



Oceans *of* **Courage**

This month sees yachtsmen and women once again tackling the Atlantic singlehandedly. David Southwood, Chairman of the OSTAR Race Committee, recounts the history of this amazing challenge



Mervyn Wheatley aboard *Tamarind* finishing off the coast of Newport in 2009



Photo by Pamela Newman

Above: Mervyn Wheatley (competitor), David Southwood (Chairman, OSTAR Race Committee), Peter Odling-Smee and Peter Crowther (competitor)

The single-handed transatlantic yacht race OSTAR will start in Plymouth Sound at noon on Bank Holiday Monday, 27 May.

This will be the 14th time that the Royal Western Yacht Club of England has organised the event. The finish line is off Newport, Rhode Island, where the Newport Yacht Club acts as host.

OSTAR has come to mean all that is best and most exciting in short-handed competitive sailing. In 1960, amidst great controversy over the wisdom of racing across the Atlantic with just one person on board, five boats started that first 2,700-nautical mile race. The winner, *Gypsy Moth 111*, sailed by Sir Francis Chichester, took 40 days. In 2000, the French skipper Loick Peyron, in the trimaran *Eure et Loire*, set the present record of nine days 23 hours.

The North Atlantic can be treacherous, yet every four years men and women from many nations, using different types of sailing yachts, from small cruisers to state-of-the-art racing machines, have pitted their skills against the elements and the clock to compete in this great race. Many of the OSTAR competitors have progressed to professional sailing careers and have gone on to take part in commercial races such as the Vendée Globe and others. Among them are Sir Chay Blythe, Mike Golding, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, Dame Ellen MacArthur and Alex Thomson.

It was the Second World War 'Cockleshell' hero Lt Col Blondie Hasler, Royal Marines, who first had the amazing idea for a solo transatlantic race. He realised that a qualifying passage would have to be made to weed out unseaworthy entries. Competitors still have to complete 500 miles solo. He went on to say: "There would, obviously, be some loss of life, but less, in my opinion, than the Grand National." The Royal Western was approached to organise it. Although many boats have been abandoned over the years, only two tragedies have occurred involving loss of a life: in 1976, the American Mike Flanigan was lost overboard; and a Royal Marine, Mike

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McMullen, was lost together with his boat.

The Chairman of the Committee for the first six races was Lt Col Jack Odling-Smee, for whom I crewed in the 1960s. Jack's son Peter is a fellow member of the Royal Western. This will be my second stint as Race Director of OSTAR and I am supported by an experienced team who helped me run a very successful OSTAR 2009. The organisers have a determination to retain the Corinthian ethos of the OSTAR and keep it open to all yachtsmen.



One of this year's entered boats, *Vento di Sardegna*, to be skippered by the Italian yachtsman Andrea Mura

In OSTAR 2009, 18-year-old Oscar Mead became the youngest person ever to finish the race. Katie Miller at 22 became the youngest woman to finish. JanKees Lampe set a new record for a 40ft boat of 17 days 17 hours and will attempt to break it in this year's race. Peter Crowther, the Stoke Fleming publican, whose first race was in 1972, will enter for the ninth time. In 1996, Peter's boat *Galway Blazer* sank some 500 miles west of Ireland and he was picked up from his liferaft by a container ship. Mervyn Wheatley from the Yealm will enter his fourth race. In 2000, Mervyn's steering failed and he hand-steered with an emergency tiller for 13 days.

In the early races, nothing much was heard of the competing yachts until they arrived in the USA or elsewhere if they retired. In OSTAR 2013, each boat will be fitted with a tracker reporting its position, course, speed, distance to go and its place in the fleet. This will be relayed and displayed on the OSTAR 2013 website, making it very interesting for those who wish to follow the race. Competitors will have satellite communication, an emergency position indicator beacon and an automatic identification system. This enables boats to be monitored. In 2009, an Italian skipper reported his boat to be sinking in a severe gale south of Newfoundland but was picked up by a container ship when Race Control alerted the US Coastguard.

It was the enigmatic Eric Tabarly who

transformed the OSTAR into a world-class event. In 1964, at a depressed time in France, Tabarly became an overnight hero for winning the second OSTAR. President de Gaulle presented him with his country's highest honour, the Legion d'Honneur. France's love affair with solo offshore racing had begun. French yachtsmen went on to win most of the races in subsequent years. Alain Colas, Yvon Fauconnier, Loick Peyron and Francois Joyon all became famous and

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encouraged other Frenchmen to enter their sport. Other European countries, particularly the Netherlands and Italy, produced their own challengers.

The biggest fleet to cross an OSTAR start line was 125 yachts in 1976. One of them was skippered by Peter Crowther. The largest vessel was the four-masted *Club Méditerranée*, sailed by Alain Colas, with a length of 236 feet. Few believed a boat of that size could be sailed safely by one man without risk to himself and others at sea. In that year, 53 boats failed to finish. After this race, the organisers imposed a

restriction on the length of boat and on the number of entries.

Crossing the Atlantic from east to west is never easy and the weather plays a significant part. While the great circle route is the shortest distance, it is not necessarily the easiest, fastest or safest. The prevailing wind is from the west or south-west – exactly the direction the competitors wish to travel. The Gulf Stream meanders contrarily across the route so yachts need to keep north to avoid it. The Labrador Current heads south, bringing with it cold water and icebergs (or 'growlers'), which can be extremely dangerous. Near the Grand Banks, cold air meeting warm air results in fog. There are also gales in the mid Atlantic and calms nearer the US coast. This race is not for the faint-hearted.

There is a legend that the wager for winning the first OSTAR was a half-crown (12.5p). The Half Crown Club is open to all those who have crossed the start line of an OSTAR. The club has no rules. On the Saturday evening before the start of the race, the Half Crown Club will meet at the Royal Western. Veterans from previous OSTARs will assemble to share their experiences with current competitors. Among them, we hope, will be Val Howells, now 86, who took part in the original race. ■

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