

Mistral of St Helier – Round Ireland Race 2010.

Alone, at the chart table, 03:00 in the Sound of Luing with 40 knots of wind behind, 5 knots of tide on the nose and horizontal rain pelting into the saloon. That's when I decided to do the RIR 2010 and I reasoned that it had to be better offshore than broaching around the Scottish rocks in the pitch black. The human mind is strange as even after reading the report of RIR 2008, with its three gales, I still reckoned that it would be better.

That was during the Three Peaks Yacht Race 2008 with a team of consultant doctors and my YM Examiner mate, Neil, where we came a creditable 8th and, thanks to very favourable winds, my ex-Conwy School of Yachting Sigma 38, Mistral of St Helier, is now the 9th fastest mono-hull ever in the 33 years of that race. What a confidence booster and without the runners that gave us the core of three for the crew for RIR 2010.

Back at Conwy, North Wales, throughout 2009 we worked on team selection from those layabouts and oddballs who sail on Mistral from time to time and club race to club race. None are racers but they are sound sailors and good company. Our criteria included them being socially acceptable, unlikely to puke and above all be of enough substance to be able and willing to share the expenses.



We debated how many crew to take, varying between 6 and 10, and Neil made diagrams, duty lists, movement plans and reserve duty lists till he ran out of paper. In the end we settled for two watches of four giving eight in total and named the team. Our average age gave some concern with the youngest 38 and oldest 63 with an average age of 51. Would we be able

stand the pace?

We tried to get all eight together to practice but with one doing Sidney-Hobart and Auckland to Uruguay on the RAF boat, Consultants busy consulting and trying to fit in Mistral's charter business to earn her keep we never made it. Seven + reserve did the qualifying passage in early March with a midnight zoom through the Menai Strait Swellies at gone high water, never mind high water slack, and across the Irish Sea down to the Saltee Islands, back up the Irish East coast sandbanks past Dublin, round Rockabill and back to Conwy in 48 hours with 320 miles done.

For qualify races we did a couple of ISORA's and round IOM with all of the crew managng at least 2 races each. The passage and offshore races were invaluable and we came to really understand why they are required.

Safety training was vital and although we had two with ISAF some had to do it to make up the 50% and we made the others do RYA survival. First Aid worried us most because despite having three Consultants including a Surgeon it seemed that the rules required one of the RYA first aiders to take on the nominated role and they wouldn't trust us to put a plaster on a finger.

To get Mistral ready and fast for the 700 miles and 3 gales it was decided to take the keel off, after 20 years and many attempts to knock it off, during the coldest winter for 50



years. The whole bilge was re-glassed 6mm thick to re-attach the box section moulding to the hull, new Stainless steel keel bolts fitted through the association recommended large S/S plates and then fitted and sealed. The seal was done exactly to Sikaflex instructions with 50-Shore 10 mm thick rubber and Sika 291 after using their primer. With that joint it produced a perfectly contoured line from keel



iron to the GRP hull.

She is now probably stiffer than when new albeit a bit heavier. Whilst the keel was off we even inverted all 2.6 Tonne and had a skilled "lead-man" put new lead to fill the caverns created by charter groundings. This is a serious race and we wanted to at least make our boat a serious contender despite the crew.

The refit was completed with much new running rigging, new traveller and refitting the mainsheet fine tune that the previous school owners had removed. Mistral started to look a serious racing yacht.

We were surprised at the amount of changes required for the RORC Cat 2 requirements as Mistral is already MCA coded. Anyway we made them all but cursed the cost of the AIS as we had to buy a new plotter as well to display the output. In the event, on the last night of the race, we were very grateful for AIS in the thick fog while crossing the routes of the Holyhead to Dublin mammoth speed boats.

Our sails caused much debate and concern. We have a good set of North Kevlars which shape and perform beautifully. I don't think that you can get better sails for a Sigma 38 OOD and they are in great condition. However experience has taught us that they are brittle and mishandling can cause catastrophic failure. A leech flutter in the night will detach the leech. Winching the halyard instead of swigging at the mast can be enough to burst the luff and a gybe in high winds must be smooth otherwise the leech and belly will

dramatically burst apart. For those reasons we decided to carry a full set of cruising sails which probably weigh around 100 kg. The logic was simple, 100kg would make us .01 knots slower but shredding the main will put us out of the race. I've tried using the Tri-Sail in 8 knots of wind and it is not very satisfying.

For us the race was good and had four Sigma's entered. We made errors, including starting about 10th over the line but achieving last place round Wicklow head, but these were mainly down to lack of local knowledge and just not thinking enough. When we were going the right way we went well and kept up with the other Sigma's. For much of the first 3 days we were second to Persistence and looking to take him on the last bend. Joker and Rebel were a nuisance as every time we got away from them they re-appeared the next dawn.

After the start just rounding Wicklow head was difficult. We found our own wind hole and then of course the tide was building against us. That beat down to Tuskar in glorious sunshine was good and we played catch up all the way down. Tuskar had its own difficulties with some crew all too eager to tack "for the mark" and others getting totally disorientated. We lost out badly there and again had to fight to catch up.

All the way to the Fastnet was hard on the wind and we were amazed that we could not shake Spindrift, a Halberg-Rassey 30. Going to windward in about 8 to 12 knots true wind, she was sailing brilliantly.

Our youngest and least experienced crew will remember the close hauled night for very different reasons. He had his first experience of the difficulties using the heads on a beat and the resulting mess was disgusting. He redeemed himself by cleaning it all up with a smile on his face and certainly earned his offshore stripes.

