

Playstation's Round Britain and Ireland Record

By Nick Leggatt

"Trim on staysail!"

Click . . . click . . . click — the clutches for the two starboard coffee grinders were engaged along with the headsail winch, and the four winch operators set to work powering up the huge sail.

"16h38. We're over the start line now. Boatspeed 18 knots. Keep high on the course, there are shallow sandbanks to port and to starboard."

Even in the freezing cold wind and light rain that had just started, the four grinders were beginning to work up a sweat.

"Hold on staysail. Main traveller up."

The grinders paused in their work just long enough to disengage the headsail sheet winch and click in to the traveller winch. As the traveller had only been let down a bit on our gybe before the start it would only need about 5 or 10 minutes of steady work to bring the car up to the centre line.

"Boatspeed 20 knots. Hold on traveller. Mainsheet in." The standby watch crew bounded 60 feet across the trampoline to the port cockpit as their colleagues on the weather side switched off the winches and connected the coffee grinders to the two manually operated hydraulic mainsheet pumps. On the leeward side the standby watch locked their coffee grinders into the port hydraulics and started to grind away — 8 people to wind in the 700kg Kuben fibre mainsail.

"Boatspeed 25 knots. Wind veering. Hold on grinding." At last the grinders were able to take a breather and take stock of our position. After less than an hour we were halfway across the Thames Estuary but still with breakers on either side of the boat marking the notorious shallows of the North Sea.



The cockpit in each hull is small and cramped, but irrespective the crew have to be vigilant at all times.

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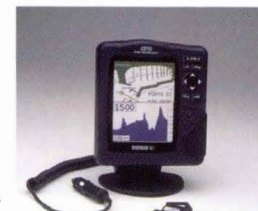
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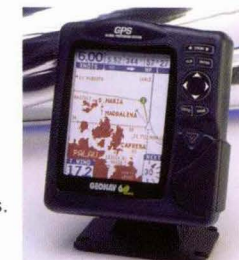
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Surfing along with a rooster-tail beginning to form.

Once we were squared away on course I made my way down to my berth as I was off watch until 20h00. My berth was right next to the casing for the daggerboard and was easier to locate by sound than by sight. The interior of *Playstation* is all black carbon fibre and there are no lights around the sleeping areas so that the off watch crew cannot be disturbed. Lying in my bunk I listened to the high pitched hum as the daggerboard vibrated at high speeds, and then the abrupt thumps as the water pressure changed when a particularly big wave hit us.

Steve Fossett's Round Britain and Ireland record, set in 1994 aboard his trimaran *Lakota*, had been broken six weeks earlier by the 110ft catamaran *Maiden*. Now it was our turn to try and regain the record aboard his 125ft cat *Playstation*. For over a month Steve had been in contact with his meteorologist, Luc Trullemans, in Belgium, looking for a weather window. What we needed was a big, slow moving low pressure that would pass directly over England. Leaving just ahead of the system, Luc reckoned that we would be able to reach up the North Sea with SE winds backing to the NE as we sailed north of the depression, around the Shetland Islands. The trick was to time our departure so that the wind did not veer too much, too soon, forcing us to beat, but also we needed a system that was not too far south when we arrived off the islands, which would have left us becalmed between two different weather systems! Perhaps a tall order — but that was only half of the story as we then wanted the weather to pass through so that we could pick up the NW — W winds behind the depression for the run down the Irish coast.

Just a few days earlier Luc had spotted a promising looking situation developing out in the Atlantic. It appeared to fulfill all our requirements, though there was always the worry that ultimately the weather would change too rapidly and at the end we would find ourselves becalmed, or even beating, in the English Channel as we approached the finish line.

Alerted to the possibility of regaining the record Steve contacted Dave Scully who was already preparing the boat in Plymouth. Dave then went ahead and started to gather a crew together. Having sailed aboard the boat in the Med during the summer I had kept in contact with Dave and let him know that I was now in England. A short time later I received a rather enigmatic email from him asking if I would like to do a bit more sailing on the boat "around England".

With my brief previous experience on the boat I had certainly developed a taste for maxi cat sailing so I wasted no time in getting down to Plymouth — arriving there at night while the permanent crew, Dave, Quentin Dimmer, Mark Featherstone and Simon Cotter, worked at getting her race ready. All unnecessary heavy equipment was removed and provisions for 14 crew for four days were loaded.



Playstation, like other maxi-cats, are absolutely awesome whatever angle they are viewed from

Eventually Steve arrived with the boat's designer, Gino Morelli, and another American crewmember, Howie Hamlin. Keeping in

constant telephone contact with Luc it was eventually confirmed that our best chance of making the record would see us leaving from Ramsgate on the afternoon of Sunday 20 October.

