

Acadia's Log: The Mini Pavois and Pornichet races

05/14/07, Pornichet FR

It is now three days after the finish of the Pornichet race and I am finally feeling somewhat normal. At times over the past two weeks, I was not sure anymore what normal was. Though it is good to be back on the scene and in the thick of things and my two relatively good finishes, 11th in the Mini Pavois and 6th in the Pornichet Select (9th out of 26 and 6th out of 29 protos, respectively), have made this past winters work, both in changes on the boat and practice down in Florida, all seem worthwhile. While there are times where I felt I could have done better than sixth in the last race, I am happy with the result. Other Mini sailors are rather surprised that I have been up there consistently with an unknown design and with relatively little experience in the fleet and on the race courses.

With the completion of the Mini Pavois, I am now officially qualified for the Mini Transat race (I had to complete one race this summer). For those of you who did not follow the action, my friend Isabelle Joschke placed first in both races sailing her new



Finot design. For the year, she now has a second and two firsts...this is a fairly significant achievement in the Mini world. Isabelle has moved one step closer to becoming the Ellen MacArthur of France (Ellen is the famous British solo sailor) and the country is finally able to pin their hopes on a new female star, something they have not had since Isabelle Autissier during the 1990s.

As always, the journey has been interesting, stressful, at times bizarre, and thankfully, in the end, rewarding. This year the boat arrived in Europe on the precise day that Sevenstar said it would and there were absolutely no problems with customs and getting the boat out of the shipping terminal. I was beginning to feel like I would actually show up at the start of the first race in La Rochelle with time to relax, time to practice on the boat and plenty of opportunity to study the weather and tactical options for the race course. However, my hopes for that were rather quickly dashed.

I discovered the day after picking up the boat (I had not ventured below until then) that one of the new Lithion Ion batteries I had packed below had shorted out and caught fire. Unfortunately, they were not in their waterproof boxes (the boxes were not completed and were to be waiting in La Rochelle) though the batteries were packed in cardboard boxes and wrapped in plastic, and I had placed these packages in an aft section of the boat where I have never had any water. It turns out that there was a small hole in the plastic bag around one battery and the cardboard

soaked up water and shorted out connections on the unprotected surface of the battery. The water apparently came from under a piece of flotation foam and sloshed over a 3" high frame (located aft of where the batteries were) when the boat was being moved around.

The smoke damage below was significant and it was hard to determine the extent of the damage to the hull where the battery had been sitting... the foam core of the hull (between the inner and outer skins of carbon) melts at 160 degrees. I was devastated. I found myself pacing around under the boat, wondering whether or not I would make the first race...or if I did, I would be working away on the boat right up to the last minute. Damn, once again it turns into panic mode to get the boat ready to race and I find myself mumbling the words often heard from my friend and working associate Peter Freeman "F.....g boats." It was hard to look at the brighter side, but at least I had not placed anything over the batteries (like a sail) that would have potentially spread the fire and had the whole boat go up.

I arrived in La Rochelle (the starting town for the Mini Pavois) two days later and set up shop on the sidewalk outside the local J-Boat dealership. I stripped the boat of everything, took stuff to the laundry and wiped down the entire inside with alcohol and soap. The smell was persistent and as I moved things into my van (which is also set up with a platform bed) I realized that I would literally have to live with it. I broke out my Dremel tool and carefully cut away the inside carbon skin, starting in the middle of the fire damage and working out. The foam core in this area was black, though fortunately only about 2/3rds of the way through, so the outside skin of carbon was intact. I ended up with only about a 10" by 10" area where I cut away the skin and dug out the bad core. With the help of the J-Boats folks, I found a small boat builder who provided some foam core material...I sized it and epoxied it in place (using sand bags for weights to make it conform to the hull shape) and then covered it with carbon and epoxy to reform the inside skin. When the repair was done it was barely noticeable and is now probably the strongest place on the boat.

