

FOR THE RECORD

INTERVIEW BY STUART STREULI

Farr Looks Back While Looking Forward

AS MUCH AS HE ENJOYS DESIGNING SAILBOATS, BRUCE FARR DOESN'T have much trouble imagining what he'd do if he decided to retire. "I'm a quite keen downhill skier," says the native New Zealander, who now makes his home in Annapolis, Md. "Never quite felt like I've done enough of it. One day, I'd like to be a ski bum for a season." For the moment though, plans of a winter in the Rockies chasing fresh tracks are on indefinite hold. For starters, there's his unquenched thirst to win the America's Cup. With that goal in mind, Farr is back for a second tour of

duty with Larry Ellison's BMW Oracle Racing team. While those responsibilities limit the time he can spend working for his design firm, he's by no means resting on his laurels there either, expanding its presence in the European dominated Open 60 fleet and looking for the next big thing in the sport of sailing.

Ian Burns is BMW Oracle Racing's design coordinator for this campaign. Has that changed your role?

Not a lot. Ian's role is fairly broad. I've still had quite a bit of involvement in

leading and directing the hull design side of the operation. I think that this design group is probably more organized into specific groups than what I'm used to in the past.

Do you feel as involved in this campaign as the last one?

I feel more involved in hull development because I've got more time for it. So that's a positive from my standpoint. And I think the downside of being more involved in hull design is I'm less involved in other parts of it, so I have a little less

overall view of the complete design.

Does that make you less emotionally invested in the performance of the boat as a whole?

Perhaps differently emotionally invested, in that you have a stronger tie to your area, perhaps a little less feeling of design responsibility for the whole thing. You just become more focused on one part of it.

During the 2003 campaign, the BMW Oracle design team initially produced a stiff boat, with less sail area, and spent the Louis Vuitton Cup steadily giving it more power. Do you feel you hit the target a little better with USA-87?

We have a lot more experience, so we damn well should've. Last time we got quite misled by the testing we did in Ventura [Calif.] for several reasons. The wind conditions were very steady, and they reduced the premium for sail power. I think there was a bit of course bias, which, in retrospect, tended to reduce the negative effects of having smaller sail area downwind. Those conditions pushed us in a direction, that didn't work so well in Auckland. We did quite a bit of work with the existing boats [in Valencia], and our new boat is in many respects a response to what the sailors felt they wanted in terms of the trade-off between higher stability versus light air speed.

How has your passion for winning the Cup changed?

I think my approach has changed a lot with the way the sport has changed. You go back to 1985, '86, and '87, it was a much smaller group, especially on the technical side. It was probably more reliant on designer experience and guesswork than it is today. It's become a more technically oriented task, and generally I like that less than the more artistic ap-

BMW Oracle Racing hull designer Bruce Farr (left) and Formula 1 driver Ralf Schumacher both benefit from BMW's engineers in their sporting pursuits.



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proach of 20 or 30 years ago. It's more like hard work than some sort of artistic pleasure.

Have you pulled back from your responsibilities at Farr Yacht Design?

To do this job [with BMW Oracle] and lead a sane life, I had to reduce the amount of work I do at Farr Yacht Design. But I haven't really pulled back from design responsibilities. I still do a lot of the design work and I still have a lot of conceptual control over the projects that go on there.

From the American sailor's perspective, it's been a while since a new high-profile Farr design hit the water. The Farr 40 is now 10 years old. We haven't seen the bigger raceboats. Are you in a bit of a slump?

There's less opportunity for showcasing new designs. We no longer have IMS racing at the forefront, where people are madly building boats and you can show whether you're good or bad at any given time. If you go over the last few years, we've had some good runs—although not necessarily all of it obvious in the U.S. The Transpac 52 is a class in which we've gone and done well, especially in the U.S. We've done quite well in Open 60s, which was a new arena for us four years ago. We did one boat [J.P. Dick's Virbac] that has shown some very good performance—good

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enough that we now have a bunch of French clients coming to us. We were quite active in the tail end of the IMS as it stagnated. We've had some Beneteau production boats that have been really big successes. I think where we have missed a little is that we haven't been able to get any commissions, until recently, for big flat-out ocean racing boats. We missed the maxZ86 thing in the U.S. We're late entering the 100-foot class boats.

