



SKIP NOVAK

THE PROSPECT OF FOILING TECHNOLOGY TRICKLING DOWN TO CRUISING YACHTS IS EXCITING, BUT IT WILL HAVE ITS DOWNSIDES, SAYS SKIP

Flipping through the pages of the current *Seahorse* magazine, a specialist yacht design monthly, you can be left in no doubt about the future, which is here now: all manner of water craft flying through the air on foils. They range from the gymnastic Moths to the Olympic Nacra 17s, from Vendée Globe IMOCA 60s to the maxi multihulls attempting to set new records for the non-stop round the world record.

There is no turning the clock back on this evolution, which is nothing short of awe-inspiring. Foiling is not a new idea, but modern materials have made getting airborne, or at least partially airborne, a reality on all kinds of yachts.

The next America's Cup will be sailed in monohulls, harking back to an earlier era. When that was announced by Emirates Team New Zealand it was met with enthusiasm by traditionalists – until they read further down the page that these monohulls will dispense with lead ballast entirely and be fully foiled 70-footers able to capsize.

'AT 15 KNOTS YOU HAD BETTER BE ALERT, AT 20 ON TENTERHOOKS'

It is all about speed, of course. We have been trying to go faster across the water since Jason went to sea in search of the Golden Fleece. Although not immediately obvious,

speed while passagemaking enhances safety simply by reducing exposure to heavy or catastrophic weather.

During my Whitbread days doing ten knots was fast sailing and surfing to 15 a wild ride. At those speeds we were vulnerable to weather that was passing over us and therefore encountered much more heavy weather and squalling on the backsides of fronts than the Volvo and Vendée boats do today. They have the ability to ride with weather systems for thousands of miles and, if need be run away from a 'ball-buster'.

During The Race in 2001, a circumnavigation event for unlimited maxi multihulls, we rode only two weather systems from the South Atlantic to the Cook Strait between the North and South islands of New Zealand,

and then another one that took us to Cape Horn. This was a safe way to sail through the Southern Ocean, no doubt.

Therefore, the old case can again be made (in justifying the outlandish costs) that innovations trickle down to cruising yachts from that pinnacle of yacht design, the America's Cup. It is already happening. Cruising concepts with swing keels, foils and sliding stabilisers across the stern are now in vogue, at least on paper. Cruising catamarans are getting souped up. Let's face it, the designers could hardly help themselves and the market awaits.

However, there must come a point when cruising – in the implied sense of the word – that the faster you go the more dangerous it will become. Eight to ten knots on a mid-size cruiser is efficient and still relaxing. Objects come up over the horizon, whether on visual or radar, in a time frame that can be anticipated and dealt with.

At 15 knots on up you had better be on alert and at 20 you will be on tenterhooks. And sailing like this in the middle of the ocean is one thing; in the congested waters of Europe or inshore pretty much anywhere you will quickly become a potentially lethal guided (or possibly unguided) missile.

Cruisers have always tried to sail faster, but the reality of speed on tap will have to be squared in the minds of the crew. Judgement calls will have to be made to slow down and this will play a big part in safe sailing and passagemaking. In a way, this means the level of expertise required to sail these speedy cruisers will need to be at a higher level.

There is another side to what will surely become a debate, in that watching the world go by at a leisurely pace is, indeed, an enjoyable pastime. A good comparison is between cycling and hiking. The cyclist has to pay attention all of the time, the hiker less so and therefore will take in more of his surroundings.

I remember on deliveries we were often content to sail at four to five knots, a good trolling speed for catching tuna and also good for cooling off by hanging, like shark bait, to the end of a rope trailed astern. The ocean has a lot to offer, but at 20 knots you will miss most of it.

For safety's sake and also your own enjoyment of simply being on the ocean, choosing the appropriate time to jump on and off the foils will be critical. ■