

The Transat is over

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So, the Artemis Transat, the race formerly known as the OSTAR is over for another edition. Loick Peyron and his IMOCA 60 Gitana Eighty took a well deserved victory in the “big” class, with the Open 40 division being won by Giovanni Soldini in Telecom Italia. There were also a host of great achievements, ranging from Sam Davies brilliant 5th place overall in her last generation 60, Roxy, Dee Caffari finishing her first solo ocean race in Aviva and the successful completion of the race by Steve White in the ten year old Spirit of Weymouth.

Despite all of the above though, the most notable fact about the race was the number of non finishers. Sailors of the calibre of Michel Desjoyeaux, Sebastian Josse and Vincent Riou all failed to finish. Indeed Desjoyeaux retirement was his first ever from an offshore race, indicating the seriousness of the situation he found himself in. The retirements to Desjoyeaux and Riou were both caused by whale strikes. The damage to Riou's PRB was sufficient for him to have to abandon the boat, fortunately he was rescued safely by the eventual winner Loick Peyron and PRB was salvageable. Sam Davies in Roxy also struck what she believed to be a whale, but despite significant damage to one of her daggerboards was able to continue.

The above does beg the issue of whether the structural integrity of these boats is sufficient to withstand impacts with solid objects at the types of speed they are capable of. Its far from impossible for an IMOCA 60 to reach 25 knots downwind and given the numbers of containers, whales, bits of wood and other solid objects that litter our planets oceans, the likelihood of an impact does seem fairly high. In the Transat, Desjoyeaux was able to return to France, Riou was rescued, but what is the likelihood of survival if a similar incident happened in the Southern Ocean during the Vendee Globe ? Some questions do have to be asked as to whether the design of these boats is sufficient for reliable circumnavigation, especially in latitudes where ice is likely to be found. Added to this the increasing complexity of the rigs, some of the issues we have seen with canting keels and the ever increasing competitive pressures on solo skippers and there have to be concerns about the dangers of races such as the Vendee. Granted, modern safety and communications mean that rescue operations are far easier than in days of old, but the Southern Ocean is a remote place and one has to ask the question of the likelihood of the Mike Golding / Alex Thomson rescue being practically repeated.

What are the answers to this quandry ? Clearly its impossible to rein back the march of technology and the competitive pressures of the modern, big money sport that ocean racing has become are only ever going to increase. However it must be possible for a review of build and safety standards to take place. Its easy to forget in this modern age with 360 degree communications that a solo ocean voyage of any description is still a high risk exercise, but we all have a duty to ensure that these risks are minimised as much as possible. In the personal opinion of this author, its valid to ask whether technologies like canting keels and some of the newer generation wing style rigs are practical and safe for solo racing (remember the loss of Movistar in the last, fully crewed VOR race ?). Its undoubtedly a difficult balance to strike between progress and safety, the Vendee Globe will be the real proving ground for this latest generation of ocean racers. We all wait with baited breath until the start in November.

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