Why haven't you been able to land those big projects?

The people who are doing all those boats haven't been people who are traditionally our clients, so it's pretty hard to win them from someone else. And we haven't had any of our traditional clients leap into that area. We're hoping to change that because we do have a possible one coming along.

What's your reaction to the performance of the four Farr boats in the Volvo Ocean Race?

We're obviously disappointed. But I think that reflects a lot of things. ABN AMRO did a huge job with their program in a lot of areas. They did a good job in design. They had the benefit of a two-boat program. I think they had a huge benefit from being early and funded. All of our boats were single-boat programs. They were all pretty late. I think the Volvo demonstrates, and it wouldn't be the first time, that an early, well-funded two-boat program puts you a long way ahead of the pack.

One of my biggest disappointments from this race was not being able to convince two of our clients to work together. In fact, what we saw was almost the opposite. All of them were paranoid of working with anyone else, including us. If two of those guys had said, 'OK, let's work together to both lift our game,' I think it may have been quite a different race.

September will see another Farr 40 Worlds. This one, in Newport, R.I., is rumored to be the biggest ever.

It's always nice to see that Farr 40 movement, and other events



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like it, where the boats have succeeded. With the Farr 40s, in particular, I think they offer some of the absolute best top-end racing you can get for keelboats. The guys that do the racing—the owners, the professionals, the general sailors—they just all love that competition because they're all one design.

For years, pundits predicted that each Farr 40 Worlds will be the last big one. This year's regatta is no exception. Does that bother you?

No, I'm pretty far removed from most of that. But the real proof is that they continue to be a strong class and they are building new boats.

What's the next movement in sailing that will have the impact of the Farr 40?

I'm not sure. The Farr 40 thing was really a reaction to an opportunity that arose as IMS became too difficult for a lot of people. The Farr 40 clicked at the right size, attracted some good people, and just sort of blossomed from there. If you look at the situation now and say, 'What's missing from sailing?' it's perhaps almost the opposite. There's a lot of one-design sailing, but we're missing on a handicap rule that will deal with a lot of diverse boats, that can encourage grand-prix racing. So there's no outlet for high-level competition in a creative environment.

Is the TP 52 class not creative?

Yes, in a limited way. It's filled a void because it gives people some creativity in how they approach their boat shape. That's been good. The ORC classes might gather enough momentum to do the same thing. But all those things are halfway between a

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rating rule and a one-design. You can't run a regatta of a whole bunch of different-sized boats with a box rule.

Does this new rule have to be based on a velocity prediction program, like IMS?

It doesn't have to be. When you look back at RORC and IOR—CCA as well—they perhaps squandered opportunities to use the rating-rule format to encourage good types of boats, but still rate them reasonably fairly. IMS lost an opportunity because it started off trying to be a rule for dual-purpose boats, not race boats. It was always trying to correct high-performance features to protect existing fleets. The same thing happened in IOR; both rules turned inwards on themselves in terms of encouraging development of more speed. [We need] a rule that says, 'OK, we're going to shepherd boats into a good place. We're only going to do it for race boats—and cruising boats, if you want to come along—but we're not going to do a rule that favors the cruising boats just to try to keep some perceived market alive. We're going to try to make the rule promote good boats.' So a deep VCG is good, a light displacement within reason is good. A generous sail area is good if you want exciting race boats. If you try to make all the race boats look like a conservative cruising boat, the racing guys won't want to sail them.

What about yourself? Still sailing the Megabyte?

I get out to eight to 10 racing evenings in a year. At my age I feel the need to do things like that to sharpen up a bit and there's nothing like sailing a dinghy to sharpen up my reflexes. Plus it's sailing I can do and do everything, which is nice. ♦