

HOME WATERS

FROM INNER CITY TO OFFSHORE

A group of teenagers from north London became the first state school crew to compete in the Fastnet race. Theo Stocker went to find out how they did it

Words & pictures Theo Stocker



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Scaramouche and
her can-do crew
during the Fastnet
and, right, training
on the Solent

Scaramouche was surfing downwind in 25 knots of breeze with a building sea. It was pitch dark and the boat was rolling like crazy. One wrong move and Scaramouche could broach. In the middle of a wild Irish Sea, 17-year-old Montel Fagan-Jordan was at the helm of a thoroughbred racing yacht in one of the world's most famous offshore races, the Fastnet. Surrounding him was not a professional crew of hardened sailors, but fellow students from an inner-city London state school.

The Fastnet Race is not an event to be trifled with. The tragedy of the 1979 race, with the unforecast gale and resulting loss of life is seared into public memory. So just how did Greig City Academy become the first state school to compete in the Fastnet Race? I joined the crew for a training day on Southampton Water to find out first hand.

The story that brought them there is an inspiring one. Greig City Academy is in Haringey in north-east London, scene of the riots in 2011 and where almost three-quarters of the school's pupils qualify for free school meals. This isn't somewhere normally associated with sailing, but outside the school is parked a motley assortment of boats. The secret lies with the school's head of sixth form, Jon Holt, a quietly unassuming geography teacher who enjoys sailing. He believed in the benefits of

adventurous training for young people and his vision to get kids afloat has been fuelled by the enthusiasm of the boys and girls at his school and the support of the head teacher, Paul Sutton.

Several years ago, Jon found an old, half-rotten Mirror dinghy on eBay and started an after-school project to restore it, with the promise that the pupils who helped would get to sail it. Soon, a small group headed down to Poole Harbour one weekend and the sailing club was born. Before long, one small boat wasn't enough and two GP14s, two Hobie Cats and a McGregor Venturer 22 trailer-sailer were added to the club, all restored by the pupils. It got to the point that they needed something bigger to take more students sailing and to stretch their sea legs.

FUNDRAISING

Just then Scaramouche, a German Frers 45 came on the market. With a huge overlapping genoa, round hull sections and full running backstays, she is typical of the era and an out-and-out race boat, in no way a sail-training compromise. Jon wanted this to be more than just a brief outdoor education experience.

'We started with spending £100 on a boat that we did up



ourselves. Scaramouche is worth a lot more than that, but the pupils have been involved in the finances of buying and running it from the outset. They know what it costs and they've given over 50 talks to get the support to make things happen,' explained Jon, who refused to speak for the boys in a single one of their meetings. If they were going to do it, it was going to be the

students' responsibility and their achievement.

In June 2015, the sailors bought Scaramouche, but they still needed to fund her operating budget. Eventually, they found themselves in the office of Darren Doherty, CEO of insurance company Pioneer Underwriters. They pitched for part of the funds needed for the year leading up to their Fastnet campaign. Darren, a sailor himself, was so impressed by what he saw and heard that the boys walked out of his office with a title sponsor and the full amount.

Meanwhile, the sailing continued and interest grew in the school. Much of its sailing is still done in dinghies, in Poole Harbour and in London's Docklands. The school's yachts are cruised as often as they are raced and at the start of 2017 some of the more experienced sailors studied for their Day Skipper theory exam and later passed their practical qualification as well. They now form the core crew that lead the watches on board Scaramouche and help to train the younger pupils.

Having learned to sail Scaramouche, they entered the ASTO Cowes Small Ships Race in October 2015. Much to their surprise, they won.

All the crew help with the duties on board, including making the tea and helming. Above right: the top sailors race Etchells from Cowes

'IF I HADN'T STARTED SAILING I WOULDN'T STILL BE IN SCHOOL'

'We started off just cruising and this still forms the bulk of the sailing the school does,' said Jon. 'The racing has just been the pinnacle of what we've done.'

While the Fastnet Race crew were all boys – a limitation imposed by Scaramouche's total lack of privacy or divided accommodation – there is a strong representation of girls in the Greig City Academy sailing project, with their own race crew capable of competing in Scaramouche.

