



# SKIP NOVAK

IS THERE A LACK OF OVERSIGHT ON THE CLIPPER ROUND THE WORLD RACE YACHTS? SKIP NOVAK THINKS MANNING IMPROVEMENTS COULD BE IN ORDER

It came as a welcome development that the Clipper Round the World Race decided during the stopover in Fremantle in Western Australia to sign on a second professional sailor as the first mate. Clearly, pressure was brought to bear. Three deaths in the last two events and several groundings, recently one with the total loss of the vessel [*Greenings*] is, no matter how you cut it, not a good scoresheet.

What started as a rally many years ago in the wake of Chay Blyth's Global Challenge, the Clipper Race has taken on the sole mantle of the 'amateur's around the world race.' In light of these tragic events it is easy for pundits to put the boot in, but the reality is that this race is otherwise a great success, evidenced by the uptake of people willing to engage in what is surely a great maritime adventure. I would never gainsay them.

However, it was time (you could say all too late, in hindsight) to reassess the structure of how it all works, in spite of what appears to be the thorough preparation the teams go through.

## 'AMATEURS ARE PRONE TO MAKING MISTAKES'

Or do they? Well, the fact is in view of this being an amateur event, you cannot expect the paying crews to put much more time in before the event than the compulsory four weeks – or the event wouldn't work. After all, this is a business.

No, I think the critique should not be on the preparation phase before the race, but rather on what had been a lack of oversight on board during the race.

Never having followed the Clipper Race that closely I was frankly surprised to learn that there was only one true professional on board – the skipper. This was apparently mitigated by at least another one of the amateur crew taking the two-week coxswains' course that focuses on safety at sea. This sounds terribly similar to the 'zero to hero' Yachtmaster programmes that have had their detractors. The idea was that this crew member with his two week coxswains' course behind him could take over and possibly lead the crew in the event the skipper is incapacitated or worse, like rescuing if overboard. That

sounds like a big ask to me. I would have gone one better than the organisers by recommending that each yacht have a skipper plus two other professional sailors who have some serious sea miles under their belts. This would provide for an experienced sailor as watch leader, no matter what watch system you use.

If cost to the organisation is an issue, surely there are enough youngish people qualified with experience where they might even be engaged by the organisers for free, as this would look good on a careerist's CV. When I look at a sailing CV for my crews on the *Pelagic* expeditions my eyes always glaze over reading the lengthy list of certificates all the candidates have nowadays. Instead, I go straight to the sea miles and a candidate's record of races and deliveries. Enough miles? 25,000 is very light; 50,000 you can talk to me; 100,000 is more like it. By that point you can assume they have seen a few things at sea and have dealt with them.

### Depth of experience

The point is, given the fact that many of the amateur crew are of a certain age and maybe not fit as they should be without the depth of experience that only many sea miles can give you, we have to assume they will often be prone to making mistakes, some life threatening. Things that come to mind are standing in vulnerable positions (leeward of booms, hands on blocks, standing in bights of sheets), not being able to anticipate wave motion, clipping on in the wrong places with respect to heel angles – just to name a few. These sorts of mistakes are rare with experienced sailors. The only way to get around this is to have a knowing pair of eyes at all times looking out for potential accidents. This is quite impossible with only one qualified person on board.

Undoubtedly the Clipper Race has become more sophisticated. It is sailed on, let's describe them as, 'sporty' boats compared with the fleet in the early editions. And it is surely more competitive. It is no longer enough just to 'get around'. This is an understandable evolution. It is never good to turn the clock back on an ocean race that does have its place, but these manning enhancements to keep pace with the expectations of the crews will not go amiss. ■