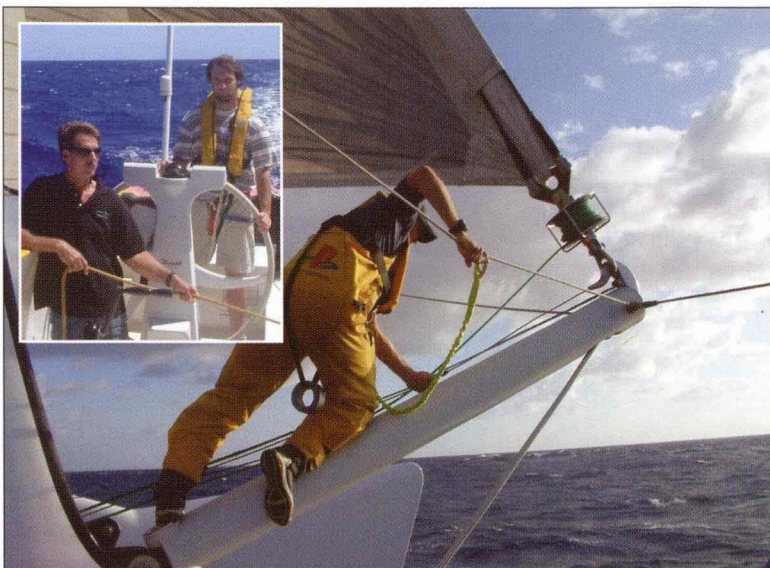


Playstation's Transatlantic Route of Discovery Record

by Nick Leggatt

The first night: The cold wind of late winter on the south coast of Spain cut through all the layers of our foul weather gear. At over 20 knots of boat speed the constant blast of spray made its way through the cuff seals and soaked into our thermal underclothes.

At the helm our skipper, Steve Fossett, peered into the blackness of the night as his 125' maxi-catamaran, *Playstation*, sliced her way through the seas. Harnessed to the deck he braced himself to correct the yacht's course when the bows dipped to the next monster wave. The three other crewmen on watch in the cockpit cast glances at the log as the hum from the daggerboards changed pitch, giving an audible indication of the acceleration of the boat. Grasping the main traveller line with both hands I



Main Pic. Out on the bowsprit of *playstation* attending to some routine maintenance.

Inset Pic. The author Nick Leggatt at the helm.

prepared to dump the mainsail if the windward hull lifted too far above the surface of the water.

25 knots... 26 knots... 27 knots. Dave

Thomson, trimming the huge 700m² gennaker, took the strain as the sheet stretched bar taut and groaned on the winch drum. With a flurry of spray, *Playstation* slammed into the back of the next wave, shaking the 150' rig from truck to toe. For a brief moment the pressure eased on the sheets and then suddenly the sails filled again.

25 knots... 26 knots... 27 knots, *Playstation* powered up again with up to 15 tons of pressure coming onto the main-sheet. Then another big wave, another sudden stop and a drenching shower of spray. Again and again the cycle repeated itself through the

night until suddenly we heard a sharp crack from the leeward hull, 60' away in the darkness. For a moment the gennaker sheet went slack in Dave's hands and then it whipped tight with such a force that the cover melted onto the winch. Scrambling to their feet the four standby watch crewmembers rushed across the heaving trampoline to investigate.

Watch captain Dave Scully was soon back with the news that the gennaker sheet block had exploded under 10 000 kg of pressure, scattering roller bearings all over the boat. Fortunately the Spectra safety stops looped through the sheave had prevented the larger pieces of the damaged block from flying off. Working quickly, the crew furled the gennaker and then unrolled the big solent jib, barely slowing *Playstation's* pace. A replacement block was fitted and the boat was soon fully powered up again, but with the crew vividly reminded about the dangers of the 'arcs of death' – those zones between the sheets where an exploding block could destroy anything in its path.

The second day: Twenty four hours at sea, 472 miles from our departure point in Cadiz and *Playstation* was settling into the more regular seas of the open Atlantic. Already the winds were beginning to take on the characteristics of the warmer, steadier Trades and the sheets were freed a little. The helmsmen were instructed to steer the optimum 'VMG running' course now. VMG running (Velocity Made Good downwind) is particularly important on a catamaran because they slow down so much when sailing directly downwind. It is a great temptation