It was now five days before the race, one day before I had to launch the boat and get her re-measured for the class stability rules (because of the new mast), and two days before all of the safety inspections for the race. I was actually feeling the pressure ease.

Each night I packed most everything in my van with the exception of the main, my new and old jibs (only place for them was on my bed and they were smoke filled) and a bag of smoky clothes and foul weather gear I had yet to wash. This stuff was all in a pile outside the J-boats fence, next to the boat. Earlier that day I had been warned by a passing French sailor to "beware of the rubbers"... hmm, rubbers? I glanced at the tires on my van and trailer to see if they were okay. Rubbers? I then figured out he was saying "robbers" (if my French was better we could have established this in his language). At night, I would go to dinner and then come back and park and sleep next to the boat and my pile of gear, figuring it would be safe as long as I was close by... and who would grab this stuff at 9:30 at night while I was having dinner? At worst maybe the smoky clothes would go, who the hell would want the sails? That night while at dinner, the sails and clothes were stolen. The next morning as I was walking around in a fog wondering what I was going to do now, a security car from the large marina complex arrived with my sails and clothes. A

guard the night before had come across two kids walking off with all this stuff and called the police...they were now in custody at the central police station and I could go fill out forms and press charges. Isabelle went with me in attempt to do this, but the place was chaotic due to the elections (the police handle absentee balloting) and they could not find a record of the incident, so we blew it off. My sails were back, so maybe my luck was finally on the upward swing.

The next couple of days were busy launching the boat and stepping the mast. All went well with the boat passing the stability measurement tests and after jumping through numerous hoops, the extensive safety inspections for the race. The maker of the batteries was actually competing in the race, so he set me up with one new battery, placed it and the undamaged one in waterproof boxes and wired them into the boat. The day before the race I had plotted all of the course waypoints and downloaded numerous weather charts... after the skippers meeting that night at 6:30 p.m., I planned to startup my new fuel cell (last years one had been replaced) and retire early to a hotel room to study the charts and the weather and get a good nights sleep. I showed up at the boat around 8:00 p.m., connected methanol to the fuel cell, hit the start button and the unit ran for four minutes and shut-down. I restarted the thing, again four minutes and it shut down. Even though there are not really any moving parts, I ripped it apart, fiddled with a few things, restarted it and again fault lights glowed from the panel. This went on until midnight and I finally gave up. Now I would be starting a four day race with no way to recharge my batteries. The only fortunate thing is Lithion Ion batteries are capable of bigger discharges than lead-acid batteries and maintain acceptable voltages through most of their discharge curve; nevertheless, I resigned myself to the fact that I would be steering the boat for 20 hours a day to conserve power (the autopilot consumes the most power). I arrived back at the hotel at 12:30 a.m. and stayed up until 2:30 a.m. studying the weather and course. I got up at 6:30 a.m. to pack clothes and food and headed to the boat to prepare sails and enter waypoints in the GPS. I also searched for alternate charging options, like flexible solar panels, with no success.

By now, the thought crossed my mind of getting my cousin Kitsy, the family Shaman, to fly over and bless the boat once again. Though I was beginning to feel like jumping from one obstacle or crisis to the next was par for the course in this class (and in reality, can be typical of boats or boating in general, f....g boats!)... it is just a question of whether you can push on through the current problem so that you have an opportunity to visit the next fiasco that will try to trip you up. The Team Acadia crew provided great advice and moral support as one hurdle after another popped up, and I thank them immensely.

It was now race day and quite frankly, I was feeling rather beat-up... though nothing like a little competition to get the adrenaline going. There were 64 boats on the starting line and winds were around 15 knots and it was overcast with rain predicated. The course had us heading upwind under a bridge that connects the mainland to the Ile de Re and on around the top of the island... about a 20 mile beat before cracking off and heading to a mark off of Gijon, Spain 220 miles to the southwest.

