

LIAH HUNTER: RMYS MEMBER STUDYING IN ENGLAND

FASTNET ON SENSATION CLASS 40.



The Rolex Fastnet Race, one of the classic offshore races, celebrated its 50th year in July 2023. The 695nm race starts off the Royal Yacht Squadron line in Cowes, heads down the Solent and out through “The Needles”, around the southern tip of the UK and up to a small island just south of Ireland, then back around the Scilly Isles and across to Cherbourg in France.

When I headed out to the UK to study, I made it a priority to get on a crew for that prestigious race. An opportunity soon arose – Sensation, a Class 40 with an impressive racing pedigree that included six Atlantic crossings and a skipper who’d completed over ten thousand miles in the year preceding the race alone. His company were offering places for 4 paying “crew”, that would cover all expenses including the charter fee, and he needed a co-skipper. That was me!

Sensation was in good condition and the owner even agreed to replace the standing rigging and headsails before the race. The crew was Polish, but the video call interview went well.

The plan was to pick up the boat in June and train for a week before qualifying in the Morgan Cup, the owner would fix any issues that arose and we would pick the boat up again the week before the Fastnet to bring it over to the UK and do another week of training before the race. It all looked good.



Then a storm came through and one of the Class 40s fell off its cradle, knocking over ours. The hull and rig were both damaged, but the shipyard assured us that the boat would easily be ready to race in four months; with two weeks to spare before the Morgan Cup. It wasn't.

"Just waiting on the stainless." They said.

RORC (Royal Ocean Racing Club) agreed to let us qualify on a Sunfast 3300, considering the mileage of the boat and the experience of myself and the skipper. The crew had a mixture of experience and ability, but a week of hard training (I think we did something in the range of 56 gybes in one day, and 35 spinnaker peels over the week) we were a good team. The race was painfully light, and I remain convinced that the only reason we actually made it across the last boat length after the tide changed is because a nearby cruise ship took pity on us and sucked us across with his bow thruster.

We separated in good spirits, feeling positive about the upcoming Fastnet.

Of course, the owner had failed to mention that the stainless he was waiting on was the rod rigging needed to hold up the mast! We turned up to pick up the boat eight days before the start of the Fastnet and found... well, the hull looked solid at least.

THE RACE STARTS...

The start was wild. The IMOCAs started first, the first rain fronts drifting across the line just as they flew off down the Solent. We were up next; a conservative second reef and the staysail had us in reasonable control as we wiggled around the 22 other Class 40s, trying not to get in any of the serious team's way.

By the time we started, it was well over 30 knots. I imagine the cannon went off, but the sound and smoke were whipped away long before they reached us. We made it about three miles from the start when the inner forestay blew out of the deck, turning the staysail into a very expensive flag. The boat promptly lost any real steerage and I was forced to turn it back down the course, straight towards some very scary IRC Super 0s coming up the other way.

Some hair raising minutes later, we replace the staysail with the Storm Jib, which had it's own stay in the luff and the underpowered boat could then be pointed back in the right direction. By that point the tide had changed and we now had a nasty wind-against-tide chop beginning to build. I was seeing 40s on the wind instrument.

The skipper came back and asked if we should retire. I pointed forwards, to where a 4 inch tear had opened up in the luff of the main about a meter above the boom.

"That's not gonna last to the Needles!" I shouted over the crash of water over the deck. "Let's wait until it goes, then at least it's not our call."

"Okay!" He shouted back, before heading back to the relative safety of the cockpit.

I kept my eye on the tear as we continued, squinting through the rain that drove like little tiny knives into my eyes. The Needles themselves eventually came into view; towering white cliffs that break off into a string of jagged stacks and tipped by the invisible menace of the sunken steamship. An IMOCA came screaming back in the wrong direction, and the radio had descended into a fairly constant string of PanPan and Mayday calls. I had a vague concept that Oystercatcher had suffered structural damage and that another yacht had an unconscious casualty with a head wound. I told the crew to sit down. The tear in the main had grown to 5 inches, with six strands of carbon fibre bridging the gap.

Then suddenly we were passing The Needles. The boat plunged off a wave, sending several feet of water cascading up and over the cabintop. The high combings did little to protect me as what felt like a solid wall of water high my chest and tried to sweep me off the back. I hastily wrapped an arm around the lifeline and looked up at the tear. 5 strands of carbon remained.

The wind strength built – 50 knots never felt quite so brutal in Australia. It's to do with the humidity and temperature, and perhaps the awful wind against tide. At 56, the primary wind instrument sheared off the top. I switched out with the co-skipper, heading down to switch the instruments.

over to the secondary wind sensor, to the soundtrack of the Mayday call of a sinking boat about a mile astern and the constant situation updates from the other Maydays in progress.

I crawled into bed listened as the coastguard tried to figure out whether the second liferaft had people in it, or whether it had just been swept overboard. The next couple of watches were a blur, but at one point it was dark, then the secondary wind instrument was gone too and a look up revealed that the windex was useless too; maybe taken out when one of the other breakages.

Then it was light again, and the wind felt like it had abated. We were somewhere in the vicinity of Dartmouth and the main was still held together by 3 strands. It felt a little surreal at first when we realised that over half the fleet hadn't made it out of The Needles – either waiting at anchor for the wind to die, or retired. We weren't doing well, but we were much, much further than we ever expected we would be. I handed over the helm to one of the crew and climbed up to stitch the main back together, then investigated the inner forestay fitting and discovered I could make a repair with a bit of dyneema and tape.