Rounding the Fastnet rock in second place in class was a great feeling and after a short reach to Inichtearracht it was spinnaker up for 2 ½ days looking for best downwind angles.

Up to that point we had had no more than 6 hours on spinnaker experience since we got the boat and had only made about a dozen gybes. It did go well although we soon saw the effect of our spinnaker shapes. We have 3 spinnakers, two light and one heavy. Both of the light ones are cut for general use with a bias to reaching with one broader than the other. The heavy one has bigger shoulders but is about a metre short in luff and ½ metre in width. And after extensive searches of the bow sail locker we discovered that a big communication error in Conwy had resulted in the broader light spinnaker being left in our sail loft.

With the rolling North Atlantic swell for one moment we considered poling out the Genoa but the general feeling was that "We hadn't come all this way NOT to put the spinny up". So up it went, narrow shoulders and all.

Up the west coast the good progress made by Joker, Rebel and even better by Gumdrop, a well sailed Contessa 35, showed the result of us not having a good "big shouldered" down wind spinnaker.

We did make a mistake going on starboard into Galway Bay, a decision which was based on trying to avoid a gybe in the dark, as the wind veered and took us deep into

the bay. That aversion to night gybe would haunt us and cost us dearly the next night. Before the next race we have to get confident with pitch black gybing.

Fortunately we got a tide lift up to Slyne Head and by daylight we were still amongst the pack although amazed to see Gumdrop doing so well- the masthead spinnaker proving an advantage. Spindrift had disappeared and he clearly was slow downwind. The weather was overcast and we heard of minor troughs coming through – some reports called them mini weather systems so we changed to the heavy weather spinnaker only to get it off again as the wind dropped.

That night between Eagle Head and Arranmore the wind ranged from very light to roaring in squalls. Whilst the sea state stayed slight we had up to 30 knots in the squalls and we still had the light 0.75 oz spinnaker up. It held with more than 20 knots apparent and that can only be down to the superb steering by watch leader Nick Carter. Must have been all that practice Auckland to Uruguay.

At dawn we seemed to have done well but when we got a position update were surprised to discover that we were 13 miles behind Rebel and Joker. During the night we watched Sailing West One Life behind us gybing and they had similar benefits to the two Sigmas.

What happened next is best described as a great debate – let's not call it a row – to determine what went wrong. The conclusion was that besides the absence of a gybe we had not been sailing optimum angles in light airs. Instead we tried to go deep at all times. So a quick check at the Polar diagrams, over with the helm, get to Best VMG and we were catching up again. That day we concentrated on best speed and did well until the wind gave up all together.

Our whole Sigma and IRC group approached Rathlin Island at the back end of the afternoon with many boats just in front and around us with the wind dying and the tide about to turn. Our initial plan was to get in between the separation zones and stem as much tide as we could. Wouldn't want to get near the beasties and nasty's around Rathlin would we?

So why are all the others going that way, with the exception of Miss Scarlet and Lancastrian perhaps? There had to be a reason. Delving through pilot books we spotted the counter eddy off the north coast of the island – so that was their plan. We just had time to head that way as night fell and we were soon in a melee of hovering and spinning boats right under the Rathlin Lighthouse. I have sighted many lighthouses and often taken the dipping height but never at an angle to the light of nearly 90 degrees.

Rathlin Island became a "car park" with some boats on long, long anchors, others snagged on lobster pots and the rest of us hovering for the whole of the tide. We did get ahead for a while on to the island's east coast but just could not keep out of the current and got swept 2 miles back doing backward pirouettes. Next race we are going to carry a lightweight 150 metre anchor line.

Others in front didn't fare any better and I noted later that Cavatina and the lead Sigma, Persistence, had to anchor off the North East Coast beaches to avoid getting sent back to "Go" .

As dawn came the wind came and we all had a dream beat away from the island and down to the finish. We fought hard but Joker had a better track to maximise the tide effects and I suspect did more sail changes.

Off Larnie we gambled that the stronger offshore wind would be better than avoiding the tide by staying inshore in shallow water. That was a mistake. As we have often said "The tide will always get you" but in the heat of the race we ignored that advice.



Our night heeling at 30 to 35 degrees was not great fun and even broke an engine mount. The reluctance to change down sails, particularly with those with Solent racing experience, probably cost us a place.

The AIS was invaluable in the thick fog and when a Ferry boat was about to run us down at least we knew his name. Maybe the precision of AIS gives them too much confidence so they are comfortable passing close. We were not comfortable.

Still our night was not as bad as Rebel's who chose, like Gumdrop, to go to Scotland in search of winds and came off badly although Gumdrop fared well for the same move.

After the overpowered, high heel, beat to the finish we were overjoyed and could have gone around again. Certainly we had enough water and food for that as we massively overestimated the requirements. Despite the extra day due to light winds we were dumping water by the fourth day having consumed less than 20%.

Rafted up along side Cavatina and Sigma 38 Joker we learnt that the Joker crew saw us as their nemesis throughout the race. Nice to be appreciated.

What a race and what an experience. We will do it again and next time and not carry so much weight in spare sails, water and food supplies. We will study the tides around Ireland more and practice with spinnaker and gybing until we can do it blindfolded – literally.



That part of the crew who chose to sail back to Conwy rather than take a ferry.

Left to right Neil - Skipper, Keith - owner & race navigator, Dave - Foredeck, Simon - the "King of the Heads" and Nick M the chef. Other crew were Nick C – Watch Leader, Josh, Foredeck and Nick E – grinder supreme.

Keith Mander – Owner Mistral of St Helier.