I started in the middle of the line and was one of the first boats off, though Peter Laureyssens from Belgium sailing the boat Ecover (his new Finot design and winner

in the last Mini Transat in the Series division) was below me and moving fast and pointing high. Within a minute he was in front giving me bad air...I went below and stacked some gear to windward (stacking is the all important task of moving gear below – water jugs, bags of safety gear, containers of food, etc), the boat started moving better. I eventually ended up short tacking up the shore of the mainland to avoid the strong currents as we headed for the bridge. I was in around 8th place as we passed under the center span, overlapped with Isabelle and slightly behind Peter, Sam Manuard (famous French Mini designer and past competitor in three Transats), Yves Le Blevac in his new Lombard Design (two time Transat competitor, ocean catamaran and around the world racer), Erwan La Roux in his new Finot design and a few other top Mini sailors. We were on port tack and I was moving fast and pointing well...I then tacked on a

couple of big headers (windshifts) and put 300 meters on Isabelle and two other boats. I rounded the lighthouse at the top of Re in fifth place and was actually glad at that point not to be in the lead...while the lighthouse was the mark, the waves coming in over the shallow water outside of it were huge and breaking and it was local knowledge that dictated how far out one should go before bearing off for Spain, I followed the leaders.



As we slowly eased off to head for Spain, everyone scrambled to put up bigger headsails. Some opted for gennakers so they could steer high of the rhumb line (rhumb line is the direct course for the next mark) the rest of us went for spinnakers... I rigged the number two chute and took off at 10 to 11 knots in the 18-20 knot winds and 4 to 5 foot seas. The boat was moving well and surfing at higher speeds on some of the steeper waves, though a couple of the large-stern French boats went chugging on by as I attempted to hold a fairly tight beam reach. My current course had me low of the rhumb line (east of it); weather charts and routing predications showed the ideal course as rhumb line for the first 75 miles and then heading high (west) of the rhumb line by as much as 15 miles halfway down the remainder of leg and then fading back to a course that took one slightly high of the buoy on the approach to Spain. I kept the spinnaker up for about two hours (it was now about 1900 hours) hoping for the wind to veer aft, which it did not do.

I finally dropped the chute and rigged the gennaker (the gennaker flies from the spinnaker pole) and headed up to a rhumb line course. The gennaker requires a significant amount of halyard tension and it is the one sail in the inventory that puts the most load on the mast and rigging. The boat was still moving well, anywhere from 9 to 10 knots depending on the waves, and the setup seemed fairly comfortable. Skies were overcast and the wind was slowly increasing... at around

2030 I was steering the boat, attempting to surf the bigger waves when I heard a loud bang. I looked up and thankfully the mast was still in one piece. I placed the boat on autopilot and went forward to look around; all seemed well on deck so I studied the mast as best as I could from deck level. The main was fairly far out and the sail was bearing hard against the leeward spreaders...I was nervous that this might have caused damage to the connection where the spreader meets the mast, but I had duct taped this area so I could not see the connection from deck level. Climbing the mast for an inspection was the only option. I had yet to climb the mast at sea (with the exception of the 14 foot broken stump in the Azores race) and the thought of it made me nervous, especially with the sails up and the boat on autopilot. On past occasions the autopilot has shut down for no apparent reason and the boat would then proceed to flail about, wondering what to do. I had climbing gear on the boat, a harness and ascenders (ascenders are basically hand cleats that grab a line and can be released and moved), though I had a hell of a time trying to use this stuff at the dock and figured it would be ridiculous at sea... I stripped off my foul weather jacket, grabbed some halyards and started to free climb the 40 foot mast, using every ounce of energy I had to reach the second spreaders.

