

12th September 2009

Well, Jessica Watson on Ella's Pink Lady has had a collision with a bulk carrier and the knockers have let the hounds off the leash and are out to get her.

I have read all the comments on the ABC Web site and have several thoughts about them. First, all the armchair sailors should just back off and stick to watching TV, they don't know anything about what has happened. In fact, none of us know exactly what happened - yet.

Some of the comments have come from professional seamen who understand the situation. Fact is, anyone who has been on the bridge of a big ship at sea will know that it can be almost impossible to see a small yacht in daytime if there is a sea running. Also, at night, a yacht's puny 12 volt lights make little impression on a watch keeper's eye on a bulky doing 18 knots.

Some comments have come from so called seasoned sailors, one has made a Pacific crossing. For the record, crossing the Pacific from East to West is well known as a "Milk run", trade winds all the way, nice and warm, not too much traffic, you might get a gale or two if you don't pick it right but generally nothing too serious. Doing a Pacific crossing doesn't necessarily qualify someone to adversely comment on a mission of the magnitude that Jessica is taking on. Perhaps the writer went against the trades, perhaps he did do it tough, perhaps he is qualified but, really, if he did the "Milk run", and if it scared him so much that he hasn't done anything like it again – then clam up with the negatives and get behind someone who does have the guts to at least try something daring and extraordinary.

One guy claims to have sailed with Jessica and she got scared when the boat broached – and the boat was crewed. If this is accurate and true, then the guy has a good point and maybe she shouldn't be out there. But you never know how someone will shape up when the chips are down. Only time will tell on that one.

Many comments targeted Jessica's age and gender. Well, I'll tell you this, I have seen a 6'4" warrior, (one you wouldn't dare pick on in the pub) who turned to jelly in 20' seas, not seasick, I'm talking about pure FEAR. On the other hand, on the same boat in the same gale, a 50kg girl is handing out freshly baked cookies with a big grin on her face. Okay, Jessica is young, okay, Jessica is a female, okay, she may not have a great deal of offshore experience but where has the Aussie spirit of giving someone a go gone? If this young lady wants to go around the world non stop single handed, if it is not a media build up engineered by her parents, if it is what "she" wants to do, then why not just get behind her and give her a shove, don't all jump on the "I told you so band wagon". The day I will jump on the "I told you so band wagon" is the day she sails back through Sydney Heads in 8 months time.

On the ABC Web site, it states that Ian Kiernan said.

"I've nearly been run down a number of times myself and the rules for the prevention of collision at sea state that all vessels must maintain a continuous radio, radar, and visual watch," Mr Kiernan said.

"Obviously as a single-hander you can't do that, but I have on many occasions nearly been run down by ships where there is no radio contact and obviously they're probably reading Playboy at the bridge or asleep in the chair and not looking out."

Honestly, what has Ian been doing, zig zagging up and down the shipping lanes playing chicken with the bulkies? After many thousands of ocean miles, I have never had a near miss with a ship. And, as an ex professional seaman, I have never read Playboy while on watch and every ship I have ever been on takes watch keeping very seriously, especially when approaching the coast where it can be expected that more intense shipping will be encountered. Let's face it, if these guys were not keeping watch, it might not have been a 5 tonne yacht they hit, it could be another bulky of similar size – of course they keep watch.

Don't get me wrong, I in no way trivialise Jessica's task, man has she got her work cut out. I used to own the boat she is heading off in, I fitted that boat out in suburban Melbourne between 1982 and 1984, I have travelled over 30000 miles in that boat, many of those miles single handed, I know exactly what she is heading into. Heading off around the world non stop is a Mammoth task, it is a challenging task, it is a dangerous task, but what the hell, parachuting is dangerous - if the chute doesn't open, snow boarding is dangerous – if you come a cropper, motor cycles are dangerous – if you fall off. What is life without challenge and danger?

All I hope is that Jessica will have the good sense to pull the plug on the whole thing if she feels she cannot do it. I hope that the sponsors and all the people who have put in so much to assist her will understand if she decides to do just that and don't put the pressure on to continue against her better judgement . I would rather see her safe at home knitting in front of the fire than heading out on a mission of this magnitude without confidence, I do not want to see another Donald Crowhurst event, where the pressures of media and sponsorship made him set out on a voyage that was doomed from the start. "If you try you might fail, but if you don't try, you have already failed", Jessica has tried, if she fails, so be it – and so what, at least she tried – which is a lot more than the knockers and armchair sailors would do.

This event has certainly opened a can of worms and I have a lot more to say on this which will be addressed in another document.