

OFFSHORE RACING SUPPLEMENT

1995 is a Fastnet Year. CSORC will soon be planning crewing and training. NOW is the time to let Chris Stebbings know that you wish to be included in the squad and join the winter training series.

To whet all appetites we print Mark Dyer's account of the 1993 CSORC Fastnet.

FASTNET RACE, 7-13 AUGUST 1993

Lesson number one for 1995: get all the crew down to the boat on the Friday before the race start. In our case we assembled on the Saturday, and had a hectic few hours stowing victuals, sorting out charts, stripping down winches, buying stores from the chandler, and many other jobs. As it was we left with some ill-fitting mainsail battens, two of which we lost in the Channel somewhere. Now that would be worth half a knot, which together with a hour or two from better sail drill, plus that time when we preferred finishing lunch to getting the spinnaker up: hey, winning this thing must be a piece of cake, really.

Faced with a weather forecast which promised a 400 mile beat, we were pretty anxious to get started, but 1320 hrs on Saturday 7 August came and went with no sign of the expected ten minute gun. Several hundred yachts milling around in a small area tested even Bob's legendary sang-froid. A good time for the rest of the crew to keep their heads down (literally) and let the skipper and navigator sort out what was happening. The ten-minute delay was caused by a passing container vessel which timed its crossing of the start line perfectly. Which was more than we did, but then what's five minutes in 6 days (but see para 1)?

In sunshine, blue water and a good breeze it was perfect sailing weather as we tacked down towards Hurst Castle, only to be faced with the first major tactical decision: which way now? Kit's game plan was to be tacking somewhere near the coast when the tide was adverse, and to be out in the stream when it was favourable. It was a strategy which we were to have 48 hours practising. We knew anyway that we had little chance of getting a favourable tide-gate around Portland, but it was still depressing in the small hours to be watching the lights of Weymouth for an awfully long time, and to go below and see almost a north-south track on the chart.

At dawn on Sunday 8 August, there were no other boats to be seen, and indeed there were rarely more than one or two others visible for the rest of the race. About the only thing to note from Sunday was the sighting of the Eddystone light in early evening, when we were tacking into Plymouth Bay in the attempt to mitigate yet another adverse tide. Why is it that the wind and tide are more often against than with? It must be the sailing equivalent of the buttered toast and carpet experiment.

If only we could have squeezed that extra half knot (see para 1), we would have done so much better for tidal gates. We rounded the Lizard against the tide at around 0730 on Monday 9 August. At least so Kit said. By this time there was thick mist and drizzle, and it required a lot of imagination to discern a slightly darker grey in the clag in the appropriate direction, and anyone claiming to hear diaphone Morse "N" 60 sec was immediately dismissed as a line-shooter. Not so with Land's End, which was clearly visible at around 1500, along with the Longships and Wolf Rock lighthouses. The wind at this time was freshening, with a choppy swell that was producing a lot of spray. It was difficult to keep the boat speed up against the swell, and the motion for the next 36 hours was highly uncomfortable. We passed a large schooner running towards Plymouth, which seemed like a much better idea.

The Irish Sea does have its compensations, however. There is a certain fascination in the large regular swell with its intimation of the nearby ocean. And the constant presence of seabirds everywhere is most striking: gannets, fulmars, shearwaters and occasionally storm petrels. The cloudscapes and oceanic waterscapes occupy the attention, so that a daytime watch in reasonable visibility passes easily and agreeably.

We were still struggling uncomfortably for every mile against a WNW wind: pretty much the direction in which we wanted to go. Nevertheless we were effectively out-sailing another nearby boat on the Monday night, when there seemed to be an unaccountable drop in performance. After trying all the usual trimming tweaks we thought of looking over the lee side where the spare headsail, fortunately still attached at the tack, was trailing in the water. Lesson number 567 for 1995: take unused sails below, particularly at night, so that this does not happen. Lesson number 568: if it does, do not waste time and effort trying to secure the sail back in the same place, get it aboard and below. Still, it is a worthwhile experience to struggle on a plunging foredeck in the pitch dark heaving against the immense drag of the water-filled sail with water shooting up the leggings of one's oilies. So worthwhile that we repeated it several times during the next couple of hours until some spoilsport suggested the better solution. By this time, of course, the boat we had been out-sailing was well ahead. See paragraph 1

Tuesday 10 August was a beautiful day, with the sea and the wind moderating. Around 1600 the wind began backing, so we tacked and followed it round until for the first time we could steer direct for the Fastnet, still 80 miles away. The difference boat size makes was then emphasised when we passed close to a US maxi on its way back from the Rock. The weather forecast threatened a depression and more fronts, and around 2200 there was a rapid deterioration, forcing a shortening of sail to working jib and 3 reefs in the main. Crests of the bigger waves broke into the cockpit, so that instead of spray it was like being hit by a few bucketfuls of water all at once. Lines of phosphorescence along the breaking wave crests stretched off into the night. There was also the question of keeping a lookout, particularly since boats on their way back home were becoming more frequent. Not easy to keep an effective lookout in the direction from which the rain and spray are driving. I would have said the survival chances of a man overboard were zero, although this did happen on another boat that night, and the man was recovered.

