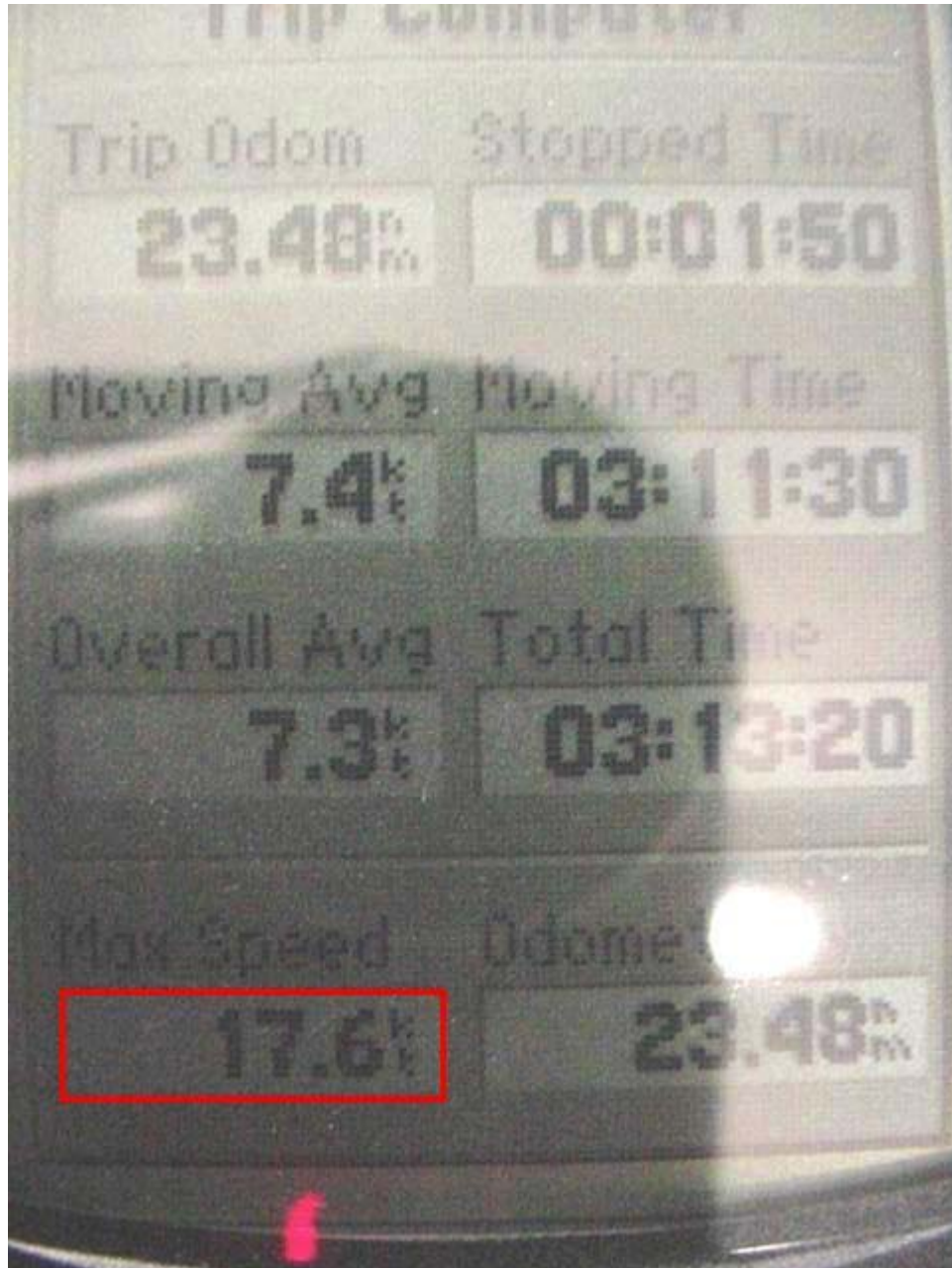