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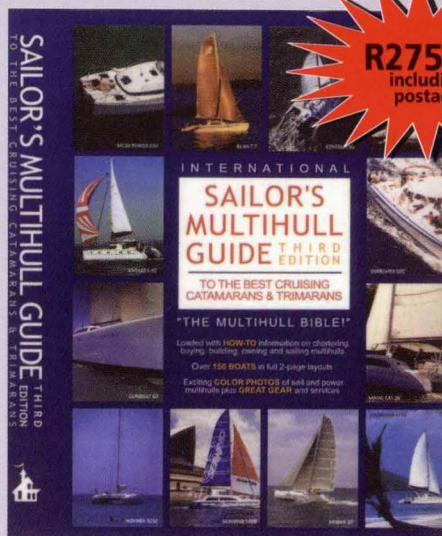
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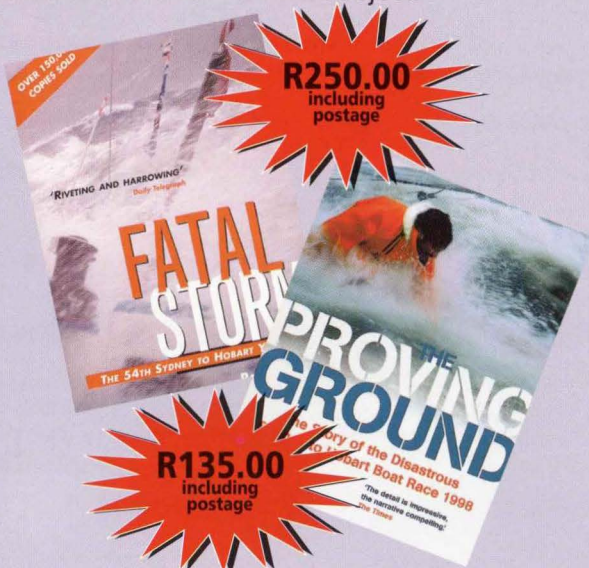


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Playstation at speed.

for the helmsman to head up, off course, to sail faster. The optimum VMG is that course which will give the boat the best balance between sailing a slow, direct course downwind and a fast, indirect course towards the same point. Two laptops in the nav station analyzed the position information received from the GPS satellite navigation system and the boat's performance information from the sailing instruments - and then gave a read out for the helmsman to help him find the best course to sail. One of the laptops displayed a graph of each helmsman's performance compared to the boat's theoretical maximum potential in the prevailing wind conditions. Driving the boat as hard as we were, the performance computer often rated the drivers at over 100%!

Just before sunrise we made out the lights of Lanzarote, one of the Canary Islands. In 1492 it had taken Columbus several days to cover the same ground that we had covered in 28 hours!

Rapidly leaving Lanzarote to port we set a course to pass between the islands of Gran Canaria and Fuerteventura. In the narrow channel the winds are accelerated by the venturi effect and gusts of 45 knots had *Playstation* storming along under heavily reefed sails. I went off watch at 08h00, while we were still to the north of Gran Canaria. Coming back on deck four hours later I found that we were already out of sight of the islands, well to the south of them!

Tucked away in the starboard hull our navigator, Brian Thompson, spoke to our weather router, Pierre Lasnier, on the Iridium satellite phone. Pierre, in his office in France, had recently e-mailed Brian the latest weather forecasts and synoptic charts and now the two of them were discussing strategy for the next leg of our route. The meteorological information was indicating that the high Canary Islands were disturbing the airflow as much as 200 miles to leeward. After careful thought it was decided that we should hold our course towards the south in the strong breeze that we had, before gybing towards the Bahamas.

Forty eight hours into



**Repairs to the mainsheet system.
Note the size of the boom!**

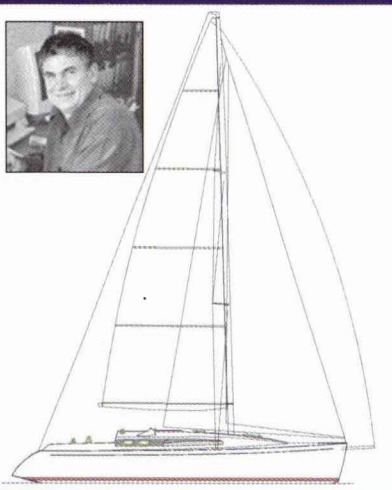
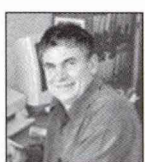
the voyage found us another 392 miles down the track towards our destination. Even 200 miles south of the islands the effect of their lee was sufficient to give us what was to be our slowest day's run of the passage, reducing our average speed to only 16.3 knots!

The fourth day: On the third day we were back up to speed, averaging close to 20 knots for 24 hours, but at the cost of a broken top batten in the mainsail. At first light the following morning all hands were called on deck, and as *Playstation* continued to power through the tropic seas the mainsail was lowered to the deck and the batten replaced. Thirteen crew members worked for the next half-hour to winch the sail back up to full hoist. Once the halyard was locked into position the standby watch was set to work inspecting the boat from bow to stern to check for other potential problems.



Skipper Steve Fossett gets in some grinding time.

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Will Howden, fresh from training for the UK Olympic Tornado sailing team, clambered out to the end of the bowsprit, secured to the jackstays with a safety harness and still wearing foul weather gear against the driving spray, even in the warmth of the sun. At the end of the sprit, 15' above the sea, he inspected the furling gear, the tack of the gennaker and the retrieval system for the furling gear. Working precariously above the waves he taped ropes that were chafing and checked their leads.

Our engineer, Mark Featherstone, was nearly 125' away in the engine room checking the watermaker and generator. To keep weight to a minimum *Playstation* only carries about 60 litres of water so it was essential to ensure that the entire system for desalinating the seawater was in perfect condition before we got too far from land.