Thirty seconds later I was perched on the second spreaders of a boat that was doing 9 to 10 knots, with no harness, thinking that if the mast breaks now or if the autopilot acts up, I might be in trouble... I quickly inspected the spreader connections and other fittings, which seemed okay, and slid down the mast. Baffled, I went and sat on the stern, ready to take over the steering. I glanced one more time up and down the mast in the last rays of daylight and noticed that the D4 (the shroud that connects to the very top of the mast) was not connected at the second spreader tip (where it was lashed)... I had been right next to this but did not see it. I studied the top of the mast from deck level and while the tip was bending slightly to leeward, it did not look radical. Another shroud, the D3 was connected to the mast at the same height as the headstay (the hounds it is called) and this was only three feet from the top of the mast, so only a small section of the spar was now unsupported. I briefly considered withdrawing or heading to a port for repairs, though I wanted to finish this race and I figured at worst, I could fly the small jib, a reefed main and the small spinnaker, all of which only went as high as the hounds. I kept charging along with the full main and the gennaker.

At around 2 in the morning, I heard another loud bang and the boat leveled out and slowed down... the mast was still up, but in the extreme darkness of that night, it was hard to see what had happened. I ran forward with a flashlight and found the gennaker in the water, to leeward and under the boat. I fought the thing and got it on board, stuffed the wet mess below, and hoisted the solent (small jib). I considered going with the small chute, but I was now a bit rattled... the boat was doing 8 to 9 knots, I knew slower than many of the boats, but I stayed with this program until 0900. By then the winds had built to 23 knots.

I put two reefs in the main, hoisted the small chute and the boat settled in at a steady 11 to 12 knots, surfing at 15 to 16. The Bay of Biscay waves were steep (10-12 feet) and confused. The boat generally seemed better at surfing than last year (due to the weight reduction) but occasionally it was hard to avoid stuffing the bow into the backside of the next wave or at the bottom of the one just surfed. Within two hours it was blowing 26 knots and the boat was starting to push a steady 12 to

13 knots... I was just inside the line of being out of control and I found myself fading into sleep for 5 to 10 seconds at a time (I had slept, or rested for four twenty minute intervals that night with the main and jib); a sudden acceleration or rocking of the boat would bring me back to reality; the reality that once again I was hanging on and steering the boat in a Bay of Biscay gale, s__t!! The wind continued to build, and as the boat blasted down the front of a wave and the apparent wind dropped for a moment, I hit the autopilot button and lunged for the cabin house and blew the tack line stopper... the spinnaker collapsed behind the main, the boat slowed and the chaos moderated; though the boat still surfed out at 11 to 12 knots under main alone. I hoisted the solent and the boat settled in to a steady 11 to 12 knot pace and again surfed into the mid-teens.

I took over the steering and once again found myself fighting to keep my eyes open. A large rumble to the right caught my attention and I glanced over my shoulder to see an exceptionally large wave moving different than the semi-chaotic direction of the rest (the Bay of Biscay is shallow and that, combined with strong currents, can make for unpredictable waves)... it was coming right at me from the beam. I headed-off some to help moderate the effects, wrapped my arm tightly around the lifeline and braced for impact... the wave washed over the cockpit like the boat was not there. I was floating on top of the wave, my arm straining to hold on; suddenly, a pop and a quick hiss --- my neck constrained as if in some medical brace; my harness/lifevest had automatically inflated. I ripped the thing off, threw it below and looked at the wind speed, 30 to 33 knots.

Another large wave roared from behind, this one looked like a vertical wall. On board, I have begun to carry an assortment of good luck charms, some short letters from friends and family wishing me safety and good luck, even the occasional religious symbol or writing given to me by someone; as I glanced at the approaching wave, I figured right now, any religion would do. My eyes quickly scanned below and for a second focused on the peacock feather tucked behind the depthsounder. As we sat on top of the wave, I had seconds to consider options for slowing the boat or steering a higher course down the front of the wave. It seemed as though the wave dropped off at about a 70 degree angle and the transition at the bottom could be messy, with the possibility of pitch-polling or rolling. A puff surged the boat down the steep face, our speed was 15, then 17 knots. As we approached the bottom, I headed up about 45 degrees and the boat rolled over to maybe 80 degrees and slowed to around 9 knots; it then stood up again and took-off, no harm, no foul. I thought to myself that I was happy it was daylight and relieved that I did not have the spinnaker up for that ride. I then dropped the jib and moved under double-reefed main at 10 to 11 knots.

