

LEARNING TO BE A BOAT OWNER

by

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Sailing is a rich man's sport. This was certainly the case when I started offshore yacht racing in the 1970s - when food, entertainment ashore and specialist clothing were provided for the crew of racing yachts at the owner's expense. This culture prevails today in the larger yachts, particularly with a recent upsurge in sponsorship of the sport. So how can I, a not-very-rich female engineer, campaign a successful offshore racer?

I bought *RollerSkate* in 1992 with financial assistance from my family. Ten years previously, it had been the "boat to beat" on the south coast, but (as with many successful yachts) it had passed through a succession of owners and disappeared into relative anonymity. I spent the next three years struggling under the load of financial and time commitments implicit in the ownership of a racing yacht, with few racing successes. I sailed with old friends from the '70s, but found that their social and family life now took priority. Often, people would call off from a race just a couple of hours before the start and racing a complex machine like *RollerSkate* with too few crew was doomed to failure.

The big change occurred in 1995, when I identified the need to assemble a coherent core team of people who would commit to a full season of racing. In contrast to the material enticements offered by wealthy skippers, the incentives to sail with me, whilst being valuable, were less tangible.

Enjoyment: Crew selection was not based entirely on sailing skills, because it is essential for people to enjoy one another's company, if they are to spend many weekends confined in uncomfortable conditions on a racing yacht. Therefore personality and commitment were my main criteria, which leads to a like-minded, socially compatible crew.

Personal Development: I was willing to train inexperienced crew. In addition to upgrading their sailing proficiency, many crew developed management skills by contributing to the campaign planning and boat logistics.

Success: People sail for diverse reasons - glamour, the "run ashore", a love of the ocean. My crew were competitive and liked to be on a winning boat.

Fulfilment: On many boats, the crew contribution is purely through the mechanics of sail handling, navigation and sail trim during a race. My crew gained additional satisfaction, by contributing to a team effort from the initial planning through all its successive stages.

Consultative Management Style: I did not subscribe to the traditional, authoritarian culture on sailing boats. *RollerSkate's* crew participated in all decision-making processes and were thus predisposed to support the outcome.

Gender Balance: We generally sailed with a balanced gender ratio (but rarely with “partners” on board). This is unusual in a male-dominated sport.

Safety-Conscious Environment: The crew were encouraged to take responsibility for their own safety, (for example, deciding for themselves when to don a lifejacket or safety harness) and also to watch for the safety of others. I found this a more constructive strategy than imposing hard and fast safety rules, which is the practice of many skippers and race organisers and still believe that it develops an awareness among the crew of the inherent dangers of their sport.

These benefits were attractive to a group of about 20 people, who formed the pool from which the *RollerSkate* crew was selected for each race. My strategy worked, because in 1995, we came second in the Junior Offshore Group (JOG) inshore and offshore series of races. In 1996, we won our class in the Royal Ocean Racing Club (RORC) offshore series and in 1997, we won almost every regatta for which we entered - JOG Inshore and Offshore regattas, RORC National Championships and the Warsash Spring Series.

Running *RollerSkate* taught me much about business management - finance and budgeting, health and safety, how to deal with large insurance claims, contracts and legalities, and the use of software tools for project planning and logistics. But the most important lesson was in people management, through the selection of crew, delegation of responsibilities and crew motivation. “Team work” is a trendy buzzword in today’s business and commercial worlds: I have found that it is the most important factor in offshore yacht racing.