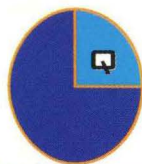
A few more crew members arrived on the boat on Saturday for the overnight delivery to Ramsgate. We made a brief diversion to Dover to pick up the final members, bringing our total to 14. The others included Chris Tibbs, the navigator who would remain in constant contact throughout the passage with Luc, Fraser Brown and Mikaela von Koskull, who had both been aboard *Maiden* on her record-setting voyage, Mitch Booth, Dave Thomson, and Richard James.

19h45. Time to get up for my watch, kitted up in full-length thermals and fleece, drysuit and gloves. All crew members were required to wear lifejackets and harness at all times as well as a fanny pack containing a personal man overboard transponder, two torches, flares and a knife.

Making my way past the twilight world of the nav station I could see from the instruments that we were now broad reaching at 28 knots in 26 knots of wind, somewhere off the low lying coast around Great Yarmouth.

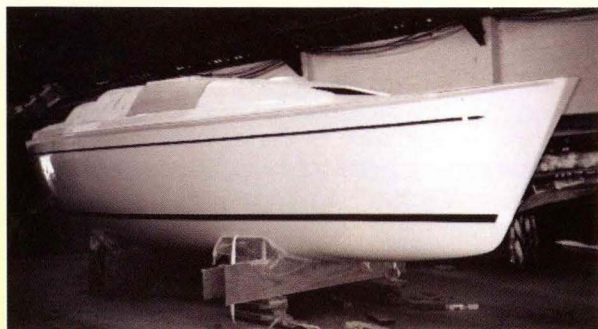
On deck a constant fine spray streamed over the bows and into the cockpit. It was still raining and the occasional wave would blast through the trampoline, smashing solidly into the aft beam. Timing the waves carefully the crew coming on watch clipped onto the jackline and then ran, one at a time, across to the lee hull to get a steaming bowl of pasta for dinner. After gulping our food down we then ran the gauntlet of crossing the trampoline to get back to our workstations in the windward hull.

Most of the helming on our watch was shared between Gino and Fraser, while Quentin and I tended the sheets. One person was always designated to hold on to the main traveller and one to hold the headsail sheet. Traveller and sheet were never cleated at sea as the danger of capsizing at 28 knots was constant. As the wind increased one of the crew would keep his hand on the dump valve for the mainsheet hydraulics, though if the hull started to fly we would first blow off the traveller, dropping it as much as 20' and then spending the next 10 minutes winding it back on!



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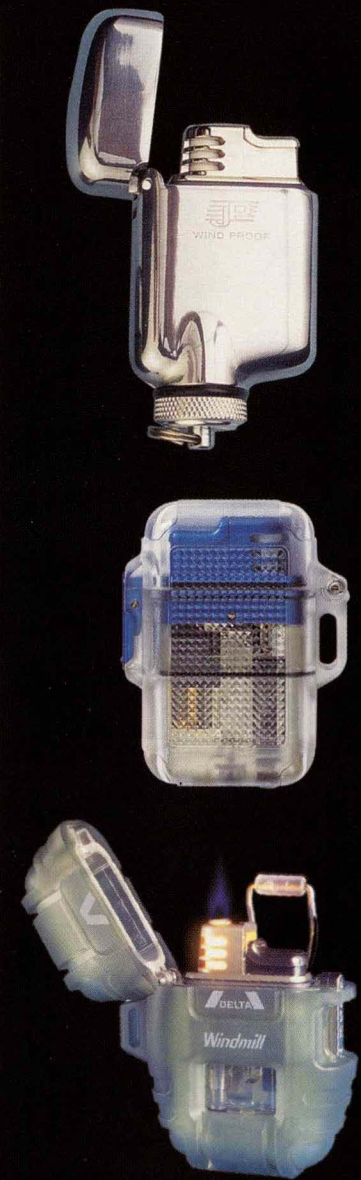
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By the end of the first night watch we were seeing the first of the North Sea oilrigs. Still dodging the shallows to the south of the Dogger Bank this was a new obstacle. Close to each rig there would also be a rig tender that usually weaved an erratic course around the sea making it difficult for Chris to track them on the radar, especially as it continued to rain.

00h00. On to the standby watch. Scramble down to the galley to make coffee and soup for the oncoming watch. One of the great things about sailing a maxi cat is that food preparation is done on a relatively level surface. That is until all the cups have been filled with boiling water, when a strong gust of wind sends the windward hull soaring into the air. On deck the crew blow off the traveller and headsail sheet, the lines running out so fast that the covers melt! In the galley there is soup everywhere but now it is time to get on deck and put a reef in the main.

Towards the end of this watch the wind started to ease and head us a bit, as predicted, but it meant getting out on deck and shaking the reef out again. With the full main up we noticed that one of the full length battens was coming out so, once again we eased the halyard and Dave climbed out onto the end of the boom, where he forced the batten back into the pocket and then lashed it in place before rehoisting the sail yet again!

Our final duty as the standby watch from midnight until 04h00 was to prepare the porridge for breakfast once all the sheets and sails had been tended to.

