

London Monte Carlo Record Attempt July 20th to 22nd 2006

In 2005 team Seahound consisting of skipper Chris Strickland, Jan Falkowski, Gordon Compton and myself set a new world record for the fastest circumnavigation of the British Isles, completing the 1800 nautical miles in some 72 hours. My abiding memory of our return was one of exhaustion mixed with exhilaration and an overwhelming wish to get off the boat. I also clearly remember that Chris when asked by the press “what next” replied that under no circumstances would he do that again and that the furthest any of us wanted to go ever again was a bar in Yarmouth or Newtown River for a bottle of wine. So how some 11 months later did we find ourselves in the middle of the Bay of Biscay some 150 miles off shore pitch dark and hell-bent on breaking another record, that’s a very good question!!

I remember sitting in the bar at the BIBOA awards ceremony with Messer’s Strickland, Compton and Falkowski always a dangerous situation at the best of times and of course as the beer flowed so did the memories of Round British Isles and before we knew it we were half way to Monte Carlo in the planning of yet another record breaking adventure. So much for we will never do it again, once was enough and cruising sedately to Yarmouth but I suppose that’s ribbing BIBOA style.

Bar talk is one thing detailed planning of an epic of these proportions is quite another, we all first met to discuss the project at Chris’s house some time in early February joined by Mike Deacon who had agreed to act as our shore support for the challenge. I guess when you have gone around Britain as many times as Mike you know when to say no and he could see the attraction of a warm office as opposed to hanging on to a Sat phone in the middle of a dark cold ocean. Chris had prepared the outline of the attempt and with the benefit of experience gained from the previous year had determined that we would make four fuel stops, the total journey distance was 2080 nautical miles and we would be carrying just over 1500 litres of fuel per leg. Seahound as most of you know is a 10 meter Scorpion cabin RIB powered by twin 320hp turbo charged diesels, in 2005 the team averaged 29 mph over the 1800 miles round the British Isles but London Monte Carlo was something else. To beat the existing record we would have to average over 37 mph and the total distance was some 500 miles longer, this was going to be a challenge and a half. The previous record was set in 2001 by Fabbio Buzzi, he used an 80 foot Buzzi mono hull powered by four 1500hp engines developing a massive 6000hp. The 600hp of Seahound seemed insignificant by comparison but the team believed implicitly that the record was achievable; the key to success would rest on two crucial factors, reliability and good weather, not to mention a large helping of good luck.

Following this initial meeting the team members were tasked with various jobs, preparation of charts, electronics, engines, installation of long range fuel tanks, food and drinks, satellite communications the list was endless. Over the next few weeks various

meetings ensued to check progress and by the beginning of June all was in place. We were now at the mercy of the weather and for better or worse the team had nominated me to make the final weather call to go or not to go so no pressure for the next few months!!

Every day I would check different web sites in an effort to establish a pattern to the weather, I kept a full spread sheet on the daily statistics so as to be able to compare the daily readings. The main problem was that we were dealing with three major weather systems, the Atlantic depressions that sweep across the country were fairly predictable as were the trade winds that set in down the Spanish and Portuguese coasts but the unpredictability of the weather conditions in the Mediterranean was much more difficult to judge. For the attempt to succeed it was vital that all three systems were favorable, for those interested in the technical side I used four principal web sites to help in predicting the optimum conditions: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/coast/shipping/> an excellent site for weather predictions in UK and continental waters, <http://www.ecmwf.int/> predicts up to 120 hours ahead and uses a different computer model to the BBC so gives a slightly different overview to what is happening.

<http://www.mediterraneanweather.com/marine.htm> This is an excellent site for the Mediterranean which gives detailed predictions on wave heights and local weather in the region and finally for Atlantic wave heights and trends I used <http://www.lajollasurf.org/images/euranim.gif> The whole of June passed with no chance of a weather window and bearing in mind that the Trade winds set in during early August which blow from the NW5/6 winds every day it was imperative that the team started before that date. Many days passed with either excellent conditions in the English Channel and SW approaches and storms in Biscay or flat calms in the Mediterranean and gales in the Channel. The days and weeks passed with little or no sign of change, at this point it is difficult to believe that a window would ever appear or indeed that it was possible for the weather to be settled in all regions at once finally however I called Chris on Sunday 15th July a weather window appeared to be developing and I said that we should leave on the following Wednesday, after he had caught his breath and realized that I was serious the phone lines were alive with activity as the final calls and arrangements were made.

