

OUT OF THE MIST

RACING

Most people will want to forget the 1991 Allied Leisure Cowes-Torquay-Cowes race. John Walker reports on a near disaster and how it may ultimately influence the sport of offshore.

As a sporting event, the longest established current offshore event in the world is unusual to say the very least. Originally conceived 31 years ago as the ultimate test of naval architecture, engineering and seamanship in powered craft, Cowes-Torquay-Cowes has survived without losing any of its appeal, despite advances in design and multiplication of power. The secret of its longevity is very much wrapped up in the third of those original elements, that of challenging individual seamanship.

The story of the 1991 race is very simple. Twenty-three boats started, twelve retired, two were disqualified for missing marks, nine finished and the cause of offshore sport was set back by about a century. In the final analysis, the 1991 Cowes Classic will be remembered as the year in which disaster was courted by high technology.

As competitors gathered in West Cowes Marina on the Friday of race weekend, they were greeted by a full southerly gale and driving rain. Everyone predicted it would all blow through by race day, and so it was.

The four leaders in the European Class I Championship, Angelo Spelta in *Fresh & Clean*, Damiano Spelta in *GB Pedrini*, Vincenzo Polli in *Bagutta* and Duilio Boffi in *Fratelli Rossetti-Velmont*, occupied space on the concrete, as did a further nine foreign teams. The home sides





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Cowes Classic results

Pos	Class	Boat Name	Driver Name	Nat	Time (hr.min.sec)	Speed (knots)
1st	I	Iceberg	N Ferretti	ITA	2.27.23	77.47
2nd	I	Fratelli Rossetti/Velmont	D Boffi	ITA	2.40.19	71.22
3rd	I	Sireg	M Capoferri	ITA	2.40.40	71.06
4th	I	Achilli Motors	D Achilli	ITA	2.41.02	70.90
5th	I	Cougar Lamborghini	R Carr	GBR	3.22.44	56.32
6th	II	Marston Hotels	C Scragg	GBR	3.52.55	49.12
7th	I	Deroa	D Cirilli	ITA	3.55.38	48.45
8th	I	Debenhams	R Fletcher	GBR	4.00.57	47.38
9th	CR	Ultraseal	R Horwood	GBR	5.33.15	33.95



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numbered race sponsor Richard Carr in *Cougar-Lamborghini*, John Clarke in *Clarke International*, Roger Fletcher in *Debenhams* and John Davey in *Macavity*.

Class II was a totally home-grown affair with Chris Scragg in *Marston Hotels*, the Allenbys in *Performance Boat*, Roger Bowley in *British Bulldog* and John Hampton in *Spirit of J&B* while the only cruisers to choose the long race were Bob Horwood in *Ultraseal* and Stuart Raven in *Hunton Atlas Computers*.

The fun started on Saturday. Eduardo Polli and Marco Riganti went testing in *SDA* and came back with both rudder blades bent outwards through 90°. As Riganti ruefully remarked as he came ashore, "suddenly the steering went very funny". Nothing funny about it for Polli, who doesn't need

any Did Not Start notes on an otherwise unblemished Did Not Finish record!

After briefing, Marco Capoferri went compass swinging in *Sireg*, while Robin Culpán, guesting at the wheel of the Seatek-powered *Giesse*, worked unsuccessfully for an hour in the shimmering eastern Solent to get the boat planing. And then there was Steve Curtis.

Bagutta completed one circuit of the Solent looking for all the world like a race winner, apparently having cured its earlier tendency to porpoise. As Curtis and Polli brought the boat back into the Medina, Carr and Currington took the sister ship out. There might have been a moment when Curtis was tempted to go round again, but by deciding against he missed watching a competent but slightly less well-trimmed

How do race committees decide to start races?

A mass of information from around the course, ashore and afloat, is collated by the Officer Of The Day via his Safety Officer. A decision to cancel, postpone, start or curtail racing is made, based upon actual and predicted weather movements and other factors. This process of information-gathering goes on before and throughout the race.

What went wrong in the Cowes race?

Early on race day, a bank of fog was reported in the western part of Lyme Bay. Subsequently, it was reported to be lifting, with consistently improving visibility some 30 minutes before the start. But the process was reversed later in the day for no clear or predictable reason.

Could the race have been stopped?

Any race committee has the right to curtail racing by reason of force majeure, of which it is the sole judge. All key mark boats on the course carried a red flag with which their crews could stop passing race boats, assuming that those race boats were close enough to observe the flag. In practice, by the time the race committee received a

(continued overleaf)

Far left: scotched on the rocks. From every point of view, it is clear that *Bagutta* has been well and truly stuffed on the shore at Paignton. As the fog recedes, salvage squads and the police move in. Above: the fleet set off under clear blue skies at Cowes, but *Iceberg* came home to victory under a cloud of controversy.



demonstration by the lower-powered *Cougar Lamborghini*.