The project has given young people who lacked confidence a place to shine. In one race, Nader Soltan, known to be good at maths, was at the chart table checking the course. Montel asked which way he should round the next mark.

'Leave it to port,' came the reply. 'Are you sure?' Montel asked, puzzled. The rest of the fleet had gone the other way.

'Yes, I'm certain. I've double checked. The other boats are wrong.' Montel took his advice and led the fleet home to victory. Nader became the hero of the hour.

Next came Cowes Week and the Round the Island race, which they completed in a year when strong winds saw many yachts turn back and several sink. They sailed back into the pontoons with growing confidence in their own ability and a new-found credibility among the fleet.



They decided they needed a bigger goal to aim for. What better event than the Fastnet Race? Of course, they would have to get through the qualifying races to gain a place. Methodically, they ticked off the classic races: Cowes to St Malo, Dartmouth to Gosport, and the Myth of Malham Race from Cowes to the Eddystone Light and back. In the Cowes to Le Havre race, they finished 27th, beating some professional crews. People started to pay attention to the newcomers, listening as the Scaramouche crew outlined their ambitious plans.

'We give out leaflets when we're at events and do lots of networking,' explained Derek, 17. 'I met someone from Kemp Sails, and when I told him that we needed new sails for the boat, he offered us a brand new set of sails there and then.'

'We have always found that the sailing industry has been more than willing to help if we ask,' added Jon. 'We've had support from Lawrie Smith, Tracy Edwards and Robin Knox-Johnston. People have been interested in what we're doing and very generous. Etchells sailors David Franks and Matt Reid have taken our top sailors under their wing and given them coaching and they regularly compete in Etchells on the Solent, which has been hugely beneficial for developing their sailing.'

PROFESSIONAL HELP

While Jon was happy taking pupils sailing in the smaller boats, he decided to call in the professionals on Scaramouche. Yacht delivery company Halcyon Yachts provides professional skippers for every outing. Company founder Peter Green explained, 'Our skippers are responsible for safety on board and they are often qualified instructors too. The kids wear lifejackets at all times,





‘TO LEARN TO SAIL YOU JUST NEED TO BE ABLE TO LISTEN AND TO PERSEVERE’

GCA's novice sailors have a *Riot* in one of the school's smaller yachts

and it is the skipper's discretion when they need to clip on. We'll have a full safety briefing before every manoeuvre. It's not about pushing the limits to win, but about getting round the course safely.'

Most of the time, Jon quietly keeps a weather eye on everything that's going on, giving just an occasional prompt as and when required.

While the older boys get to grips with the big boat, the younger pupils also get the chance to spread their wings, and Jamal, Kayin and Shayan opted for a sail with Jon on *Riot*, the school's Intro 22 quarter-tonner. Together, they have already sailed *Riot* from Southampton to Cowes by themselves, with a RIB close by in support.

'It is nerve-wracking the first time you let them out by themselves,' said Jon. 'I get them to keep the topping lift up to keep the boom clear of their heads. We'll introduce the finer points of sail trim later on.'

'I've been sailing for a year now,' enthused Kayin, 14. 'I started because it sounded different to football or basketball. The head

teacher gave a talk on sailing and I volunteered straight away with Jamal and Shayan. I learned the fundamentals in a dinghy at first, including capsizing drill. To learn to sail you just need to be able to listen and to persevere. You have to keep going and keep concentrating – and that's resilience and diligence.'

'Sailing has definitely changed my behaviour,' agreed Shayan. 'You have to be on point and listen to the skipper and not argue back and that helps my behaviour in school.'

KNOCK-ON EFFECT

Behaviour, rather than academic performance, is one of the key principles for the pupils involved. 'One pupil had a 60% attendance record at school before he started sailing. Now it is over 90%,' explained Jon. 'It was hard trying to explain the point of sailing to his parents initially, but when they came on board the boat, they were blown away by what he could do.'

