

712 words

11th June 2010. Friday.

By Marty Still

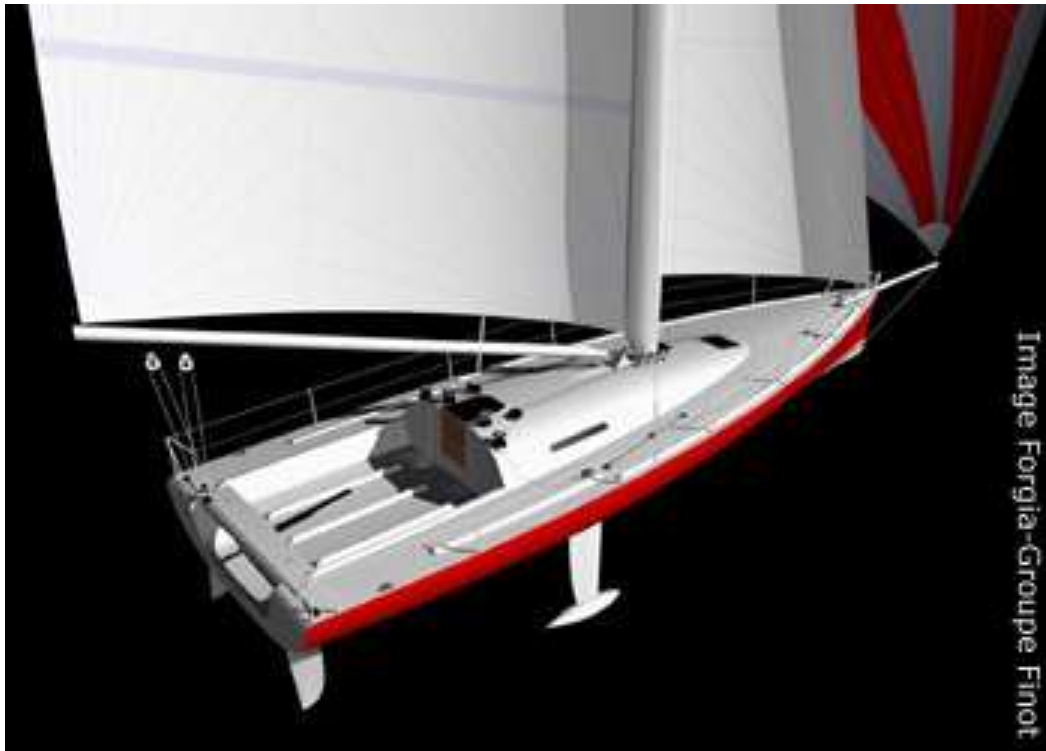
Well, it looks like Abby Sunderland, another teenage would be around the world sailor, is in trouble in the Southern Ocean.

I came under some fire and not a little praise for some comments I made about Jessica Watson and many of the things I said there are very relevant to this situation so I'll keep it brief so as not to repeat myself.

First up I totally agree with Ian Kiernan's comment that questioned what a 16 YO is doing in the Southern Ocean in mid winter in the first place. Bad planning, yeah, dead right it is. I guess Abby was under pressure given that Jessica Watson was already under way and, being only four months younger, she had to get going to have any chance of grabbing the "youngest" around title. For many years now I have always considered that sailing to a deadline can be a dangerous thing to do.

What about the boat? Is t really the right tool for the job? I don't think so. Ella's Pink lady was the right choice of boat, a robust, compact, easily managed vessel with a sea kindly motion in a seaway.

Wild Eyes is a race boat, I mean, look at this. It's a race boat.



When I owned Ella's Pink Lady, then named "Shanty", when racing, I would have 6 persons on board. A boat like Wild Eyes would probably race with a crew of 12 – it's a race boat. "Shanty" was 33' long with a displacement of 5 tonnes, Wild Eyes is 40" long with a displacement of 4 tonnes. Water ballasted, big rig, twin rudders, hydraulic lifting keel, all carbon fibre, a down wind flyer – a race boat. It is in no way a boat for 16YO to be single handing around the world.

I sincerely hope Abby is okay. I hope she got scared, (justifiably so in big Southern Ocean seas) and has perhaps lost a rudder, had the keel come off or something like that and has activated her EPIRB. It wouldn't be the first time an EPIRB has been activated but the person has been found alive and well and still with the boat.

Hopefully she hasn't had to take to a life raft in big seas - that would not be good.

Two EPIRB's have been activated, both manually, that doesn't sound good but it doesn't mean she has been separated from the boat, it just means she feels her life is in danger and she is in need of rescue.

Should she be there? I don't think so.

It seems to me that there have now been so many people who have sailed around the world single handed that it has come to be seen as – routine – easy – if they can do it I can do it.

Have we forgotten that Mother Nature rules? Have we forgotten that our big steel ships, never mind our little plastic boats are absolutely nothing in Mother Nature's big scheme of things? Jon Sanders got it right when he said: "If man can make it the sea can break it". That man respects nature and worked with it.