Only 12 hours into the passage we were already on the same latitude as Scotland, north of the Dogger Bank, and slightly to the east of the rhumb line course to the Shetlands, in anticipation of the wind backing to the north of east.

04h00 to 08h00. I slept soundly through my off watch period as we continued to race along at over 20 knots through the oilfields.

08h00. Back on watch. Still raining but as the day wore on the wind dropped to under 20 knots and by midday it had just gone into the NE quadrant. We rolled up the staysail and unfurled the larger solent jib to help us work our way more to windward. Every hour we sheeted the sail in a little harder as the wind continued to head us until, suddenly, the sail tore from leech to luff and there was a mad scramble to get it down on deck before it flogged itself completely to pieces. Boatspeed dropped to seven knots for a time while we unrolled the staysail again and then dragged the solent over the main beam to the central trampoline, where five crew members promptly set to work sowing it back together. In a few hours the sail was repaired and re-hoisted, boatspeed climbed back to 15 knots in 15 knots of easterly breeze and we were back on



The author at the end of Playstation's massive boom.

track.

20h00. Back on night watch. We were almost 60°N on a freezing autumn night but at least the clouds were breaking up as we had passed to the north of the frontal systems accompanying the low pressure system. As the sky cleared and the full moon began to shine we had some glorious night sailing though we were nervous about the record as the wind was going well into the NE and dropping more and more. Were we too far north of the centre of the depression or were we sailing too slowly to make the Shetlands before the wind backed all the way into the NW?

There were fewer rigs to contend with now but our next obstacle was to be the fishing boats working the shallow waters off the islands. Approaching Muckle Flugga, the northernmost point of the route, we were hit by yet another rain squall with shifty winds, which caused us to complete a succession of quick tacks before the wind died in the wake of the squall. For a few hours we anxiously wondered if the wind would fill in again and get us over 10 knots so that we could keep ahead of the record pace but it turned out that Luc's original prediction had been quite accurate and we increased the pace soon after rounding Muckle Flugga in the early hours of the morning.

The next 24 hours saw some fantastic sailing as we blasted off on a reach under the maximum sail area: full main, gennaker and staysail. With winds of 25 - 30 knots the boat was fully powered up and regularly surfing at over 30 knots. Typically of post-frontal conditions we experienced persistent strong winds interspersed with gale force gusts as a succession of hailstorms lashed the boat, at one point leaving a thin layer of ice on the cockpit sole.

Sometime after 03h00 on 23 October we experienced our strongest gusts of wind - over 40 knots. Under full sail Playstation raced along at 36 knots while we struggled to roll up the gennaker and reef the main. All day we ran down the west coast of Ireland, past Inishear and Mizen Head and out into the Celtic Sea.

That night, in the middle of the Celtic Sea, the wind suddenly died away to a flat calm just as the gennaker sheet broke, the

pump on the heads broke and we got a fish trap line jammed in the daggerboard casing, preventing us from raising or lowering the daggerboard for the rest of the passage. Checks of the weather fax and forecasts as well as phone calls to Luc confirmed that we were now on the ridge between "our" low pressure system and the next one and that to stay ahead of the game we would have to tack to the south to pick up the new breeze as it filled in across the English Channel.

Overnight, and well into the next morning, our speed dropped well off the record pace as we made slow progress on what appeared to be a poor heading on

the chart, but by lunch time we were about to round the Isles of Scilly. Through the afternoon we struggled against the strong currents between the Bishop Rock and Land's End but by nightfall, approaching Eddystone Lighthouse the wind finally began to fill in from the SW so that we could re-hoist the gennaker and get the boat up over 20 knots again. All night we had all hands on deck as we did a succession of gybes to keep the speed up and keep us clear of the busy Channel shipping lanes. We certainly surprised a number of container ship captains as we overtook them in the darkness!

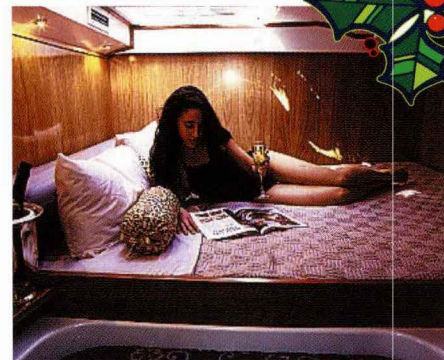
As it got lighter the next morning it

became apparent that the increasingly heavy rain was also bringing stronger winds which were keeping us well up on our target speeds. All hands worked frantically for the last few miles, reefing down as a squall passed over, shaking out the reef as the sky cleared, gybing as we approached shoal waters, reefing again, etc.

At last, in pouring rain, at 08h47, we crossed the finish line off Ramsgate, completing the 1787-mile course in 4 days 16 hours 9 minutes and 36 seconds for an average speed of 15.93 knots, and breaking the record by approximately 55 minutes. ⚓



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