Nearby, in the darkness of the carbon fibre tiller-flat, Mikaela von Koskull crawled around with a torch inspecting the Vectran steering cables and the rudder quadrants. With no light other than the thin beam of the torch it was like working in a coal mine during an earthquake - *Playstation* would rush ahead at nearly 30 knots, the windward hull starting to lift above the breaking crests of the waves then suddenly she would crash into the wave ahead throwing people to the deck unless they were holding on securely. In amongst the steering gear there wasn't much to hold onto without crushing one's hands so Mikaela had to rely on her expe-

rience of the boat's motion to help her anticipate when to brace herself.

The safety inspection paid off over the next 24 hours as we passed the halfway mark of the course, completing another 400-mile day's run.

Day five: Thirty miles behind the pace set by Grant Dalton's crew on *Club Med*, but sailing a very different course. *Club Med* had passed very close to lee of the Canaries in an effort to shorten the distance to be sailed across the Atlantic. On her second day she had had a very bad run but the following day, breaking clear of the islands, she had set a 24-hour world speed record under ideal conditions. To achieve a run of 626 miles in 24 hours she had headed north of the rhumbline route to the Bahamas, reducing her VMG towards her destination but getting into the record books anyway. This strategy meant that for the next few days she was forced to sail a slower, more southerly course, away from the lighter winds of the high-pressure system to her north. Our course, on the other hand, put us a good 200 miles to the south of *Club Med*'s position. Sailing the extra miles to the south had cost us for a day but now it meant that we were in a much better position to be able to sail fast angles for the remainder of the passage. Centred in the strongest part of the trade winds we completed one gybe after another to keep *Playstation* averaging over 430 miles a day until we reached San Salvador.

The eighth day: Lunch - rice and sar-



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dines. The one advantage of a transatlantic record attempt was that the weight-saving attempt at the start didn't extend to the food. Unlike a round the world passage it was deemed unnecessary to be forced to eat freeze dried food continuously. In the hot, tropical sun most of the crew spent the days on deck, out of the sweaty confines of the cavernous hulls. Eating al fresco we were relaxed as the boat continued her 20-knot race across the ocean.

Suddenly there was another load crash and the 1.5 ton boom lurched into the air. Under continuous enormous loads the Spectra sheet had parted and now the boom came up against the safety stops that were installed in case of such an occurrence. All the crewmembers on deck dropped their bowls of food and rushed to get a repair underway. Will clambered out to the end of the boom to prepare the spare mainsheet blocks, Dave collected the spare mainsheet and Simon 'Sifi'

Fisher collected the toolboxes. Dave Calvert, Pete Hogg and *Playstation's* designer, Pete Melvin, all rushed in to give a hand.

The emergency mainsheet was run through blocks to the winches and the boom was brought fully under control, and then the hydraulics were disconnected from the broken sheet. A new sheet was spliced onto the hydraulic ram with the other end spliced to the traveller. An hour after the sheet broke the hydraulic mainsheet system was fully functional again and the emergency block and tackle had been removed. *Playstation* was back on course and now more than a day ahead of *Club Med's* pace.

The finish: Nine and a half days out of Cadiz, and on the horizon San Salvador gradually became visible through the misty light of an early morning rainsquall. Everybody was on deck as we made landfall. Tim Zimmermann, author of 'The Race', the book about the round the world

race for which the maxi-catamarans were built, sat in the cockpit taking notes. Steve took the helm for the final beat to the finish. Brian kept rushing to the nav-station to check the course past the reefs on the way to the finish. Dave Scully stood near Steve calling out the wind shifts and gusts while the trimmers tried to squeeze the last few knots of speed from the sails.

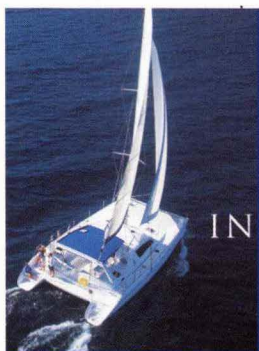
Completing 3884 miles in 9 days, 13 hrs, 30 min and 18 sec at an average speed of 16.93 knots, *Playstation* crossed the finish line off Cockburn Town to claim yet another speed sailing World Record: the fastest Trade Wind crossing of the Atlantic along the route pioneered by Columbus, more than 24 hours faster than *Club Med's* old record and considerably better than Columbus' time of 36 days from the Canary Islands! And we were still early enough to moor the boat, tidy up and get ashore in time to celebrate my birthday! ♪

The author, Nick Leggatt, has been a member of RCYC since the early 80s. He skippered charter yachts in the Caribbean and Med in the late 80s, and in the early 90s drove a Land Rover from Cape Town to North Cape, Norway, finishing in 1993. He has also worked on private yachts in the Indian Ocean. His ocean racing experience includes the Uruguay Race, a Rio Race, the Fastnet, and others. He has cruised the Atlantic aboard his own Charger 33, and spent two seasons racing 12 Metres in Europe. As a crew member aboard *Playstation* he has achieved two world speed sailing records, namely the Around Britain and Ireland passage and Transatlantic Route of Discovery.

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