



SKIP NOVAK

THIS YEAR'S FASTNET RACE TRIGGERS MEMORIES OF THE 1985 EVENT - AND SUBSEQUENT COURT CASE - WHEN SIMON LE BON'S *DRUM* LOST HER KEEL

The other day I was walking along The Strand and on into Fleet Street in London for no other reason than to find the expensive clinic that was dishing out that new and expensive vaccination for shingles – recommended by my GP given my age and stress levels (anxiety brought on from owning two boats continually trying to sink themselves).

The landscape seemed vaguely familiar, but when passing the Royal Courts of Justice on my left I twigged. The last time I was in this neck of the woods was back in 1988 when I was required to appear on behalf of the owners of *Drum* (Simon LeBon and co) in their lawsuit against the fabricator of that famous aluminium keel that fell off in the 1985 Fastnet Race.

There was a pub across the street we all retired to after the event in order to fortify ourselves. Or was it before? I can't quite remember.

The pub was not to be found, which was strange given the captive audience of endless winners and losers

emerging from across the road.

In 1988 when I walked into the courtroom and sat down awaiting my interrogation by the defence counsel, I was shocked to see that

every barrister, every barrister's assistant and the judge himself had a copy of 'One Watch At A Time', my magnum opus on *Drum's* Whitbread Race campaign. I can only assume these were all remaindered copies. Every book was festooned with Post-it notes which made me start to sweat.

In his opening statements our barrister fumbled while 'untying the mooring lines' and it was clear he knew not bow from stern. I thought, if he continues like this we will be holed and sunk at the dock. You soon realise why these people are highly paid because within minutes he seemed to have an epiphany, trimmed his sails sharply and charged off at speed down the race course.

Then the defence had a go. First up on the witness stand was our project manager. This was lucky for me. Almost

immediately his head fell over on his left shoulder after the first barrage of questioning by the barrister attacking his integrity. The battering continued and he sank lower in stature with every question until he almost disappeared behind the lectern.

Like him, I had no formal qualifications in the marine industry other than a skipper's ticket, so I saw it coming. When the barrister asked for mine I raised myself up on my toes slightly, stuck my chest out and said, quite calmly: "25 years of offshore experience". This seemed to do the trick. The rest was attempting to recall the chronology as the pages of 'One Watch At A Time' were thumbed through to corroborate my explanations.

As is often, the ending was anticlimactic as the case was settled before lunch by the solicitors doing a deal in the corridor and all was adjourned. As I was filing out I received a request from Judge French to sign his copy of my book – an accolade indeed. At that point I'm sure our team did retire to that pub.

You could say this was a watershed event in yacht construction. That keel failure was a calamity that was a bridge too far.

Remember the problems with rudders, structures and all kinds of equipment during 1979 Fastnet Race? The information given to boatbuilders and fabricators of parts by the avant garde of yacht designers of the day was sketchy at the best of times. The keel drawings for *Drum* merely said 'all welds will be structural', but there was no welding schedule attached.

The fabricator claimed he had no idea what or what for he was actually building and that was his defence. He had no case, but our designer was criticised for a lack of technical information on his drawings.

In any event the *Drum* story was definitely a wake up call from that point forward. Sound engineering came to the fore but the irony remains that as offshore racing yachts become more radical, in spite of better engineering and more reliable composite materials, the safety factors are lowered in order stay competitive.

So, keels keep on falling off and things keep breaking – and that is the nature of the game. But I will never forget that big bang and the immediate roll over. Best not to be repeated too often. ■

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