

SKIP NOVAK

ABANDONING YOUR YACHT SHOULD BE A LAST RESORT, BUT HOW DESPERATE SHOULD YOU BE BEFORE MAKING THAT DECISION?

The two yachts that were abandoned in the recent edition of the ARC brought into question issues that need attention but, as is often the case, will not be easily resolved.

Let me first say that anyone making judgements on these two incidents is sticking his/her neck out to be chopped off as it can be nothing more than armchair speculation. You'd have had to be there in person and then later be willing to talk about it. Certainly, in the case of the X4³ *Agecanonix* where they had a fatality, the psychological pressure just to 'get off' must have been enormous. Understandable and case closed.

The case of *Charlotte Jane III* is not so cut and dried though, and there are not many actual facts forthcoming – due no doubt for legal reasons. So the following are my opinions, by me and me only. Having said that, on various sailing forums there is an echo chamber asking the question of how can you abandon, no matter how uncomfortable the conditions, a perfectly sound hull, as evidenced by its later successful salvage.

Having steered this column now for over seven years (gulp!), I have to be careful in repeating myself. In the March 2016 column I dwelt on rudder failures of my own and how to carry on. In the July issue of 2017 I asked the question of why there are so many unneeded rescues after another similar loss of steering incident off the Canaries.

In an ocean race a rudder or rig (let's also include those in this discussion) failure puts you out of the running. Is there, or should there be then, some sense of responsibility in trying to get to the finish without assistance by jury rigging these fundamental systems? They do it in the Vendée Globe often and the stories are the stuff of legend. Many cruisers have also had to jury rig rudders and masts, some out of pride adhering to a maxim of self-sufficiency, others out of necessity being alone in the middle of nowhere.

Let's remember those Vendée sailors are the elite, or at least experienced enough to be resourceful. The inarguable fact is that the proliferation of people going sailing naturally lends itself to less

experienced sailors tending towards the herding instinct of 'strength in numbers.' Consequently the ocean sailing rally concept has evolved and the ARC has superbly led the way. It is also patently obvious that with more boats on the ocean there will be more failures of fundamental equipment like steering systems for a variety of reasons; poor construction and installation, hitting floating objects and lately the phenomenon of whale strikes among them.

In some ocean-going events like the Golden Globe Race, you have to prove in practice and demonstrate a jury rig and jury steering system. But this is a tiny fleet with a long lead time for the entries to accomplish this none-too-easy feat of seamanship. In the ARC it is written in the Safety Equipment Regulations under sub heading 'The following

equipment shall also be fitted/carried,' that you have to have: 'A proven method of emergency steering with the rudder disabled.'

The 2021 ARC had an upper limit of 225 boats and 144 entered (due no doubt to

Covid). We can appreciate that for the organisers to have each yacht demonstrate the solutions to these somewhat statistically unlikely scenarios of failure is clearly out of the question.

I will venture to say that many entries will have let this one slip under the wire with a hypothetical jury rig and not well thought out, if at all. If you didn't take the time pre-rally, to actually build something to test you would be operating on speculation if you had to invent the system in extremis.

And as one forum contributor pointed out, to rig a rudderless steering solution on modern boats with tiny keels is not as easy as it was with the more traditional full keel yachts of yore, where directional stability was built in.

Another thing that has generated a talking point is the idea of getting everyone into a liferaft in high winds and a 4m swell as being a safer option than sticking with your rudderless, but floating shelter. The old adage 'never step down into a liferaft, only up as your boat sinks underneath you' is a good one to remember. Easy for me to say from my armchair, though. ■

'With more boats, there will be more failures'

