



# Skip Novak

Racing and cruising are poles apart these days. While racing has become more extreme, cruising is now arguably too easy

**I** suppose we can divide sailing into two convenient categories – racing and cruising. Decades ago the two were more or less intertwined activities on board cruiser-racers, which still exists to some extent at club level. However, it is a fact that the two taken on their own have significantly diverged with respect to the physical ‘work’ put in.

When I grew up, cruiser-racers were really the only show in town. We are talking about boats from 30-50ft. You raced them at the weekend, either round the cans, or maybe up to another port town on Lake Michi-

gan, and then cruised them back to base. The family cruised up and down the lake for extended summer holidays. They were liveaboard boats.

There was not much difference in handling whether racing or cruising as the functions were the same, only differing in intensity and concentration.

This status quo continued through the Seventies and then stripped-out racers made their appearance. These were argu-

ably unfit for cruising, largely from a down below comfort point of view. Racing these boats through various rule and class permutations would become more and more athletic, culminating in what we see today in extreme racing genres where body armour and clever location and rescue devices for safety are de rigueur.

Likewise, sitting beer can in hand while telling stories on the weather rail has gone by the board. There is not much chance of holding onto anything while your legs and arms are extended as ballast through the lifelines in horrendous contortions – not my cup of tea. To race seriously today you have to be reasonably fit and be able to suffer – if not gladly. This is a logical evolution with no argument.

At the other end of the scale true cruising boats, now firmly separated from the cruiser-racers of old, need less physical input than they did as a function of not only clever systems (welcome), but also powered assist sail control systems (many suspect).

And all these years I have been living under the impression that sailing, including the cruising kind, was if not ‘sport,’ then certainly an active pastime. Otherwise, why leave home? Current trends in design and fit-out seem to argue for taking the home with you with its conveniences and amenities.

I admit to a primitive nature. I still enjoy grinding a winch until out of breath. Handing sails, lines and running gear is a joy, not a burden. When it’s hot I enjoy sweating it out and when it’s cold I welcome the biting feel. I like to think I sail in the environment that is thrown up at me, rather than altering that experience with unneeded distractions.

Now, though, if you are really clever, you can make sail and get from port to port with little physical effort at all, as long as all the buttons function.

Could this be the reason why committed racing sailors of today rarely go cruising? Is it too tame? I mean, can you imagine the likes of Grant Dalton pushing a button to furl up the jib on a 40-footer? Is there something missing in the cruising formula? Something that many people do not realise they have lost?

In addition to the inevitable march of technological solutions to everything, the argument, of course, is that as we all get older – and I certainly fall into this category – making it easy keeps us on the water. If you suffer from a physical infirmity, these enhancements can be critical to participating at all.

But for otherwise fit individuals it is the very nature of staying physically active that keeps us agile, supple and ‘young’, at least in our own imagination. May I suggest that exertion and an occasional struggle can be a positive thing?

Well, I will stick to my guns here – the day I have to push a button to trim the jib is the day I quit sailing. If you catch me out, shoot me.

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