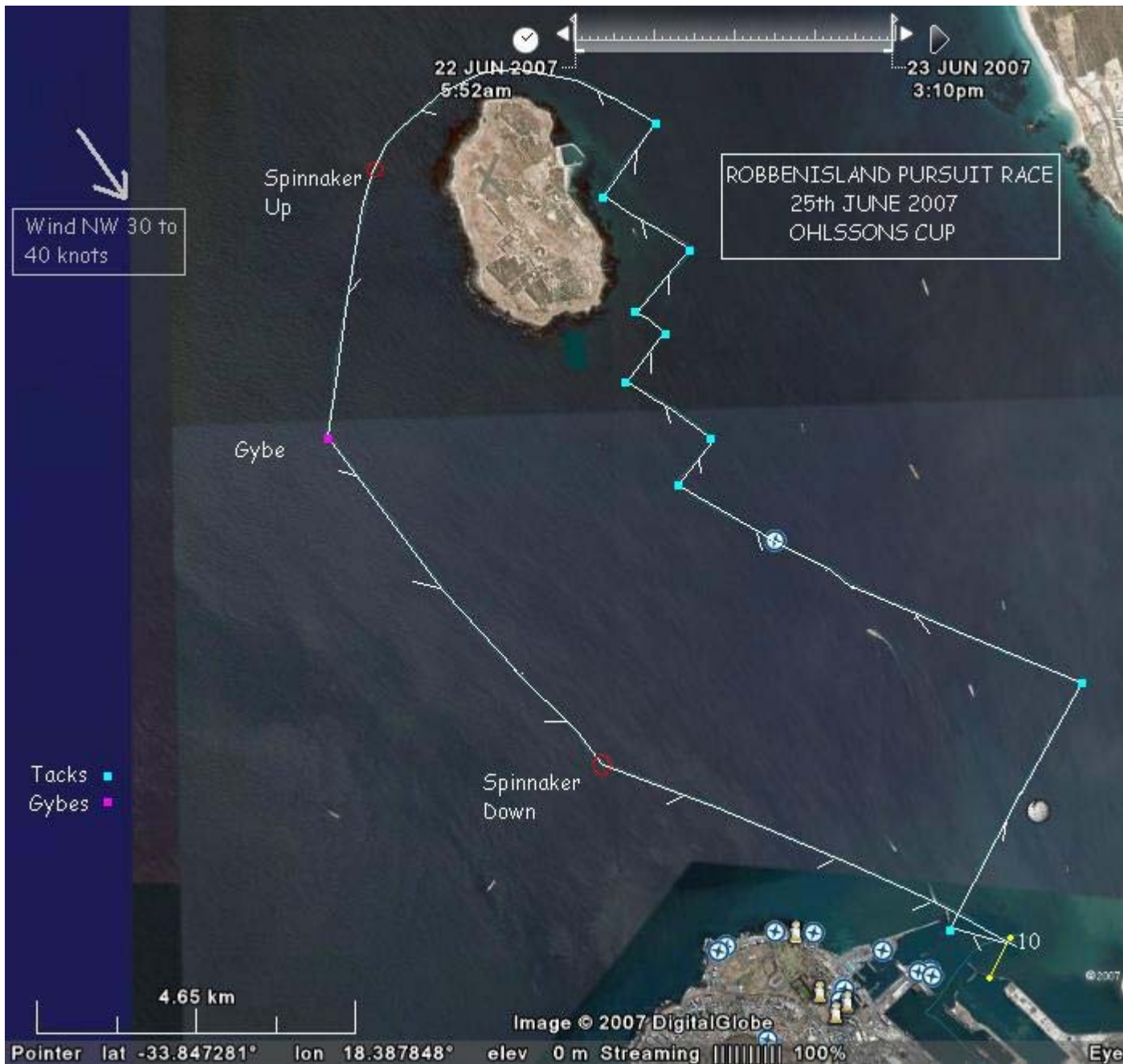


