

# SKIP NOVAK

HOW HARD SHOULD YOU PUSH IN A RACE AS COMPETITIVE AS THE VENDÉE GLOBE?  
THERE MUST COME A POINT WHEN IT'S TIME TO BACK OFF...

I am a lousy sports fan. If I can't actually do it, I'm ambivalent. However, I do tune in to the FIFA World Cup and Rugby World Cup finals and, as a Yank, the Super Bowl, for no other reason than to arm myself for the Monday morning conversations downstream. Best not to be totally ignorant of any important world event, whether it be famine, war, an election or sport.

Same goes for yacht racing. The amount of sailing news on various forums is overwhelming and I'm wondering how people can take this all in and still function with a job and family to support. I will watch the actual America's Cup, though to follow the whole story from the end of the last one is too time consuming. And the Volvo Ocean Race is also too long and drawn out to keep me interested. Not so the Vendée Globe, however, as it is short enough to capture even my attenuated attention span.

And being based in Cape Town was reason enough to stay tuned in; we had four Vendée 'visitors'.

A post by Charlie Dalin certainly caught my eye in early December. At the time he was the race leader: "I am discovering something I have never had to do before," said Dalin, "I have to un-trim, detune my boat. I feel now 50% of the time I am trying to trim the sails and the foils and keel to go faster, and 50% of the time I am de-tuning the boat. I find myself looking for the brake pedal.

"The sea state in the Indian Ocean is really what is limiting my speed. Sometimes the boat accelerates in the surf and we go to 28-30 knots and you don't know how it is going to end. It is really weird to think that I should slow the boat down. I never had to do this before in my racing career."

This was a shocker for yours truly, who during his antediluvian ocean racing career always accepted that you cannot push 100% all of the time. I thought anyone doing something like the Vendée would take this as a given. But apparently not, and although the attrition rate of retirees is nothing out of the usual, could this be the reason we saw those first structural failures in the Atlantic more or less at the start of this ocean racing marathon? Was it pedal to the metal and come what may? I do get the impression that, especially the younger

pilots, fresh off the Figaro circuit (and maybe those who have been around the block and should know better), just wind these fragile machines up and then hope for the best.

With the speeds having increased dramatically in the new generation of foiling IMOCA 60s, hitting 'square waves' surely has to be avoided. In the heat of the moment when there was all to play for by dropping first into the Southern Ocean, and possibly gaining an enormous advantage on a weather system, you can appreciate the reasons for being a bit over zealous, and consequently a loss of the bigger picture. But even when sailing those painful IOR medium displacement boats back in the day, it was impossible to keep pushing 100% and you had to finesse your way through certain wind and sea conditions.

On the wind, pounding in a head sea would spell some sort of serious breakage, if not sails exploding and bow sections delaminating, then possibly the whole rig going over the side. Off the wind, pushing too hard for too long meant a broach or a

Chinese gybe – and you rarely escape those unscathed.

With a full crew there were also psychological considerations. When I was pushing things a bit in the Whitbreads, grumbling and strange looks from the rogue's gallery on the weather rail often made me take a pull. And I imagine while single-handed, if I may say so having no experience myself, going full tilt all the time must lead to dodgy decisions simply due to the stress factor.

Short course racing is a different story where to win does require a 100% flat out approach – I suppose you can include a transatlantic in that category where total

time at sea is measured in days, not months. But there has to be some down time needed in the

mix. In the 1997/98 Volvo Ocean Race short course racing supremo Paul Cayard on *EF Language* later admitted that when they pushed too hard at the start of Leg 2 out of Cape Town they got their comeuppance in the Southern Ocean and scared themselves into a different modus operandi. He got smart quick and went on to win the race. I suspect previous winners of the Vendée would also have had that epiphany at some time or another before it was too late. ■

**'There has to be some  
down time in the mix'**