Some weeks earlier Mike had warned us that if the attempt were to take place in Mid July he would be in the Far East and so it was, Mel Wilby had kindly volunteered to step in so one of the first calls was to Mel. We had established a number of contacts throughout Europe at fuel stations, marinas and had also made arrangements for the attempt to be officially timed by a representative of the UIM (Union Internationale Motonautique) the international governing body for all world record attempts, all of these important contacts now had to be called and advised of our planned start time and anticipated arrival at their location.

The start line in London is a line drawn between the Royal Pier Gravesend and the Tilbury Fort so the first challenge is to get the boat to London, on the face of it that sounds simple until you realize that Chris actually didnt want his boat in a dock in London for the whole of the summer whilst we waited for a weather window. The solution was simple, tow the boat to London and launch in the docks immediately prior to

the attempt. This was done but not without its problems, a blow out on one of the trailer tyres, massive congestion in the Blackwell tunnel which when towing a rig the size of Seahound is a major headache and difficulties in launching on an unfamiliar slipway with restricted access. Finally the boat was in the water and the daunting task of loading all of the provisions begins, carrying sufficient water alone is a massive undertaking, a four man crew consuming a minimum of four litres per day equates to over sixty litres of drinking water. Food was pre prepared and was packed into sealed plastic containers; this consisted of sandwiches, fruit, chocolate and snacks. During the record run the previous year we had taken some hot food in cans, the team had agreed to carry similar provisions for this attempt so we duly packed some 18 cans of hot food which included such delights as spotted dick, beef and chilly and chicken surprise. What we had failed to appreciate was that our itinerary was so tight that we would never have the opportunity to open these cans let alone eat them so if any one wants some very well traveled hot pack meals I am sure Chris will be happy to negotiate a special price for these essential items that are a must for any record breaking attempt. By 1900 hours on the Wednesday evening the night before the off the boat was ready the team assembled and a final supper was called for, Charles Blois and Ali very kindly travelled down from Suffolk to be with us and so a very pleasant evening ensued. We decided that eights pits of old peculiar and a curry at the local might not be the best of ideas particularly as the team were apprehensive about the prospects of what lay ahead and comments like never again were ringing distantly in our ears.

Thursday the 20th dawned and a beautiful day was in prospect, Mel Wilby traveled from Fleet and met us in the lock as we were about to leave, it was really great to have so much support, the onus to succeed was now well and truly on us. We departed the lock and slowly made our way down river passing the Dome and the Thames Barrage, as soon as we were clear of the barrier we increased speed in order to meet with Anne our official timekeeper at Gravesend. We had only been underway for a matter of moments before we abruptly came to a shuddering stop, with nerves on edge and adrenalin pumping we discovered we had picked up some plastic sheeting round the port propeller, this we quickly cleared but we all secretly hoped this was not an omen for the rest of the trip. Chris not being at all superstitious!!! dismissed the occurrence and pushed on regardless to Gravesend.

Contact was made with Anne as we swept into Gravesend Reach and before we could turn around we had crossed the line and the attempt was under way. Our first stop was St Peters Port Guernsey, we had taken a light fuel load in London to ensure a fast time on this all important first leg, once underway the nerves began to subside and we settled down into a comfortable routine. We had decided to use the same watch keeping procedure as had been adopted the previous year, this involved two hours driving, two hours sleeping, two hours resting and two hours navigating before going back to driving, thus avoiding going from sleep to driving or navigating. Southend flashed passed as we cruised at a steady 45 knots, the Medway came and went and conditions were ideal. As we approached the Red Sand Towers old anti air craft gun emplacements left over from the second world war the wind started to increase and what had been a calm a delightful run rapidly deteriorated into a force 4/5 off the starboard bow. Chris was driving and the