# NEW J27 SPEED RECORD!!!!



*Above: Proof of our new speed record set on Saturday 22nd June, 2007 during the Robben Island Race*

**ROBBEN ISLAND PURSUIT RACE  
22nd JUNE, 2007**



“Deliciously terrifying” - That’s about the best way to describe this race. Not only did we have the satisfaction of being one of the smallest boats to complete the race, but we also finished on the podium (3rd overall) having been beaten by the Mumm 36 ‘Ballyhoo Too’ and the ILC 40 ‘Gumpton’ respectively. These were relatively minor achievements as the real glamour of the day went to a breathtakingly fast, downwind sleigh ride in 35 knots of winter gale with huge waves. Add to that a brand new speed record for Smackwater Jack of 17,6 knots – smashing our previous record of 16,6 in the process.

I wouldn’t have missed this one for all the tea in China.

The newspaper banners were all shouting 'COLD, RAIN, SNOW FOR CAPE', so I knew the race would either be cancelled or it would just be a hell of a tough race. It was the latter.

There were forty four odd boats entered when I checked the notice board and the course, which was simple enough stated: "Start at #10 (Starboard) – Robben Island (Port) – Finish #10 (Port)"

Whilst we were rigging the boat at about 10h30 on Saturday morning, the wind was about 15 knots North West and the skies were blue – actually very pleasant conditions considering it is mid winter – but there was a distinct chill in the air, so I told the crew to dress warmly. As we left the dock and motored into the main dock, the weather changed abruptly. Suddenly there were banks of dark clouds rolling in and the wind picked up to well over 25 knots. The outboard was struggling a bit, so we hoisted the main so we could motor-sail out of the harbour.

Our start was scheduled for 11h49, so we had about 20 minutes to check things out. As we headed towards the outer breakwater, some boats were already heading back in. Boats were calling race control to announce their retirements one after the other. Of the twenty one boats that ventured out to the start area, eleven had retired before the race even began. Things were a little wild out there to be fair. Our sparring partners, the J27 'Pure Magic' also retired which we were a little disappointed with, but Alan must have had his reasons. Some of the gusts riding up ahead a major pre frontal system were very strong – up to 40 knots, so we decided for safety's sake, to stick in a reef. Our rule of thumb is that we never reef, but something about the sea state and the sky colour, made me go against our standard procedure. It turned out to be a very astute decision. We would have been in a spot of trouble otherwise.

The skippers in Cape Town are a tough, well-salted bunch and the rate of retirees bears testimony to the conditions out on the bay. To be fair, there was a Tri-nations rugby international between South Africa and New Zealand on the big screen in the clubhouse and a nice, big fire in the hearth. Nonetheless, I doubt skippers would have taken the trouble to arrange crew, rig, get to the start area and then return to watch the rugby. I digress.....Back to the wet stuff.

We had about six boats which started ahead of us. Behind us, we had all the big boats. It would turn into a day of carnage as the sea and wind dealt swiftly with most of the competitors. It was a much smaller fleet that actually started the race.

Our start was obviously no problem as we were the only boat in that specific time slot. We went off on a short starboard tack remaining in the lee of the western breakwater to make use of whatever flat water we could find – and let me assure you, there wasn't much! The boat actually felt well balanced with the reefed main and the #3 sheeted fairly full for power, to get through the waves. Even so, the main wasn't doing much work at all and we were easily getting to 6.5 knots on the beat. We tacked just under the head of the