In the waters off Cowes at least, race day dawned bright and clear, the early morning sun out of a cloudless sky promising a hot day. Further west, morning mist was persisting in Torbay and the western end of Lyme Bay. The race committee were faced with an interesting decision, but informed input from down the course suggested that things were clearing, so at 1104 the fleet was flagged away by *Wight Express* on their 190nm course.

For some, the day was short. *Macavity* destroyed a Bonner motor within a mile, *British Bulldog* and *Passlunch* were history before the Needles, and early leader *Paul Picot*, *Polli's SDA*, *Clarke International* and *Fresh & Clean* were all out before Portland. But they may have been the lucky ones. As the fleet followed the rhumb line across Lyme Bay, the leaders encountered first mist and then fluctuating fog as they hurtled west.

It was here that seamanship should have taken over. The simple definition of seamanship is 'skill in and knowledge of the work of navigating, maintaining and operating a vessel'. Irrespective of the responsibilities of the race committee, there is little doubt the onus was on every driver and team to reduce speed and accommodate the restricted visibility as and where they found it.

It was here, too, that the Cowes race in particular and offshore in general fell victim to the new technology which allows today's race boats to fit and rely upon Decca, GPS and other electronic navigation aids. Most of the leading boats had electronic navigators, but instead of assisting them in making safe passage, these contributed to such a feeling of infallibility that the teams pressed on, with devastatingly spectacular results.

The 200,000-ton Iranian-owned bulk carrier *Avaj 2*, planted squarely on the race route in Torbay, was the first to feel the problem as a number of competitors came much too close for comfort. But it was the beaches of Paignton which bore the brunt as *Andreas Ugland* and *Jan*

Hillstadt in *Fiat Uno* and *Polli* and *Curtis* in *Bagutta* came ashore on the rocks, while *Achilli Motors* and *GB Pedrini* stirred sand and *Capoferri* in *Sireg* had an incident with an anchored *Shetland*.

Thankfully, personal injury was kept to a minimum, but the damage to the sport was done and no-one is trying to make excuses.

The run home was almost anti-climactic. *Achilli* led but stopped several times with electrical problems and was eventually passed at Hurst by *Norberto Ferretti* in the *Lamborghini*-powered *Iceberg*, *Boffi* in the *Isotta*-powered *Fratelli Rossetti* and *Capoferri* in the *Seatek*-powered *Sireg*. *Achilli* eventually got going again to finish fourth, all four boats averaging in excess of 71 knots.

Fifth boat home was *Carr* at a more modest if sensible 56-knot average while *Scragg* was sixth and first Class II boat, followed by *Domenico Cirilli* in the *Baudouin*-powered *Deroa*, *Fletcher* and Australian *Robert Voges* in *Debenhams* and the only cruiser to finish correctly, *Horwood* in his *Johnson*-powered *Ultraseal*. *Hampton* ran over either the end of *Peveler Ledge* or the *Bearpan* in *J&B*, but had already wrong-slotted in *Torquay*, while *Raven* in the *Hunton* was out of time, a sad end to a sorry day.

Very few people came out of the race covered in glory and the fall-out includes a Royal Yachting Association investigation into how and why the day developed as it did and how to make sure it doesn't happen again. Time will tell what the full impact of such a fiasco will be on the future of the sport in British waters, while the continuing use of Decca, GPS and similar kit may also be called into question.

Already under pressure, the Cowes event looks likely to become a cause célèbre as and if any administrative weaknesses are flushed out. It is also to be hoped that any other miscreants feel the cold breeze of authority, so that the sport can continue to please and excite without endangering other people or its own very fragile position in the public's perception. □

request to curtail, the vast majority of the fleet still running were already in the fog and uncontactable.

Should the race have been stopped?

In retrospect it is easy to suggest that the race might have been curtailed but, on the balance of probability, nine out of ten race committees would have allowed it to proceed for one simple reason. Enshrined in the Union Internationale Motonautique and Royal Yachting Association racing rules is the simple expediency that 'it shall be the sole responsibility of each boat's driver(s) to decide whether or not to continue racing'.

Where does responsibility lie?

Irrespective of any other considerations, the granting of licences charges drivers with very specific responsibilities of their own, clearly laid out in the rulebooks. The basic premises state that 'safety takes precedence over racing and drivers should do nothing to endanger spectators, crews or other participants' and that 'the international regulations for prevention of accidents at sea shall apply at all times'.

What are the lessons learned?

Race committees need to be supremely vigilant. Licensed drivers must understand that the starting of a race is not a mandate to continue at racing speeds in adverse conditions. Reliance on some electronic navigation aids may have contributed directly to the problem, and their continuing use should be the subject of immediate discussion at the UIM.

Above: Norberto Ferretti and the winning crew celebrate after taking the chequered flag. But should it have been a red one?