boat was leaping from wave to wave landing heavily and without a single word being spoken we were all thinking how on earth are we going to take 60 plus hours of this. We rounded Northforland, rapidly passed Dover and headed out down the English Channel. I called Dover Coastguard to log our passage plan and when I advised them that we were bound for Monte Carlo in a RIB there was a pause for laughter whilst they took in what I had just said then a very efficient have a good trip and good luck was the reply from the authorities, they undoubtedly thought we were completely mad and they were probably right. Dover is always an uncomfortable area and today was no exception I had warned Chris that we may have some unsettled weather at the beginning of the attempt but also that it should improve the further west we went. By the time we passed the Isle of Wight the conditions had indeed started to improve, the sun was shining and the world looked good. Some five hours after crossing the start line at Tilbury we turned into St Peters Port for the first of our re fueling stops, the staff at Boatworks had been contacted by Mel and a space was open and waiting for us on the pontoon despite it being a peak holiday period. The re fueling took some 30 minutes and then we were off after having been interviewed by the local press, the next leg was the first of the big ones, Guernsey to Ushant, and then 350 miles of open sea across Biscay in the dark to La Corunna. The conditions could not have been better, the sea was flat calm and we were back to cruising at a steady 45/48 knots we were already on target to set a new record but we all knew that a vast amount of ocean lay ahead.

We passed along the North Brittany coast in near perfect conditions and crossed the Chenel de Four as the sun was slowly going down in the West, the Islands of Ushant appeared in hazy conditions and we turned south into the channel, a course that we would now follow until rounding Cape St Vincent off Portugal. The waters between these islands was confused with sloppy and large seas heaped up in all directions and we were forced to slow to 20 plus knots, these conditions were to prevail for the next couple of hours until we passed over the continental shelf and into two thousand plus meters of water. We stopped briefly at this point in order to done full survival dry suits and extra layers of Gortex for the cold night ahead, by now darkness had descended and the first of our night legs had begun. This is never an enjoyable experience and it is essential to maintain an extremely vigilant watch at all times, from past experience I knew that it was extremely likely that we would encounter many fishing boats on route and that the dangers associated with nets was very real. There was little or no moon so just pitch black as we continued on our way, at this point you have to drive the boat by feel as you cannot see any of the wave patterns, most of the time we got it right but we caught one wave very badly, took off into the blackness of the night and landed with a shuddering, boat breaking crash with all of us on top of each other. We rapidly checked the boat, all was well but this was a reminder of how exposed we were and how quickly disaster could strike. The watch system worked well and by 0200hrs we were off the approach to La Corunna having covered the 700 miles from London in under 18hours, we had made arrangements to re fuel in a marina at Sada, a small new development some 15 miles inland from La Corunna, this being the only fuel outlet that was open (by special arrangement) at this time of night. A number of small open fishing boats were surprised to see us flash past and as we rounded the entrance to the marina the fuel man was laying out the hoses, the engine hatches open and we were all set for a quick turn around,

service indeed. The boat was re fueled in less than twenty minutes and after a short comfort stop we were again on our way, things were going well and we were still on target but now with Biscay behind us. Sleeping on Seahound is a challenge in itself, the extra fuel tank is positioned immediately in front of the aft seat and the only place in which to lie down is on the seat next to the tank, the problem is that if the boat takes off over a wave as it lands you get body slammed into the seat so consequently not much sleep is possible.

The run down the Spanish and Portuguese coast was uneventful, conditions were good and we maintained an excellent average speed. In the planning stage I knew that the weather was likely to deteriorate as we closed Cape St Vincent, this is a notorious headland and the sea conditions here can be desperately awful, as predicted the further south we traveled so the wind increased. The seas increased and by the time we were within 80 miles of the headland we were in a full force five possibly six with large braking seas all around us. This was the time for care, definitely no heroics, our time benefit was rapidly eroded and for the first time we fell behind and were now outside of the existing record time. That did not matter just keep the boat moving and hope to make up the lost time on the next leg, weather conditions in the Med were supposed to be ideal and we could make up our lost time there. We rounded the headland in a cloud of spray and rough water, winds were now in excess of 40 knots and a degree of apprehension was evident on board. Our next fuel stop was in Lagos, we entered the harbour to be enthusiastically greeted by Helens sister, family and supporters, fresh sandwiches, a can of cold beer and a chance to relax for a few minutes was a welcome relief. We had by now been on the go for some 30 hours and this short break was very welcome.