While behaviour is important, no one is allowed to use sailing as an excuse to slip behind on academic work. School work is regularly taken on cruises and those sailing Fastnet qualifying

A SAILING EDUCATION ON THE FASTNET RACE

17-year-old helmsman Montel Fagan-Jordan explains what the Fastnet Race meant to him

The start of the Fastnet Race 2017 was a frantic affair. Rigging problems, combined with a whirlwind of media attention meant we only just made the start. Starting upwind, we threaded our way through the fleet but yachts seemed to come out of nowhere. We prioritised safety and lost out by ducking beneath other boats as it became clear just how competitive everyone else was.

The first days were a slog up to the Fastnet rock, beating all the way. The conditions were rough passing The Needles but then the wind dropped to around 10 knots, which suits *Scaramouche* with her huge overlapping genoa. We got into a two-watch system of four hours on, four hours off, giving us a strong sense of responsibility to our opposite number to be on deck promptly. The time seemed to go very quickly and once into the watch system, we buckled down and got on with it.

It was great to see the Fastnet Rock in daylight but frustrating that the wind died and we sat becalmed being pushed back by the tide. Eventually we did get round, the spinnaker went up and we were off back to England. The wind built, leading to my highlight of the race: four special hours at night in the middle of the Irish Sea.

Scaramouche was surfing downwind in 25 knots of breeze with a building sea. It was 0200 and was pitch dark. *Scaramouche* is great upwind but rolls like crazy downwind,



accentuated by the huge masthead spinnaker. Surfing on *Scaramouche* is exhilarating: noisy, fast and wet. As we approached Land's End most of the crew were asleep down below. By instinct, I did what I had done for years on *Scaramouche*:

wait for the following wave, turn into it a bit but not too much to prevent a broach. As we come off the surf my brain tells me to steer the other way, but I can feel the point at which we could gybe. We were doing this for hour after hour, each wave exactly the same and then it dawned on me.

Making a mistake on an Etchells can be scary, but one wrong move on the helm of *Scaramouche* could start a broach. On a 45ft yacht in the dark and out of sight of land, that could be life threatening. All it needs is for one broach, and with *Scaramouche* on her side, a falling hand-held radio or cooking pan could cause serious injury.

In school we are always told about responsibility and the need to concentrate. I understand that it's a skill we need, but right there in the middle of the Irish Sea, the need for concentration and responsibility is immediate and practical. In sailing, your focus is heightened like nowhere else, because you have to. In the end we finished 146th out of over 350 yachts, so I was pleased. I was most pleased, however, that we finished safely.

I'd love to pursue a future in sailing, with a place on a proper racing yacht. I have a possible opportunity to join a university in the USA with a sailing academy but I would need to cover the tuition fees. I want to give something back to the sailing community and inspire other young people.



Montel Fagan-Jordan is the lead helmsman on *Scaramouche*

racers during their GCSEs were put to work when most sailors would be heading for shoreside comforts. The school is fully behind the sailing project and teachers will often come along for the ride or meet the boat in harbour, to help the sailors catch up with missed lessons.

'The staff love following us on the Marine Traffic website,' Jon said. 'Sometimes our head teacher Paul will see where we are and text us with suggestions of tactics.'

On board, Montel is the lead helmsman, and confidently takes charge of manoeuvres as we tack down Southampton Water towards Calshot.

'Ready about,' he shouts to his crew. 'Get the genoa in, a bit more ... there, that's good.' It's hard to imagine but asserting himself and raising his voice is something that Montel has had to learn to do on board.

One of the original crew members, Karim, explained the excitement of racing. 'When you're offshore and the boat heels over, the adrenaline starts pumping. It's a bit harder at night when it's cold, raining and you want to sleep, but it's still fun.'

