

How yachtswoman was saved from ocean

10/2/1999

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Charleston, South Carolina – Giovanni Soldini navigated rough seas for nearly 24 hours to save a French sailor who capsized in a solo, around-the-world yacht race.

As dawn broke on Tuesday, Soldini found the yacht PRB, floating belly-up.

Soldini, sailing Fila, picked up a hammer on the third pass and threw it at the hull. The thud reached sleeping Frenchwoman Isabelle Autissier, who popped out of an escape hatch in the stern.

Peter Dunning, the Around Alone race co-ordinator, said Soldini “found a needle in a haystack” when the Italian yachtsman found Autissier more than a day after her 18m craft capsized in the Pacific Ocean between South America and New Zealand, the most desolate water on Earth.

The daring rescue was a perfect melding of seamanship, technology and tenacity, the (Charleston) *Post and Courier* reported.

It wasn't luck, race director Mark Schrader said. With Soldini, it was pure concentration.

The drama began on Monday with an electronic scream for help from an emergency beacon aboard Autissier's yacht.

But when the fax arrived at race headquarters in Charleston, race officials weren't too concerned because the beacons often malfunction.

“We had already had three false alarms in the race,” Dunning said.

Race officials, however, couldn't contact Autissier. Then they learnt that Autissier's computer system had conked out. That's when they began to get nervous.

Half-hour later, Dunning got a call from Autissier's shore team in France. She had phoned them, saying she was capsized.

Halfway between New Zealand and Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America, Autissier was as close to the middle of nowhere as you can get. And 65km/h winds were battering the water.

Race officials began searching for ships in the area, anybody who could help. It turned

out that Autissier's only chance would be another competitor.

Soldini was sailing farther north than Autissier and leg leader Marc Thiercelin. The Italian skipper thought the weather to the south was too violent and unpredictable.

Thiercelin was only 55km ahead of Autissier, but his boat, Somewhere, had a broken boom and he didn't think it could turn and sail into the wind.

Even though Thiercelin was closer, Soldini could get there faster than the Frenchman fighting against head winds.

It was a tense time for Schrader, who has lost a sailor on this leg of the race.

“It's just my nightmare,” Schrader said. “Losing Harry Mitchell four years ago, I didn't want to go through that again.”

Soldini, 320km to the north, didn't hesitate: “I have 55km/h of wind, and I'm not letting up

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until I have found Isabelle,” he said. Soldini's white, arrow-head-shaped yacht crashed through 9m waves at a furious pace, averaging nearly 30km/h for hours at a time.

His course took him into a vicious Southern Ocean storm that whirled clockwise. And as Soldini neared Autissier's position, the winds shifted like the sweep hand of a clock.

When Soldini spotted PRB, there was no sign of Autissier.

Soldini sailed as close as he dared, turned around and sailed back. Then he threw the hammer.

Inside PRB's hull, Autissier had been asleep, conserving energy and batteries. She hadn't expected a rescue so soon. The hammer was like an alarm clock. Autissier got up and made her way to the escape hatch, where she had a liferaft waiting. – Sapa-AP