On leaving the harbour the wind was still howling so much for calmer conditions, the sea was really uncomfortable, confused and from all directions, we tried everything to ease the ride even running almost on the beach all to no avail so no choice but to bite the bullet and drive through it. This was one of the worst parts of the journey, as we closed the Straights of Gibraltar so darkness fell for the second night and we were tired and battling very difficult conditions. Chris took a rest or rather four hours of body slamming on the aft seat, I took the helm and Jan navigated, the conditions could not have been worse pitch dark, shipping everywhere and the last straw our trusty shore support Mel called us and advised us that fog was likely in the Straits. Sure enough about an hour later we hit the fog bank, full attention now on radar as we passed in and out of extensive fog banks. Slowly however the seas eased and as we approached Europa Point so Chris surfaced to enquire where we were and if his boat was still in one piece. We arrived of Europa Point at 0012 hrs were timed in by our friends in Gibraltar and the first good news of the day was that we had set a new world record for the fastest time from London to Gibraltar.

After a short stop we continued, Chris took the helm and I had a sleep, seas now flat calm but misty so back up to good speed, hopefully we could now make up the time lost earlier. Dawn broke to an idyllic Mediterranean flat calm with the promise of a great day ahead, we were once again making close to 48 knots and on a mission to make up lost time. We stopped of Cartagena to transfer fuel from the deck tank to the main tanks, this

was a process that we had been using throughout the attempt and it had worked faultlessly. Fresh from a short sleep I took the helm and accelerated away only to lose power on one of the engines almost immediately. This was a concern but when coupled with a battery problem we had experienced during the night we realized that if we lost the other engine we might not be able to re start, desperate measures were now required to solve the problem with the down engine, the fuel system was bled and we restarted only to lose the same engine almost immediately. We had come so far and could not accept failure at this point, the engine was again bled and once again we got it going, this time all was well air had been introduced into the fuel system during the fuel transfer probably due to us being so tired. The battery problem was a worry so we called Mel and arranged for a new battery to be on the quay when we arrived at our next stop in Ibiza. Conditions were fantastic, hot sunny weather, no wind, dolphins and whales joining us and flying fish leaping out of the water and showing us the way, this more than made up for the terrible night the day before.

Ibiza appeared in a haze and in no time we were mooring up on the fuel quay for our last fuel stop of the challenge but where was our battery, a quick call to Mel confirmed the battery was on the quay but which quay. In all of the confusion the battery had been sent to another marina on the other side of the Island, no time to wait now as we were still very tight on time so nothing for it but to push on and hope for the best.

The coast of Ibiza rapidly disappeared behind and in no time we were chasing along the north coast of Majorca, I asked Chris how much further we had to go, no problem he said just 400 miles, Oh that's all right should be in Monte Carlo in 8 hours. The sense of impending success slowly enveloped all of the crew no one dared to speak let alone even half suggest that we might get the record, as the hours passed so the tension grew the conditions also worsened and that was not in the plan. The French coast was now less than three hours away and for the third night it started to get dark, conditions were less than ideal a large following sea and 20 plus knots of wind don't break anything now was the only comment from all on board. Finally after some 61 hours at sea we crossed the finishing line indicated by a flare from the Monaco Yacht Club. It is difficult to describe the feelings on board we had beaten the previous record by over two hours and had established a new outright world record for the epic voyage from London to Monte Carlo.

As we tied up in Monte Carlo surrounded by superyachts of the world elite a waiter from the Monaco Yacht Club arrived carrying a silver tray down the jetty with four glasses and a bottle of champagne, we had arrived in style and were on top of the world.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking all of those who helped us achieve this dream without your help and encouragement it would not have been possible.

John Puddifoot

Record Statistics:

Total distance 2392 statute miles

Average speed 39.07mph (including all stops)

Time taken 61 hours 12 minutes 48 seconds

Team

Chris Strickland (Skipper), John Puddifoot, Jan Falkowski, Gordon Compton