By afternoon the winds started to drop and I hoisted the jib, took the reefs out of the main and within 15 miles of the buoy off Gijon, Spain ended up close-hauled, tacking for the mark. I rounded the buoy at 11:15 p.m. at night with other boats, but had no idea who they were; these were the first boats I had seen in 24 hours. When rounding the mark, we were suppose to call one of the safety boats accompanying the race and notify them of our rounding time... once clear of the buoy and approaching boats, I went below to use the radio. On my second attempt at calling, there was a loud crash forward and the boat nearly stopped moving, then another large thump. As I dove for the cockpit, my initial thought was, hell, I have hit a boat

that was on approach to the mark. Fortunately, there was no boat there, but as I glanced over the side, a large piece of timber floated alongside the boat. With a flashlight I inspected the bow, and while there was some scarring in the paint, it seemed okay; underwater inspection would have to wait until after the race.

That morning the winds were non-existent and for three hours, I did circles with the small spinnaker up. When the breeze filled in, it was basically a beat for 200 miles to Ile de Yeu... I studied the weather charts and it seemed as though the predications had moved up a day. I played the rhumb line and started taking on the headers, staying on the closest tack to the next mark. The batteries were hanging in there, though I was not sure exactly where on the charge curve that they would give out, so I continued to steer; falling asleep on the helm for 10 to 15 seconds at a time, and actually dreaming. In one dream, I remember standing in the garden of a house, talking to a man who was digging up bent screwdrivers.

Thirty hours later the wind came aft about 40 miles from Ile de Yeu and I struggled to carry my small chute at 50 to 60 degrees apparent (since my top halyard was broken I could not use the gennaker, which would have been ideal). Twenty miles from the island, the wind came further aft and boats with big spinnakers caught up and sailed on by. That night and the next morning it was down to variable winds... sometimes no wind and doing circles, sometimes upwind, at times downwind. For the leg from Ile de Yeu to the finish off La Rochelle (a 55 mile leg) it was downwind with light air at first and a freshening sea breeze by the end of the day. I suffered with the small spinnaker.

When I finished, I figured that maybe I was in the thirties... when I entered the harbor and saw that I was 11th, I was rather surprised. I would later find out I rounded the buoy off Gijon in 27th and managed to pass 14 boats on the way to Yeu. I was physically wiped-out, I had only slept for 9 hours in four and half days.

The next few days were spent inspecting the boat and fixing what I could. The spinnaker halyard had destroyed the top sheave box and cut a 2 inch slot in the front of the carbon mast. The starboard upper spreader tip was crushed, which is why the D4 shroud let go. These things, and a crack in the bow caused by hitting the piece of wood, I could not fix in time for the next race (The Pornichet Select which was only 5 days away), so I jury-rigged the D4 shroud and attached a Harken block to the top of the mast and ran my top spinnaker halyard externally. Four days before the Pornichet race, I sailed the boat for 24 hours, upwind in 22 knots of breeze, to get to the starting area. I then went by train back to La Rochelle to grab the van and trailer and drove back to Pornichet. I was slowly getting more rested, but was still beat.

Prior to the Pornichet Race, there were no major setbacks and I was able to spend a significant amount of time studying and plotting the course, recording the currents and analyzing the weather. The race had around 12 marks or islands that we had to round or pass, four within the first five miles after the start. For the start winds were out of the north northwest and variable, like a Long Island Sound northerly in the fall... shifting a lot and strengths anywhere from 5 to 12 knots. I took the pin end of the line as the breeze headed, tacked and crossed the fleet. We were on a short one mile weather leg before leaving the bay. Soon the breeze went variable and boats were headed in the same direction on opposite tacks. I rounded the first mark in about 10th, caught a few boats over the next three short legs, then moved up into

fifth place as we started a 40 mile beat to Birvedeaux Plateau, north of Belle Isle. I generally maintained fifth or sixth position for the rest of the day and that night, with Isabelle, Peter, Eve, Adrian Hardy and David Sineu ahead.

