

SKIP NOVAK

PRACTICAL SKILLS ARE STILL KEY FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO WORK IN THE MARINE INDUSTRY, BUT THESE DAYS FORMAL TRAINING IS NECESSARY TOO

My son Luca took his final high school matriculation exams in November. He's not university material, at least not yet. "I hate sitting in a classroom," he says, which is a chip off the old block.

When asked what he wants to do in life he has often told me that he would like to take over my Pelagic business. Well, I was one of those boat bums from the 1970s, winging it all the way with no plan whatsoever. One thing led to another and here we are. And I explain to him, often, that "times have changed my boy..."

I have had many similar conversations with young people who'd like to 'get into yachting,' where they think they can take their STCW basic safety training, maybe even do some RYA courses to start off, but otherwise have no manual skills at all. Yes, you might get a job on a superyacht, but you'll be doing plenty of hosing down, cleaning, polishing, making beds, napkin folding and serving drinks and canapes for a long time... or forever.

Anyone who has skippered real sailing yachts – I mean those of, say, 100ft or less – will know full well that the sailing side, providing you have a small-boat background, is the easiest part, ditto the piloting and navigation which is the hinge pin for getting your licenses. But when it comes to the engineering on board – fixing engines, pumps, hydraulics, electrics, electronics and more, all of which are becoming increasingly complex – there is no substitute for a solid technical college education or deep manual skills training before going to sea.

Then you need the sea miles, away from marina services, to experience all the failures with this technology and learn how to bodge it all temporarily. If you can come to the table with that background you'll be of immediate value and climb the career ladder quickly.

This discussion always reminds me of the wave of immigrants into the American 'Corinthian' yachting scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most had sailed up from New Zealand, Australia or South Africa or across the pond from the UK. I met a few in the Great Lakes as an

impressionable teenager and many of the rest during the 1972 Transatlantic from Bermuda to Bayona, Spain, when I was 20. They had colourful nicknames; Fat Rabbit, Flying Nun, Wharf Rat, Thirsty, Bruce the Goose, Jocko, Tom the Pom and Frizzle to name a few that are printable.

I was enamoured with their continuous and amusing repartee; they could all sing a song, tell stories, drink hard and, more to the point, could fix things. The young Americans of that era who were in that world, and there were a few, were mainly from well-to-do set ups, destined for the family business in the city when they eventually threw in the professional sailing towel. The immigrants were working men, returning colonists (at least when in Europe), who took over by storm and facilitated what was an exceptional travelling roadshow.

In that era of ocean racing it was a continuous circuit on boats that were livable and went everywhere on their own bottoms. In 1973 I took a job as a rigger and

fitter at Ross Yacht Service in Clearwater, Florida. This was a focal point for many IOR yachts prepping for the Southern Ocean Racing Conference (SORC). After a six week series ending in Nassau, the next stop was Miami for the race to Montego Bay. And then, like migratory birds, we sailed north for the Annapolis Newport Race, then the Bermuda Race (biannually) ending with the Marblehead Halifax Race. It was only a skip across the Atlantic and you could be there by Cowes Week. The Skagen Race was possible, with this whole circus finishing with the Middle

Sea Race before it was time to head back to Florida.

The Sydney Hobart, the Cape Town to Rio Race and the Transpac to Hawaii were occasional side shows.

It was a long time ago. Some of these immigrants returned 'down under,' but many stayed and were by and large absorbed into the marine industry. A few married boat owners' daughters, and never looked back.

Take note, all would-be careerists, these successes can still hold true today, but formal training in manual skills will give you a leg up. All food for thought when choosing a life at sea. ■

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