



# SKIP NOVAK

WORKING ON YACHTS AS A TEENAGER SET THE SCENE FOR SKIP'S ADVENTURES WORLDWIDE, BUT TIMES FOR YOUNGSTERS HAVE CHANGED, HE LAMENTS

**I**f any readers are tired of my 'back in the day' stories please send a letter to the editor. Possibly my advanced age is to blame, and realising I might never get a chance 'to foil.'

What brought on this reminiscence was a recent experience putting my 15-year-old son, Luca, to work during the annual *Pelagic Australis* refit in Cape Town. Having lost his monthly allowance through a catalogue of misdemeanours, he was hard up for cash.

I told him it is about time to realise what a proper day's work is like and he would get paid the minimum wage in South Africa (which is not a lot). His first job was to chip off galvanising slag on 115m of our anchor chain on the hard. As he sat on the concrete in the hot sun with hammer and cold chisel, I told him he reminded me of those pictures of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island breaking rocks, which was not appreciated. Plus, he was missing a day in the surf, a passion that has taken over his life. This was somewhat of a reluctant trial for him.

I remember my early days in Chicago, working with my Dad (definitely unpaid) in the boatyard on the north branch of the Chicago River on spring weekends. I must have been eight or nine. He would hand me a piece of sandpaper and point to a hatch cover from our 40ft

racer/cruiser and remind me again: "Sand with the grain." With a real job to hand, I felt very important.

At lunch time we would sit on the old wooden pier eating our Swiss cheese and salami sandwiches on rye, talking about the sailing season to come. I cannot recall that I had any other 'activities' that conflicted. This is all we did on spring weekends.

By the time I was 14, I was spending the entire three-month American summer holiday as a liveaboard in Belmont Harbour on Chicago's north side. There was a gang of us – we called ourselves 'the Harbour Rats'. We only saw our parents at weekends and, to this day, we still wonder what exactly they thought we were doing during the week, much of which is unrepeatable to this audience.

However, on the positive side, we each had a stable of

boats that we worked on during the week and prepped for the weekend's racing, such as washing the decks and topsides (the soot was horrendous, well before the Clean Air Act) with a bucket and lanyard as we were on mooring buoys. The interior also needed a pull-through.

Putting ice on board on Saturday morning and often bringing the boats off the hook and on to the dock was the best part of the job. We even shared a 'hooka rig' for cleaning the bottoms. It was entrepreneurial – sort of a modern-day boat valeting service without the crisp white uniforms, the fancy branded van and pressure washers.

On our own time, we fooled around repairing old outboards, fixing sails and rigging, messing around with dodgy petrol engines in deep bilges (luckily no one was asphyxiated or immolated) and generally enjoyed being Harbour Rats ready to lend a hand to whatever needed doing. We were tolerated by the club members and I suppose at the same time feared because of what we might get up to next. This freedom and self-reliance at a relatively young age set the scene for my future wanderings worldwide, without question.

It seems improbable that what was an idyllic set of circumstances for a teenager could be repeated in modern times. Firstly, liveaboards are hardly allowed in marinas, let alone minors on their own. In any event, they wouldn't be able to roam free given the security systems in place.

And work ad hoc on boats as a 14- or 15-year-old? The legalities of child labour laws would make what we enjoyed a non-starter, not to mention letting a kid loose with a variety of power tools. Health and safety would certainly have something to say about that. And insurance issues – oh gawd!

The fact is the argument here is somewhat moot as young people today have little or no free time even to contemplate such a situation. The standards and stresses of education, underpinned by organised activities, have all but scuppered any form of underage entrepreneurship, let alone an engagement in a part-time job to earn a crust.

As I write, there is still six weeks to go before *Pelagic Australis* sets sail back to the Falklands. There are plenty of Saturdays and Sundays left for Luca to get stuck in and earn the money for that new surfboard he is dreaming about. At least he has the incentive. ■

## 'WE FOOLED AROUND AND ENJOYED BEING HARBOUR RATS'