breakwater for a long port tack out into the bay. Immediately we realised one of our biggest problems would be avoiding floating kelp – and there was lots of it. Conditions for the guys on the pointy end of the boat were, shall we say ‘character building’, with ice cold gusty wind and sheets of spray coming over the bow. Every now and then the boat would plunge over a sharp wave and bury her bow half a meter under water. This wall of water would come rushing over the decks, swamping and physically moving the crew from their positions. It was getting very rough. The guys up front were calling the kelp: “Up, up up!!!! OK OK Down, down!!” It’s not so easy going up when you are already close hauled. Each of those luffs to avoid kelp would see our speed coming right down to 5 knots or less. Conversely sailing down would make us lose plenty of height. As it was, we were sailing fat for power and speed, rather than height with the compass indicating a tacking angle of 91 degrees. After 4 miles, we stuck in a tack to head directly into the waves and towards the island. Our boat speed went up to 6,6 knots. The odd steep waves would see us come crashing down with the whole boat shuddering on impact. Boat speed down by one knot and then work it back up to speed again. It was hard work and Charles was grunting with effort as he had to perpetually work the mainsheet through the waves. It was about at that point that Charles noticed a meter long tear along the leech of our fairly new mainsail. It appeared to have ripped out from the leech tape and had split fully between the 3rd and 4th battens. We would just have to live with it and it was unlikely to affect our speed by much. I just hoped it wouldn’t tear any further. Stresses on the boat were enormous – particularly so when falling off wave faces at speed.

Up ahead, we had the L26 in our sights and much further, the Miura ‘Apricot’. At least we had something visual to gauge our performance by. We gradually drew ahead of the L26.

Dead upwind we had the dangerous ‘Dyang Family’ reef (so named after a freighter which ran aground there in the seventies). Massive rollers were thundering over the reef and we were heading directly towards it. Then we were suddenly back in kelp territory again. Tons of it floating around and so difficult to spot in between the sharp crests of waves which were already getting into the four meter range. Which was worse? A headered tack or sailing into kelp? We decided the kelp was the worse evil, so we tacked back onto port heading out into the deeper water of the channel. In the process we crossed ahead of the L26. Our next quarry would be the Miura – a 30ft cruiser/racer and renowned for their heavy weather abilities. We were confident we could overtake them on the long downwind leg as that design cannot plane and we sure as hell would be!

A series of tacks in the lee of the island followed dictated by kelp, heading and flat water. We were steadily gaining on the Muira, but behind us the bigger boats were also closing on us. Behind us one of the boats was in trouble – their mast snapped off at the lower spreaders and the rig was in the water. It turned out to be Connie Papageorge’s 33foot X Boat - “Zebra” Now we were only nine boats left in the race. It was getting bitterly cold especially so for the foredeck guys and our bowman specifically, who is a skinny guy. He must have been frozen, but typically he never complains.

We were nearing the northern (dangerous) tip of the island and about to cross tacks with

the Muira. Inexplicably they carried on going out to sea leaving us in first place around the north of the island – the halfway mark. The leg had taken about two hours to cover a distance of 14 nautical miles.

Most of the big boats had benefited from a big starboard shift behind the island. Looking at our GPS track it is clear, we did not benefit from the same shift.

The Farr 40 ‘Aladdin’ was cutting the corner of the island dangerously close. There are reefs all along that shore, but the big danger is the size of the waves, which lift ponderously in great green walls of solid water to thunder down on the shore. The shore is littered with wrecks – to me they had large neon signs reading “DON’T COME NEAR HERE SONNY!” (I was obedient)

We were still sailing fat and fast, whilst the Farr 40 was pinching to get around the reefs, so we remained in the lead, but we had a whole host of boats on our tail as we bore off around the north western corner of the island. Whilst the northern shore of the island has the most wrecks, the western shore has more reefs and a shore break which starts several hundred meters offshore. This is dangerous stuff, so we headed well out to sea, behind any evidence of white rollers. As we were progressively able to free off, our boat speed kept on increasing till we were doing a steady 9 to 11 knots with frequent extended forays into the planing zone. We were able to hold our lead over the bigger boats, but it was inevitable that they would overhaul us in time, so we got ready to hoist the spinnaker. Things were hairy with the boat bobbing and rocking, plummeting and leaping over wave crests. It was exciting stuff, but the big league roller coaster ride was lying in waiting in the form of the yellow .75 oz. spinnaker.

