



Finally... Having just set new outright and one-mile world sailing speed records, a country mile ahead of the previous best marks, SailRocket's founder and skipper Paul Larsen at last cracks open a bottle of Mumm champagne given to Larsen on the launch of the first boat, VSR1. Though it had languished for 10 years at the back of a container Larsen and designer Malcolm Barnsley (getting the champagne shower) assured us that it tasted quite wonderful

This dog is going to hunt

Blue Robinson learns more about the rest of the Vestas SailRocket team and probes Paul Larsen about his next step...

Seahorse: What about funding such a complex and lengthy effort...

Paul Larsen: The real supporters are the people who come along in your formative years, when you have a whacky idea and a whacky boat – which is not quite working. A guy called Giles Mackay bought an Orma 60 which I sailed in St Tropez. When he heard about this project he wanted to support it, but I was reluctant to take his money as although we had a boat we definitely didn't understand the whole puzzle.

It wasn't until we became completely poor in Weymouth, waiting for wind with £1,000 left in the kitty that we had to find somewhere else to go test. I flew to Walvis Bay here in Namibia and found this speed sailing holy land; then I had the confidence to call Giles and say, 'Mate, this dog is going to hunt... if we can get it down to Namibia!' So Giles backed us to move with about £70,000 – a huge injection compared to what we'd been surviving on.

We shipped the boat to Walvis Bay and had one massive smash-up after another; I liken it to surfing North Shore Hawaii. Your first time at 20ft Pipeline you paddle into the wave and then realise you have no

idea what to do, so you wipe out time and time again and that is what we did. But Giles stuck by us.

SH: So breaking the boat, but not records.

PL: We weren't breaking records and so Giles couldn't use us for his marketing. I didn't take his support lightly, I put my name to this project and we are not selling someone a dodgy product; we owe him a huge amount so I feel a strong obligation to him and to everyone who gave us a cleat or some rope or a dry suit. I wanted to honour all of that because we have seen so many projects that simply don't deliver.

People talk the talk, pocket the funding and never follow through. That's one of the experiences in yachting that I really don't like; people want their name in lights but won't do the hard yards. This project simply wasn't ever going to end that way.

SH: How did Vestas become involved?

PL: Giles was really important, and even as he later pulled out we had this desperate session when we 'had' to get through 40kt. And at 40kt we were only learning to walk in the speed-sailing sense. When Vestas took over the wind turbine company that had backed us the management learned of this little project and liked it so they came onboard.

They wanted to build a new boat straight away with their name and engineering on it, but we hadn't finished with the first boat yet, so we continued until we maxed it out. And all the time other people were pushing their projects on and beating us... making the record seem like a mirage.

Then the kitesurfers came in and were soon heading to a place traditional boats weren't going to go. So we sat down with our designers and laid down the criteria: we needed to design for something around 65kt. But we weren't focusing on a number, we were aiming at a cavitation point or well above it. The record would come.

SH: Plenty of lean times along the way...

PL: The interesting thing is we ran for so long with so little funding we were scared to ask for the money that would solve the problem. Vestas said they wouldn't put their money into something that was half-engineered, so we had to adopt their methodology, including a feasibility study before they committed funds.

So for me to say we needed £60,000 to secure the engineers for a feasibility study – who all worked for free on the first boat – that was an important step as this boat had to pay its way. It was scary, going from the first boat costing less than twenty grand for a carbon-Nomex wing-sailed boat to everyone putting in proper time. So you are now looking at hundreds of thousands of pounds, yet with everyone still doing an amazing job.

And this is the great thing; this is a well-understood boat, designed by some very clever people, using thorough methodology, and it is practical. From brand new, within 23 runs it was sailing at over 50kt.

SH: So what next?

PL: The gloves are off in speed sailing. Kitesurfer, windsurfer, Hydroptère, SailRocket, it's all about lift over drag, power

HELENA DARVELD/SAILROCKET

over drag. Maximise power or reduce drag in every corner of the boat. It's interesting, people are talking about improving kite-board efficiency by tying the kite to the board, eliminating our weak bodies, or doing X, Y and Z. I just think, 'Mate, you would just be designing the SailRocket!'

