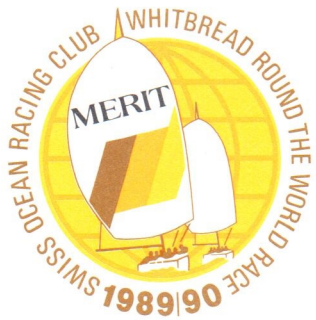


KETCH OR SLOOP ?

The question which dominated the 5th running of the Whitbread Round the World Race was undoubtedly whether ketch or sloop-rig was the ideal design for such an event.

In the end, the two New Zealand ketches won the race, but it is interesting to analyse why the Swiss Ocean Racing Club chose to build "Merit" as a sloop, finishing third overall to the two leading ketches.

The success of "Merit's" skipper Pierre Fehlmann, winner of the previous Whitbread and many other major races, has been built on his experience with and complete mastery of the fine-tuning and racing of yachts rigged as sloops.

Initial discussions with Bruce Farr, the designer of "Merit", proceeded from that basis, and Farr did not suggest alternatives. At that period, the New Zealanders were involved in the same line of research on hull designs.

The SORC programme called for "Merit" to be launched about a year before the start of the race, in order to optimise her preparation and eliminate any problems that were revealed. The schedule was met and the training programme that followed was crucial to the fact that "Merit" dominated all the sloops in the Whitbread.

With the yacht already building, Fehlmann heard that Grant Dalton, skipper of "Fisher & Paykel", was working on the design of a ketch. After discussing the question in depth with Farr, it was decided not to modify the Swiss yacht during its construction. Farr himself seemed (at that time at least) not to convinced of the virtue of a ketch.

At the request of the Swedes, he however designed his fourth yacht for that race as a ketch (her construction had been interrupted for some time for financial reasons). The yacht was "The Card", which finished more than five days behind "Merit" overall. Had "Merit" been modified at the last minute, she would have been roughly in the same situation.

Dalton's "Fisher & Paykel" was already in the water and Peter Blake's "Steinalger 2" was still in the shipyard when an incident occurred which, at first sight disastrous, was to prove a major advantage for Blake.

The hull of the first "Steinlager 2" showed such major problems when it was taken out of the mould that it had to be abandoned, and a new hull built.

Blake's team put the time apparently lost to good use, asking Farr to conduct a long series of computer simulations with different variants of ketch rigs - a task about which Farr was not initially enthusiastic.

One of the models in this programme was of a ketch with a main mast rigged as 7/8. It was a revelation. The IOR measurement rule which only slightly penalises mizzen and staysails thus allowed a considerable increase in the size of the mizzen mast and lengthening of the hull. The real "Steinlager 2" was born...

The question now is what decisions the IOR will take on the current measurement rule. which takes little account of the various sails linked to the mizzen mast.

If there is no change, there will be a host of new ketches. If however, as often in the past, the IOR corrects the more extreme tendencies, the balance between the two rigs will probably be re-established.