At daybreak, the winds were light, at times drifting conditions as we headed south to honor Ile de Yeu and then to a buoy south of Les Sables d' Olonne. I ghosted up on four of the leaders as they sat in hole north of Yeu, then faded back as breeze filled and they worked high on a reach. I soon lost sight of them in the fog/haze as I started gybing on the lifts downwind. Three hours later I found myself 100 yards ahead of Peter and David; Isabelle and Eve were about 1 mile ahead and Adrian was sitting in a huge hole off of Les Sables. From there it was a dash for the buoy south of Les Sables as the breeze filled in, I rounded in seventh. It was now about 100 miles upwind to Isle de Groix off of Lorient and it was blowing around 20 knots. The top seven boats crossed tacks a few times, then I focused on playing the shits back up to Isle de Yeu (which we had to honor to starboard). Six hours later, at about midnight, I had passed one or two boats and was slightly to leeward and behind the leaders as we passed Yeu, no more than a few hundred meters behind. The breeze finally started building and came aft a little, so we were now slightly cracked off as we headed for Isle de Groix. On the way we had the option of passing Belle Ile on either side (West or East), though going inside to pick up favorable current seemed like a risky option when exiting at the north end and having to head up in the chaotic



and building seas. I opted for the westerly, or outside route, and as it turns out, all of the leaders did. By daybreak, I was passing the north end of Belle Isle and by now it was blowing 25 to 30 and the seas were rather large... for sails I had a double reef in the main and the solent. As I went below to grab some food, I hit one of the cables connected to the autopilot control head; the pilot shut down and the boat went into an autotack; now the keel, waterballast, and all the gear stacked below were on the wrong side. The boat heeled over excessively and I battled to get her back around, eventually bringing the keel to centerline and building enough speed to tack in the large waves. In the middle of all this, I finally spotted another boat; it was Peter on Ecover, about 200 meters behind, hmm, passed him again somehow. He managed to tweak his program and was off and running again, headed for Groix. I rounded the island in fifth place, about 200 meters

in front of the sixth place boat, Fabien on Soitec. At this point, it was taking every ounce of available energy to accomplish anything on the boat... I thought to myself that sailing this boat was the most mentally and physically challenging thing I have ever done, and for some reason, it seemed more intense than last year. Maybe I was pushing harder, or perhaps it was just that I was one year older, whatever the case, it took all of my concentration to accomplish anything, even taking a piss.

We had about 50 miles of downwind work to the finish, in a breeze that was blowing a steady 30 and gusting higher. Fabien set his gennaker and passed on by, I

attempted to set mine but for the life of me, I could not rig it up right. I had slept two hours in the last two and half days and I was to the point where I was almost delirious, my mind was not functioning well and my body could barely move. After the failed attempt with the gennaker, I sat motionless for awhile and then went for the small spinnaker as we bore- off slightly in the lee of Belle Ile. The minute the chute filled, the pole collapsed to the leeward side of the boat, the spinnaker flailing like crazy. I got that down and decided that I just needed to finish, no matter what place. Though as I rounded one last mark 10 miles from the finish, I hoisted the full main (and I had the solent up), the full main was a mistake. I had to gybe twice before reaching the finish and with the full main and my mental state, it was one hell of task to keep the boat on course through a gybe... the first one I barely got through; on the second gybe, two miles from the finish, I broke one of the running backstays.

Upon reaching the marina, I literally tied the boat up, left it in a mess, and headed for the bar to join those that had finished. One beer later I was on the verge of blacking out, so I headed for the van and climbed into a bed that was dry, warm and not moving.

-- Clay