There is enough literature around dealing with Southern Ocean sailing that there is no excuse to say: "I didn't realise what it might be like". When you venture into the Southern Ocean, when you venture into any ocean, you should know that you can be well and truly clobbered and there are plenty of travellers gone before you to tell you that.

You know, the most dangerous conditions I have seen on a small boat was in Bass Strait, just 6 miles from land, not the biggest seas I have been in but certainly the most dangerous and the close proximity of land gave me limited directional options. Serious weather and serious seas can happen anywhere at any time and that is something any mariner will know and be ready for.

Now, I am the first person to say that if you try and fail, you just failed but if you don't try, you have already failed. Yes, get out there and have a go, yes, be an achiever, yes, be a leader and an innovator – but – let's keep it sensible.

I really hope Abby is okay.

12th June 2010 Saturday.

Well, it seems that Abby is okay and I'm very happy about that.

I find it very interesting that when I was the only one saying this has gone too far, this is bullshit, Jessica was too young, too inexperienced, this is becoming unnecessarily dangerous, I stood alone. But now that Abby Sunderland has gotten into trouble, hasn't that brought the hounds out. Accusations of negligent parents, she's too young, too inexperienced, from Ian Kiernan, ill prepared and badly bad timed, from Tony Bullimore, "When do they become too young"? And from the builder of the boat, At 16 she just wasn't strong enough to handle a 40 footer in gale conditions. Isn't that exactly what I was saying. Where were these peoples comments when Jessica came home, were they too busy standing on the dock waving the Aussie flag to be honest. And to all those who sent me abusive emails, "What do you think now"?

When the press contact someone they look for a slant, the slant they want but let's look at this rationally and logically.

Okay, you are going to go around the world non stop single handed.

What boat do you choose? Do you choose a sedate, strong proven vessel, such as Ella do you choose a lightweight downwind flyer like Wild Eyes. If you are in your right mind you would have to choose the former. "Wild Eyes" is a good boat but it's a race boat, it may be designed to race in the Southern Ocean but it is designed to be crewed not single handed by a 16YO girl.

This comment from Abby's father is pure nonsense.

"Sailing and life in general is dangerous. Teenagers drive cars. Does that mean teenagers shouldn't drive a car?" Sunderland said.

In essence I agree with him but you cannot equate sailing alone around the world with driving a car on an LA freeway. The LA freeway is probably far more dangerous for a start.

If Abby is so experienced and so capable, as we have been led to believe, as we were with Jessica Watson, why on earth did she let off not one but two EPIRB's? (If Jessica Watson was so experienced and so capable, as we were led to believe, why did she not stay awake in the middle of a shipping lane?) Mr Sunderland, think yourself lucky your girl is still alive.

If Abby is so experienced and so capable, why did she not wait for conditions to abate after losing her rig and then set up a jury rig to get herself out of trouble? Lots of sailers have done that in the past. Let's face it, she had a strong boat that wasn't leaking and still had its structural integrity, which says a lot for the construction. Why put so many people to so much trouble, and risk, and then leave a perfectly good boat? Why? I'll tell you why, because she was scared. That is understandable, I am sure I would have been scared in 50' seas too, but this is where experience comes into play.

A mate of mine was rolled over in big seas in Bass Strait in a 25 footer. All his leeward windows were punched in and the boat had taken a considerable amount of water. He hove to so as to best protect the broken windows, baled the boat, cut up his plywood saloon table and made storm boards that he bolted to the window openings. Then he got the boat home – he sorted it – on site.

Another mate was rolled and dismasted off Cape Horn. He baled the boat, got things tidied up, set up a jury rig and got the boat to safety. No EPIRB activation, no mayday, he sorted it – on site.

Another mate, on passage from South Africa to Australia in a 33 footer, lost his rudder at around the same place where Abby lost her mast. Did he set off an EPIRB? No! Did he call for assistance? No! Did he ask for help from anyone? No! Typical South African, perhaps, but a seaman and an experienced sailor, he sorted out the problem and got the boat safely to Australia. His boat was disabled just as Abby's boat was. Abby let off two EPIRB's, got a Qantas jet to find her, pulled a fishing boat away from his work and livelihood to go get her and dumped her boat.

All these guys were in the 40's, all strong and experienced sailors. All had enough age/experience/maturity to be able to deal with the situation without outside assistance. These guys are very much not alone in these feats.

When New Zealand introduced their section 21 that covered equipment to be carried by foreign flag yachts before being allowed to leave NZ waters, it was seen for what it was, a bullshit, illegal, unworkable money grab by government and was scrapped in short time.