But it will be fascinating to see what comes after us. People are now forced to take notice and probably to change. We were obliged to change by looking at the performance of the kiteboarders as they didn't have a foil going through the water and so didn't have the same issues with cavitation. So we had to look way beyond the current issues. If the kiteboarders can push to 70kt fantastic, we forced it!

SH: Do you see your record lasting long?

PL: I will be surprised if we hold the record for long. Suddenly speed sailing has gained credibility, which clearly helps sponsorship. Somebody will come with credibility and funding and attack it. We did it with a bunch of clever guys while the America's Cup and VOR were on, where all the money was heading while we were working away looking like a bunch of misfits!

If someone rocks up at Walvis Bay with good funding, two boats and two containers they will perform, because there has been a precedent that everyone understands. Both the Hydroptère guys and us pitched to sponsors who had no way of understanding as there wasn't a precedent.

In 2013 there are a lot of smart hydro-dynamicists out of sail-jail – the America's Cup – and they would love to do this sort of stuff. They now have a point on the graph to work from and they just have to build on that. This has been a wonderful thing to do, there are some great ideas in sailing that have never been tried or where the execution has been poor.

People ask us if we are headed offshore, aiming for the 1,000-mile day... there's more to do than that! There is no reason boats offshore can't be sitting on 50kt. To me boats like *Banque Populaire* lack imagination. I sailed on *Groupama 3* and, though I liked it, the philosophy of 'big is better' was not the way I thought it should go. Big boats costing stupid amounts of money to campaign when there are more elegant solutions... and which will blow the doors off those boats.

SH: One of your misfits on the beach was Malcolm Barnsley. What can you say about a guy like that?

PL: To be breaking records in front of Malcolm, that lovely gentle guy, was fantastic. He is a naval architect, a very experienced test engineer and a very, very thorough guy who already had the drawings for the first boat when I met him. Chris Hornzee-Jones is the principal designer of this second boat – he and Malcolm knew each other well and had faith in each other.

Critically, the moment I met Malcolm I knew there was no ego at work, just a curiosity on how things work with this beautiful, gentle manner. And if he doesn't know something he doesn't try to muddle

his way through, he will just say 'I don't know'. Then he will start thinking about it, then start drawing it and he won't let the problem go and, mate, that is gold. So combine that with the power of Chris's brain and we could talk through any problem until the solution just became logical. Just working through it.

The annoying thing about this project was it wasn't big enough to employ Malcolm and Chris full time. They had to have other jobs. This is just a passion for them, so every day I was living with the boat and translating these phone calls for the shopfloor and wishing they were there. Design meetings together were pure gold, where we solved big problems quickly. Doing that stuff over the phone was tricky. **SH:** So the general concept for the first boat came from where?

PL: Malcolm designed the first boat and even when Chris took over with the second boat Malcolm was providing oversight. Any questions we talked over between the three of us and a strong engineering solution would emerge. Then we would qualify, quantify and justify it as we knew we had to be careful that no mistakes would slip through the net... Very often in these types of projects tiny details slip in the build stage and the boat breaks down – and people are suddenly critical of the whole project. I knew we had to be utterly vigilant to stop that from happening.

So over in the shed in East Cowes every little detail that was translated into carbon and resin I was watching like a hawk, while the builders were thinking 'are we doing something wrong here? Don't you trust us, mate?' My response was this is not a boat it is an aeroplane, which I will be strapped into and want to be confident in. When a project like this crashes the builder who applied the carbon is never blamed – it is the stupid bloke in Namibia who is to blame. I thought, 'Not on my watch, mate.' We had to have the plates spinning safely with a sponsor and so it absolutely had to all be done properly.

People don't realise it is detail upon detail. They think it is whacky misfits stuff. Malcolm summed it up perfectly back on the beach. All the sums and all the work, we did the work and the numbers are coming good.

SH: What now?

PL: As I said, the gloves are off. If we now build a boat that is a little faster, people will be disappointed. We have the opportunity to now stand in front of a sponsor and say we are going to do something really big; we have a track record and no one expects what we do to be normal...

I am casting my eyes offshore but I also hope someone comes out and knocks our record off... This boat is more than capable of heading into the 70kt range. Plus if someone else wants to drive it the offer is there! SailRocket will continue as we look for our next challenge – but for sure our next 'boat' won't look like anything out there now. □



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