

FASTNET 1997

By Gordon Friend

The Fastnet race or the 'Grand National of ocean racing' is one of Britain's most well-known yachting races. The race is held every two years and takes a fleet of boats from Cowes in the Isle of Wight, through Hurst Narrows, passing the Needles, past a succession of south coast headlands, Portland Bill, Start Point and The Lizard, then Land's End.

From Land's End 180 miles to the north west across a very empty Irish Sea lies the Fastnet Rock. The boats must pass between the Rock and the mainland of Ireland, head off to the south west for approximately seven miles to round the furthest west of the course marks then turn tail and head off in a south easterly direction for Bishop's Rock in the Isles of Scilly. From here it is a short 100 mile dash back to the finish line in Plymouth Harbour.

The race is organised by the Royal Ocean Racing Club first formed in 1925 at the end of the first ever Fastnet Race which was contested by seven British cruising yachts. The wisdom of a 'public ocean race' in such northerly waters was the cause of much debate. The fleet of seven has expanded over the years peaking at about 300 vessels in 1979 and then dropping back to the present day numbers. This year on Saturday 9 August, 249 boats made their way to the start line.

Included in that number was *Valkyrie*, a Dahler 35, the yacht of the Civil Service Offshore Racing Club. On board were eight crew members, some



Fastnet Rock – 180 miles from Land's End.

veterans of previous races and some, like myself, newcomers to this classic event. Each member of the crew had competed in at least three of the RORC qualifying races and been selected to represent CSORC.

There was an air of tension and excitement on the boat. The morning

had seen the delay of the last Cowes week races due to thick fog that had slowly cleared, consequently the sea was alive with boats of every size imaginable. The start was a hectic affair with *Valkyrie* using good local knowledge to start at the port end of the line and hug the coast of the Isle of Wight, weaving in and out of the spectator boats and capitalising on the strong westbound tide. The fleet spread wide throughout the Solent only to converge again to pass through the Narrows at Hurst Castle.

As the fleet passed the Needles, *Valkyrie* headed south hoping to be the first to benefit from the south westerly winds on the incoming low pressure. Alas this was not to be and five hours of the first night were spent with our anchor firmly fixed to the sea-bed since the east-going tide was far faster than the forward motion of the boat. As the watches were changing at 3 am the wind began to fill enough to raise the spinnaker and anchor, and head off towards The Lizard.

The next leg saw several sail changes as we tried to coax the most from the boat in the changing winds and tide. The crew began to settle into the four-hourly watch system punctuated by gourmet 'boil in the bag' meals. Sleep



The crew – ready to go.



A crowded Solent as we make preparations for the start.

was often interrupted by the skipper directing the off watch crew into bunks on the other side of the boat to act as counter-balances.

Beautiful Sailing

As we rounded Land's End the wind gradually began to build to a steady force 5 powering the boat along on a broad reach. This was beautiful sailing.... then suddenly a large gust caused the boat to broach, driving the boom deep into the water. The boat stopped dead, the spinnaker kept on going! A few moments of confused panic were followed by some hasty sail changing. The loss of our lightweight spinnaker would cost us dearly later in the race.

Tuesday morning saw the Fastnet Rock with its lighthouse protecting mariners from the treacherous rocks

slowly draw closer until it towered over our boat. We rounded with about five other boats in close proximity. The next mark lay dead upwind. For the next two hours we tacked against our near neighbours, crossing close by each other several times. As we rounded the mark a 160 mile reach lay ahead to Bishop's Rock. The major drawback with this tack was that it raised the boat's toilet about six feet above the water line, and since the toilet operated by flushing sea water it was declared out of order.

The journey to Bishop's Rock took all day Tuesday and most of Wednesday. The wind stayed in the south west, enabling us to cut a straight line between the two land marks. Temporary distractions were provided by large groups of dolphins visiting, playing around the boat, surfing off the bow-wave, disappearing under the boat then

speeding alongside again gracefully.

The Isles of Scilly came into view and soon we were picking our way through the rocks to the south of the islands. From here it was a straight line northwards to Plymouth. The boat levelled up, sails were reset, the spinnaker raised, the toilet reopened!

As we made our way to Plymouth our hopes of a very fast time faded with the wind, leaving us struggling to make progress, paying the price for tearing our sail. Our heavy-weight spinnaker hung in front of the boat like a curtain while other boats had a glorious balloon of colour leading their yachts to the finish line. Our efforts were redoubled with each member of the crew trying every trick to squeeze more speed from *Valkyrie*.

Yachts began converging from all sides into the funnel of Plymouth harbour. The light winds had bunched



The start: Over 752 miles to go!

up the fleet. The finish line was almost as busy as the start. An ecstatic crew crossed the line at 15.05, five days, 21 minutes and 21 seconds after setting out from Cowes. A place of 45th in our class and 189th overall was certainly worth celebrating, a task we took to heart in the next 24 hours!

The Civil Service Offshore Racing Club is open to all staff employed in the civil service or it agencies. Anyone interested in racing or introductory cruises should contact either Chris Stebbings 01734 416130 (evenings) or Gordon Friend GTN 273 0750.

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Glossary

Broad reach: When the wind is coming from the rear quarter of the boat – the fastest point of sail.

Boom: A long pole supporting the bottom of the sail.

Spinnaker: A large triangular sail carried opposite the mainsail.



The crew relaxing after crossing the finishing line.