I expressed a view then that I felt if someone wants to go to sea in a small boat, don't give them a false sense of security by loading them up with all this safety equipment, most of which does nothing to assist safety. Tell them, if you want to go to sea you **cannot** take a radio or EPIRB, if you come a gutsa out there "you are on your own". That would sort out the wheat from the chaff. If Abby had no radio or EPIRB she would have had to sort it out on her own.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for adventure and I'm all for safety but going to sea in a small boat is a serious business and needs to be regarded as such. It can change from being a pleasant sail to a life threatening situation in a matter of hours or even minutes and for a variety of reasons, not all of them due to bad weather, and you have to be able to deal with it on site. I would have to wonder how Abby would have coped had she been faced with the same situation Tony Bullimore was in when he was rescued in the Southern Ocean – I reckon she'd be dead. If Jessica Watson had been T boned by the bulky, I reckon she'd be dead.

I reckon Jessica "got away with it" and I reckon Abby has "got away with it". I don't believe either one has enhanced the sport, rather they have put a bright spotlight on the negative side of things and the fact that it simply cannot keep heading in this direction. It needs to be self regulated by a rational and sensible approach to something that can be very dangerous pass time. If it isn't self regulated then you can bet the officials will officially regulate it. Personally, I reckon open ocean sailing is one of our last real freedoms, I do not want to see the bureaucrats get their hooks into it.

This brings me to another question I covered in the Jessica Watson write up. Are people, adults, parents, marketing companies, media sponsors putting up big financial incentives, rolling the dice with these children's lives?

When a parent doesn't say to their child "No, it is too dangerous and you are not yet capable", yes, I believe they are.

That's all I have to say – for now.

14th June 2010 Monday

Does this madness ever end?

Let's get this right, Abby Sunderland, with limited experience, (She was 16 – just) set off on a sponsored trip to sail around the world non stop and single handed.

She set off in a totally unsuitable boat at the wrong time of year.

She stopped after only a few days due to technical problems.

She got around Cape Horn okay but stopped again in South Africa due, again, to technical problems. (Surely the writing was on the wall).

Then she gets dismasted in the Southern Ocean – about as far away from anywhere as she could be.

She makes no attempt to get the boat going again despite the fact that the boat is fine.

Instead, she activates not one but two EPIRB's.

A Qantas jet goes 2000 miles off the Australian coast to locate her.

A French fishing boat stops what he is doing, working for a living, to go rescue her.

Now, she is looking for “donations”, not to reimburse her rescuers but to get her boat towed to a safe harbour where she can make repairs, presumably at someone else's expense, and have another go.

Abby, get into the real world will you. You abandoned your boat. It was not sinking, it was not severely damaged, it was very much alive and afloat, you abandoned it. What right do you have to expect people to help you rescue the boat so that you can continue with an ill planned voyage when you obviously don't have the experience to take on the task. What planet are you on?

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After Jessica Watson crashed into a bulk carrier after only a few hours at sea, because she didn't know it was there, because she didn't look, after Abby Sunderland has abandoned a perfectly good boat I seriously wonder where these two “very young” girls get their impudence. The worlds best sailors have come up through dinghy sailing. What is happening when these “very young girls” want to start at the top? What's wrong with doing that which most of us have done? You start with dinghy's, you progress to perhaps a trailer sailer or small keel boat, you crew on bigger boats, you get a good handle on what it's all about then, eventually, you “buy” your own small keel boat and go make some mistakes in your local cruising ground, then, you go “buy” a bigger offshore boat.

These girls haven't had to buy anything.

Jessica: I'll just smash into this bulk carrier, someone else will pick up the tab.

Abby: I'll just abandon my boat in the Southern Ocean, someone else will pick up the tab.

Come on!

What can I say about Abby's father? Here is saying how happy he is that Abby is safe, the boat is secondary to her well being. Now, I presume, he is backing the appeal to get other people to fund her continuation of the trip. Mr Sunderland, how about being a parent and teaching your daughter how to work for what she gets instead of getting someone else to pay for it.

I see some similarities here between Jessica Watson and Abby Sunderland.

Both claim to have single handed experience, but both have not expanded on that. Exactly what single handed experience do they have - at 15? People, athletes, who are going to enter the single handed transatlantic race have to have a qualifying single handed cruise to show they are capable. Why doesn't this apply to these "kids" who are going to set off around the world? Why are major sponsors getting behind what can, ultimately, only end up in disaster? Why are the "loving" parents getting in on this act?

Jessica said, after she hit the bulky, "Everyone is speculating on what happened but no-one knows what happened out there". So why didn't she tell us what happened??? She never did and still hasn't.

Abby said, when criticised about her youth, "Youth doesn't make huge seas".

My answer to that is that it is quite right that youth doesn't create huge seas but youth does make you abandon your boat unnecessarily. As she certainly did.

Anyone who goes to sea knows that anyone, no matter how experienced, can get in trouble but some things are essential when going to sea.

1. You have a boat suitable for the task.
2. You plan the voyage so as to give yourself the best chance of not hitting bad weather.
3. You must have the experience to be able to deal with what you can reasonably expect to meet in the ocean – which - is anything and everything.

Clearly, in my opinion, both Jessica and Abby were not up to the task.

Abby, go to college, or whatever it is you do in the US, and go to sea later, when you know something about what you are doing.