



# SKIP NOVAK

ODDBALL PROJECTS AND ROUND THE WORLD HEROICS... SKIP RELISHES THE 30-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF A GREAT WHITBREAD RACE

When I started this column more than five years ago I began with a nostalgic tour down the Hamble River, which seemed like a good place to start – so much yachting history, so many stories fuelled by so many pints downed in all those pubs.

Well, we are back there again. On 31 August, the King and Queen, the yachtsman's favourite pub, was host to an ad hoc reunion of Whitbread crews from the 1989/90 event. Instigated by Howard Gibbons, the project manager of Tracy Edwards' *Maiden* campaign, the idea began with a simple mailshot to a few of the likely suspects in the area and snowballed from there.

In the 1989 event the first all-female *Maiden* crew, along with *Fazisi*, billed as the first ever Soviet entry, were the two media hooks. They were oddball projects, to be sure, but both established themselves as iconic stories in round the world race history.

The images for me are unforgettable: Tracy's girls in bikinis giving the bottom a wet sand; Soviets running around amusing (and likewise impressing) the locals as we struggled to finish the build of *Fazisi* at Hamble Yacht Services after flying the hull in from Soviet Georgia in an Antonov 24.

Our mission was to get to the start line against all the odds, not to mention without a lien on the boat.

As you would expect, the Soviets were busy chasing the *Maiden* girls around the hard, along with all the other crews, and some success was achieved.

If it hadn't been for Laurie Smith's *Rothmans* ditching their keel for a better design, *Fazisi* would have not been able to enter. As one Kiwi crew said on the dock as we bolted the tiny fin on to the hull: "If this thing rates, we are in trouble!"

Well, we didn't rate and luckily acquired *Rothmans*' old keel, which was twice the size, and bolted that on.

Of course, the serious players such as Peter Blake's team on *Steinlager 2*, Grant Dalton's *Fisher & Paykel* and

Pierre Fehlman's *Merit* were in a different league.

Remember, those were still the days of the International Offshore Rule, when a maxi could resemble a banana or a Sherman tank and still somehow rate the same. Those three and the other seven maxis were the big beasts of the event. Many of the crews were paid to go sailing, but most were still not.

These were the nascent days of true professionalism in sailing, bridging the gap between the cornucopia of boats manned by sometimes questionable crews and the box rule boats which looked the same to a general audience, but were not. It eventually evolved into the one-designs in recent editions of the Volvo Ocean Race.

But no matter how you cut it, the 1989 edition was still more carnival than professional sport. And Hamble village was where it all happened during that very special summer.

The Hamble reunion was basically a night in the pub. Nostalgic speeches were not given nor other entertainments laid on other than Rick Tomlinson's rolling photo and video gallery on a modest screen in a corner. I am sure we were all delighted to see ourselves appear and gulped at how we looked 30 years ago.

Although the crowd was British in the main, people flew in from Sweden, Seattle, yours truly from Cape Town (with other business tacked on) and many points on the continent. It was a big ask for pub night, but it goes to show how strongly these major yachting events – which took a year of your life – can linger in our memories.

If you were around in the day, you'll well remember the names of some of the boats: *Creighton's Naturally*, *Fazisi*, *Fisher & Paykel*, *Liverpool Enterprise*, *Maiden*, *Merit*, *NCB Ireland*, *Rothmans*, *Rucanor TriStar*, *Satquote British Defender*, *Steinlager 2* and *The Card*.

I suppose the major difference between then and now was how somewhat civilised we had become. The heavy lifting was left to a few of the sons of Whitbread sailors who came along. I wouldn't say we are now boring, by any means – there was plenty of humour and innuendo, straight from the weather rail.

But the days of six pints as standard on a typical pub night were a thing of the distant past. I nursed two for the four-hour gig. True professionalism indeed. ■

## 'THE SOVIETS WERE BUSY CHASING GIRLS AROUND THE HARD'