about tides and currents. You may think you have book learnings, but come do Race to Alaska. You understand what rivers are all about.

A It's so true. And it's so different than the east coast. I've been in high tides and I mean you go up into Nova Scotia. I was sailing

around Nova Scotia and they have some of the highest tides in the world, right, 42 feet. Stuff comes in, the tidal bores are incredible there. But it's very, very different. It's a lot more active, and even going through the race at the end of Long Island sound, these pinch points, Strait of Gibraltar, it's much more organized. These strange little eddies that come off or the tide schedule says it's going to do something at a certain time. And it does. I was going down coming back on one of the trips on the way back when I was heading down, and the tide was saying I had it with me. I was trying to get out of the place I stayed that night and it said that the water was coming out of the harbour at that point. It was an ebb tide. And I swear to god it was against me by 2 knots. I was rowing and rowing and rowing and I'm like, what the hell is going on?

Q You come to this part of the world and there are

so many things affecting tides and currents around here that you don't necessarily have to deal with every where else. For instance, people don't really take into account you have a 2,000-mile long Fraser River that is dumping water 24 hours a day just north of the San Juan Islands. You get a spectacular snow melt, all of a sudden your tide charts are just wrong at that point. You have spots over by the edge of San Juan Island where you're getting into 1500 feet deep and these upwellings are affecting everything. It's the perfect place for Race to Alaska, isn't it?

A It is. It is. It's a brilliant idea. I mean, it is. It is because there's so many variables that it makes it a lot of fun. That's why people come back year after year.

Q So switching attention to this coming year, it's February 9th today. I can't do math. You got several months to go. You're probably training,

you're thinking about it, coming up with your plan. And you have most of the course yet unseen.

A Yeah.

Q What are you thinking about? What's on your mind the most about the race coming up?

A Well, some takeaways from the previous race and things I could change. And I think the big thing is stay west, young man. Do not -- especially on the proving ground. Even though I got there, the next was rethinking the boat, which I've done. So I got rid of the lee board set up. I now have a dagger board that's a lot more centrally located and probably more protected. It won't come out of the water and snap like the other ones did and it's made of carbon fiber so it's a lot stronger. What I'm thinking in the next few months, training. I'm rowing. I have a rowing machine in the basement, trying to get up to what I was before,

which is a few hours a day. I'm just rowing in a very different way than an Olympic rower would row. It's a more sedate way of doing it, keeping my heart rate at 110 and slowly just moving along. And that was good for me last time and I'm continuing with that. I'm going to be taking the boat out in a lot more challenging conditions. Long Island Sound in March can be -- the weather can be unpredictable and that's what I kind of want to get into a little bit where I'm fairly close to shore. And you know, break the boat up a little bit. I think I'm going to focus on -- I'm good at staying awake. I'm good at staying awake for a few days. And one of my mistakes I made early on after leaving Victoria, everyone sort of went along for the day and around 9:00 everyone sort of found the camp and stopped. The ones that I was following along. And I did the same thing. And you know what I did, I just stayed awake all

night. I was awake when I stopped the boat. I ate dinner and I just was awake. I should have continued on. I had good wind and I should have just kept going for those. And realizing it's a marathon, not a sprint, and at one point I could just pull over and put the boat on shore for a couple days and chill out. Kind of I was in a hurry but I wasn't in a hurry, that kind of thing. I didn't pick my times to stop; I didn't pick my times to go very well. And I think I will change that perception in my own mind of what I should do. I should be a little more responsive instead of kind of set in a way, and have a plan. The plan I have is not to have a plan, at least not to be a strict plan. I'll stop the night and rest.

Q Sure. In that plan/no-plan, do you have in your mind's eye some sort of finish time that you're shooting for?

A Well, last year I was hoping for three weeks.

And I was happy with that. I wanted to beat
what do you call it, the grim sweeper?

Q The grim sweeper, yeah.

A I wanted to definitely get beyond that. So
yeah, the goal would be between two and three
weeks.

Q Well, I'm super glad that you're coming back.
You're a great character in the play that is
Race to Alaska last year. Good to have you blow
the starting horn at the Victoria start.

A Well, I hope to blow the horn at the end.

Q Yes, absolutely. Let's have you blow the horn
at the end this year. Sounds perfect.

A Thanks Jesse.

Q No problem.

A Thanks a lot. Take care.

Q We'll see you in June.