By lunchtime, the sun was out, our wet gear was hanging over every surface and we were flying along at a healthy 8 knots.

There was a brief kerfuffle when one of the crew fell over and snapped the tiller extension, but fortunately we had a set of battens onboard which we could tape together like a splint. It got a bit breezy again as we rounded the tip of England. One of the mainsheet blocks blew, but a spare was tied on with dyneema and the liberal use of “truckie hitches”.

The next drama came unexpectedly. It was calm; the skipper was downstairs looking at the Nav, the most experienced of the crew was on the helm, I was about to go to sleep.

The boat was doing 5 in 7, a leisurely fetch. Then suddenly it gybed. There was no preparation, no time to change the runners. We were up on deck in a flash, demanding to know what the helmsman was doing. The skipper grabbed the helm, but the boat didn't come back onto course. I dropped the new leeward rudder back in, we regained steering and gybed back over. For a moment it was good, then the boat heeled and wham! Tacked.

Then we noticed that our leeward rudder was flopping uselessly from side to side. The ball joint that held it had dislocated, the plastic bushing that should have held it in place had disintegrated. It was being held on only by the linkage at the top and the rope that locks them down.



We put on both runners, then steered the boat up head to wind to slow it down. The plan was to lever the rudder back into place and tie it forwards into the cup somehow.

Unfortunately, the boat didn't just slow down. It quickly started going backwards, the rudder flipped sideways and pinned against the transom, catching my little finger and crushing it like a wet sponge. We started the engine and motored very very slowly, creating a fore-aft flow over the rudder which straightened the rudder, releasing my finger and allowing two of the guys to force it back into place. Some creative use of dyneema and a set of multigrips later, and it seemed like the rudder was back in and working.

I poked my finger a bit and decided it didn't feel broken, but we used the Starlink to send a couple of photos to a doctor before strapping it up. I then summarily informed everyone aboard that "If we don't finish, we don't get t-shirts. I better get a damn t-shirt for this." And so we decided to continue.

AROUND FASTNET ROCK AND TO THE FINISH...



We drifted around the famous lighthouse on Fastnet Rock, concerningly close to a whale – those things haunt me, I swear – then we were over half way. It all felt a little surreal; we hadn't even expected to reach the start line, but we'd somehow overtaken one of the other Class 40s, and there were three more not too far ahead. We'd mostly figured out how to sail it by that point, and the forecast looked like there might be some pretty wild down-wind stuff ahead.

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BIN LINER NOT MOVING = CODE 0
 BIN LINER MOVING = FULL SAIL
 BIN LINER GONE = REEF

When we finally made it around the Scilly Isles, there was yet another gale forecast to hit that afternoon, but the bin liner was still there so we hoisted first the small spinnaker, then peeled to the bigger one when that one was boring. At first it was nothing special; 8s and 9s, the occasional 12 knots. We overtook another boat or two and spotted the front forming behind us. The wind built... and built... the boat took off. Boat speed climbed up to 17, then 22. We put the second rudder down and tied it on with dyneema just in case the leeward one fell off again. I considered checking the lashings on the backstay, but we didn't have any dyneema left to replace them. I decided I'd rather not know.

The front receded behind us. We slowed down slightly. The front caught up again, sling-shotting us back up to 25 knots. We rocketed past boats, bow wave taller than my head, almost a tonne of water ballast in the transom tanks and 250kg in the windward midships, everyone lined up along the traveller. It continued like that for hours, well past when we should have been overtaken by the gale and forced to pull the spinnaker down. We overtook another Class 40, and 23 other boats. The sun started setting, but our average speed had increased to 20kts. We could make Cherbourg in just over an hour if we dared to carry the big spinnaker into the night. Perhaps we might have, but the tackline chose that moment to snap and the spinnaker tore whilst we tried to recover it.

Well, we decided, we'd been flying the biggest one fine – sure, the wind had built whilst we tried to get it down, but surely that meant we would be in perfect range for the smaller one.

The skipper braved the 2m bowsprit to run a spare sheet as a new spinnaker tack, then came back to grab the spinnaker.

'I'm doing 14 under just the main!' I told him.

'Great!' He responded, dragging it over the combing and taking it forwards. Perhaps we should have considered what the windspeed must be for me to be doing 14 under just the main. I recall a vague thought that maybe a spinnaker would help balance the helm.

I don't know whether what happened next was an accident, or a miscommunication, but one minute I was trying to haul us down a wave with the lights of France in front of us. The next moment, the lights were blotted out by a spinnaker as it bloomed out from the sock. I had just enough time to come up with a creative string of swear words before we were totally flattened.



We eventually recovered it, then unfurled the genoa and sailed the rest of the way into Cherbourg with the gale slowly but surely catching up. It brought with it horrendous, driving rain so thick that we never actually saw the finish line, but cross it we did. More than half of the fleet had retired, but somehow we made it all the way.

We placed 15th out of 21. And for the record... they didn't give out t-shirts...

A TRACK OF THE RACE CAN BE FOUND [HERE](https://www.rolexfastnetrace.com/en/competitors/race-documents/fleet-tracking)

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