DEREK KAWEKE: 'SAILING HAS KEPT ME IN SCHOOL'

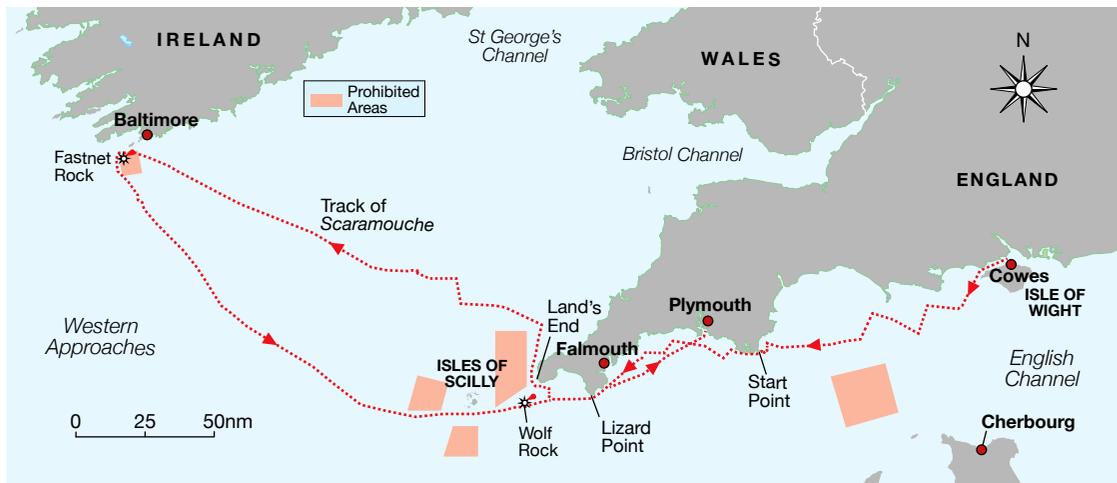
'I started sailing in Year 10 after a teacher sent me to Mr Holt and asked him to "shake me up a bit". I have to behave in school to earn the right to go sailing and I started to sort myself out. I moved from sailing dinghies to yachts and got involved with giving talks about what we were doing. I've started supervising too; as older students we mentor the younger ones.'

My mum is really supportive of my sailing and thinks I should stick to it, and dad is gradually coming to



understand it. I want to go to university and I just need to decide what to study. If I hadn't started sailing I wouldn't still be in school and it's helped boost my grades. I always used to be late and I wasn't bothered, but I've got an interest in sailing now and

I don't want to be kicked off the team. Sailing builds your character. Offshore racing isn't something people our age normally do, but when you're sailing, you have to be mature and positive. You don't have a choice.'



FASTNET RESULTS
Finish in IRC Overall: 146th
 (362 starters)
Finish in IRC Three: 37th
Distance sailed: 670 miles
Total time: 4d 13h 59m 19s
Corrected time: 4d 16h 44m 18s



The route of the Fastnet race shows the scale of their achievement. Right and below, Scaramouche in full flight

Montel agreed. 'I love sailing round the cans. With boats close together, there's more atmosphere and the action is in quick bursts so it's more exciting. Sailing offshore though feels like a bigger achievement.'

Finally the crew were ready for the Fastnet. With a mixture of nerves, excitement and pride, they set off for the start line on 6 August. Ahead of them lay six days of offshore racing, their longest time together on the boat without a break. After a clean start in strong headwinds, the wind faded so that they ghosted around the Fastnet Rock against the tide. On the return leg, the wind filled in again until Scaramouche was surfing down the waves, under spinnaker day and night.

REAPING THE AWARDS

The crew finished the race 146th out of a fleet of over 350 race crews. They won the Musto Media Award for the best media campaign during the build up to the race, and since finishing they have won the RYA Award for Endeavour and been nominated for two Young Sailor of the Year awards. Over the last year, over 200 pupils have been sailing on Scaramouche, with 25 of them serious regulars. In total, over 1,000 pupils have been on

the water through GCA Sailing. Jon and his students now want to make sure the sailing programme is sustainable and becomes engrained in the ethos of the school. Having met them, there seems little doubt that they will make this happen.

After just a day on the water with them, I was inspired by what these mature youngsters have achieved. As I was leaving, however, I noticed one of my interviewees laces had been tied together and with sea-side fascination, jellyfish had been collected in a plastic box on the pontoon. There's no harm in keeping a bit of schoolboy mischief, after all.

Follow their progress at www.gcasailing.com