At 0500 on Wednesday 11 August, the Fastnet light was sighted. The difficulty now was to steer close enough to the wind to get round it. Force 8 was forecast, and if that came in before we were round, it was doubtful whether we would be able to make it in the seas then running. Very slowly we made headway, until at 0702 the Rock bore south and we were able to tack and bear away. Instant relief: from struggling to make 3-4 knots beating and slamming into the seas, we were doing 7-8 knots downwind with big following waves. There was time for a glimpse of the grey coastline which was our only view of Ireland.

Rapidly improving weather brought the sun out, and a cruising atmosphere soon developed. Clothing and sleeping bags were dried, and Kit busied himself in the galley to produce a decent lunch. There was a further gale warning, however, and we kept an eye on the cirrus clouds which never cleared. But for the moment sailing was once again bliss, and it was with some reluctance that we stirred ourselves to set the spinnaker. The cruising mentality was reinforced by the occasional school of dolphins, a beautiful sunset, and later by some splendid meteor showers. The breeze freshened, and went on freshening. In the middle of the night a broach occurred. Recovery operations took place amid much swearing in which the watch below were passive participants.

Early on Thursday 12 August the Bishop Rock was sighted, with the Scilly Isles clearly visible. It was a magnificent day for downwind sailing, and even the navigator was given his first trick on the helm for this trip. After he achieved the record burst speed of 12.4 knots on a surf he was quickly put back on to making sandwiches whilst everyone else tried (unsuccessfully) to beat him.

Comparatively speaking, we were almost home to Plymouth, but the last 50 miles ticked away slowly. We were now worried about a light wind forecast, and were anxiously watching another spinnaker astern, which seemed to be gaining. Slowly it overhauled us, until when the wind dropped to a whisper around 2200, it lay abeam. Navigation and reading the tide were critical now, and Kit was on continuous duty. The crew sat still and cold while we crept along with hardly a breath in the sails. The tide was turning against. The wind died completely around the last headland before Plymouth Sound. The other boat was now just ahead.

Bob sat almost motionless at the helm, with just tiny movements of the tiller to take advantage of any ghost of an air. Past the headland we picked up a little more from a very light breeze coming down Plymouth Sound, and tacked past the end of the breakwater, willing the breeze not to fail and let the tide push us out. Kit was calling the tacks by Decca now, the echo sounder being out of commission. We had overtaken the other boat, and Bob was gaining more all the time. His first words for several hours were: "I'm climbing over him, Kit, and he's bigger than me!"

With some difficulty, we identified the finish line, but at 0333 on Friday 13 August a searchlight suddenly shone on our sails, the engine was started and it was all over. Until 1995.

CREW: Bob Wolfenden (Skipper), Kit Mitchell (Navigator), John Storey, Mark Dyer, Simon Baker, Gill Chandler, Mark Steel

[Precedent's finishing position: 23rd out of 45 starters in CHS class 3, some 20 hours behind the class winner, "Buckshot" -another Sigma 33]

PRECEDENT

RACING PROGRAMME

September		
Aug 30-Sep 8	CHS European Championships	tba
9-11	JOG Fecamp start 19.00	56
16-18	RORC Cherbourg	50
24-25	JOG Poole start 08.00	50
October-November		
1-2	JOG Navigators	50
8-9, 15-16	HRSC Winter Series	50
weekends until		
26-27 Nov	HRSC Winter Series	44

CHARTER DATES AVAILABLE

September	12, 19, 23	80
October	3, 7, 10, 14, 17, 21, 24, 28, 31	80
November		80

INTRODUCTION TO CRUISING/RACING

September	20-22	60
October	4-6, 18-20	60
RYA 5-Day course	September 26-30	150*
MOD Introductory days	August 23-25	60
September	13-15, October 11-13, 25-27	60

Charter prices marked * are for whole period

Representative events are IMS, Cowes Week and CHS
 Reduced mid-week charter rates
 £60/day if booked within 14 days
 £40/day if booked within 2 days