We waited for a lull and gave the call “OK – KITE UP!” It was a smooth hoist and the sail set immediately. The turbos came on and the boat speed climbed immediately to 13 knots. We were all concentrating too hard after that to look at the log. To our left the Mumm 36 had her spinnaker up as well and did a huge Chinese gybe allowing us back into the lead. We were cranking down the wave faces. Unpredictable. Every wave different. The helm was mainly feather light as the foils howled their song of protest. As each wave would lift the stern, we would accelerate abruptly with first Waldo, then Tyran, furiously cranking the winch controlling the spinnaker sheet. The apparent wind would come forward in less than a second and I would have to steer deep onto a run and beyond to prevent the kite collapsing – then back up the next wave as the speed bled from 16 knots down to 13 – but that’s where we remained. The guys were all speechless, scared, amazed, thrilled, wide eyed and loving it. The longer we were able to plane at these speeds without broaching, the more our confidence grew. Behind us, the Farr and other boats declined flying spinnakers and we simply disappeared from their view.

Our heading was determined by that fine pre-determined groove that one gets into with high-speed sailing – but this heading was way too low. After the initial surge of high octane adrenaline subsided, I told the crew we needed to gybe. After a brief, but sensible discussion, we decided we would strike, granny tack (in lieu of the torn leech on the mainsail and a great reluctance by any of us to take a dip in the Atlantic), and rehoist on

the port gybe – however it would be a weather hoist, complicating matters a bit, but we had little choice in the matter. The manoeuvre went off smoothly and we sailed 'two sail reaching' for a minute or two waiting for a lull before getting the kite back up again. Having a first class bowman like Tyran proved its worth and up she went, filling instantly with the big horsepower kicking in. It was another four miles of breathtaking speed with plumes of white water peeling off the bow five meters into the air – higher than our lower spreaders – obliterating the view. The boat humming and groaning as we charged from wave to wave. Some of the waves would tilt the boat forward at about 15 degrees and hold us there for 30 seconds or longer - roaring downhill at 16 knots plus and then plowing the bow into the next uphill with cascades of water foaming over the boat and out the back. Then Charles heaved a big sigh and said very loudly: “EISH!”

We were all smiling and laughing. Adrenaline junkies to the core. We were actually holding it together. We had done more than eight miles of this super fast surfing and planing and not one broach. Simon was lightning quick on the vang control and the whole team was working together in an efficient manner – each understanding the consequences of a mistake very clearly. Between the spray and the incredible volume of noise (the VHF repeater in the cockpit which I normally find too loud was inaudible) I could make out what looked like a lighthouse in the distance. That meant we were way too deep as it was Mouille Point Light and we would have to take the kite down and do a two sail reach through to the finish at a ninety degree wind angle.

It was one of those days where looking at the plotter and making intelligent tactical decisions were not happening. It was simply a matter of head in the general direction of south and hold on for dear life and try not to broach. The strike was smooth and we were soon planing along on a two sail beam reach at 11 knots- which ironically felt dreadfully pedestrian after the sustained 15 and 16 knot runs we had been doing. The bigger boats were starting to close us down without our spinnaker up, but it would have spelt a certain broach if we had tried, so we just focused on surfing the waves to the best of our ability.

We could see ‘Ballyhoo Too’ and ‘Gumption’ to our left and about a mile ahead heading toward the finishing line. Once around the breakwater, we got the spinnaker ready for the final burst through to the line, but as luck would have it, we got a big 40 knot gust with a massive wave set at the same time, which sent us on another of those blistering downhill charges with Tyran still sitting on his haunches on the bow with the spinnaker in his arms - white water foaming under his armpits. This man is cool as ice. Nothing seems to fluster him! It would not be necessary to hoist – our third place was easily secured.

Once back in the harbour, I checked the GPS and there it was: 17,6 knots. I reckon this record will stand for a very long time. So to celebrate, we put the kite back up inside the harbour to see what sort of speed we could get on flat water, but it was a mediocre 12.4 knots. After showers and beers back at the clubhouse, the rugby held little allure for us. We had all just lived through three of the best hours of our lives. Memories we will take to our graves. Happy and contented sailors.

I salute the J27 – what a bullet proof boat!