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By Marty Still

Well, well, my comments on Jessica Watson that were printed in the Age and SMH apparently caused quite a stir. I have been away on a yacht delivery so have only just caught up with things.

I received many emails about it, some abusive, some informed, some uninformed, some with an interesting view, some not so, however, interestingly, most of the informed communications were in agreement with my comments. How about that?

As with most things, I do have a view and I am not afraid to voice that view and, it would seem, I am very much not alone with this one.

What I also find interesting is that the journalist, (who called me fishing for a story, I did not call him) asked me many questions, which I answered honestly, as I do in all my dealings with people however, not all of the comments I made were printed. I consider this to be dishonest but I guess it is what's called "journalistic licence" he got the slant he wanted. From here on in, any journalist wanting to speak to me will get a "no comment" - so don't bother calling. And, by the way, I am pretty sure I did not use the word "selfish", it is not a sentiment I feel about this at all.

While I feel absolutely no need to defend myself on this, due to journalistic license by picking the eyes out of what went to print, just to set the record straight, here is my exact view.

What I did say, that wasn't printed, is that I think Jessica did a great job in sailing Ella around the world. Make no mistake about my opinion on this, she spent several months at sea, on her own, she may have been calling Mum twice a day on her sat phone and was being weather routed but she had to pull all the strings, she had to endure the cold and wet, she had to take the risk to achieve what she did and it is no mean feat, I know, I sailed that boat more than

30,000 nm, many of them single or short handed and I absolutely and unreservedly congratulate her on that one.

What I also said is that despite the fact that Jessica successfully completed a circumnavigation of the globe, I am not convinced she was really up to it. I know, it's a hard one to explain but I stand by it so here goes.

I liken this to a learner driver who can easily drive a car on a straight, dry road at 180 KPH but it's when something out of the ordinary happens that experience comes into play. Just look at insurance premiums for young drivers, it is a well known and documented phenomena. The ocean is no different, if you do not take ocean sailing on a small boat seriously, there is a good chance it will kill you.

At this point I will outline some of my experience so you know that I am not a landlubber making uninformed comments.

I have hundreds of many thousands of sea miles under my belt in commercial shipping. The ships I have worked on range from 20' open pilot boats in "The Rip" at the entrance to Melbourne's Port Philip Bay, to dry cargo ships, to a 212,000 tonne COC. I have seen gales in most of the worlds oceans including one at force 12 for two days where the ship I was on, an old 2,500 tonne cargo ship, was in danger of foundering when we were hove to in the North Sea for that time.

I started sailing dinghies at an early age and fitted out "Ella's Pink Lady" (Then named Shanty – and not pink) from a shell back in the early eighties. She was set up for single handed sailing but was raced as well as cruised. I covered over 30,000 offshore miles in that boat. I have been in gales gusting 70 knots in that boat and on one occasion a gale in Bass Strait gusting 60 knots in that boat. Anyone who knows Bass Strait will know that a gale there can make it a very dangerous place to be due to the relatively shallow water causing closely spaced, standing, breaking waves, not to mention wave bounce. Plus many voyages and deliveries on other boats, mono hulls and catamarans, from 20' to 54'.

So let's look at some of the facts – as I understand them.

1. On the first night out of port, sailing alone in good conditions, only a few hours out, Jessica was in collision with a ship. I believe the official finding was that she hit the ship not visa versa. She didn't know that fully lit ship was there despite the fact that she had radar and a functioning set of eyes and was going to have a snooze – in a shipping lane.

If anyone reading this thinks that is a great feat of seamanship and showed the necessary experience and maturity to undertake this voyage then we are on different planets and we could never agree.

2. From Jessica's blog. Some instrument or another stopped functioning, some considerable time was spent on the phone with a tech to find the problem – if I remember correctly it turned out to be a fuse.

In my opinion, if you go to sea you need some rudimentary knowledge of a lot of things, this would include, basic engine maintenance, rig maintenance, sail repair and the use of a multimeter to trouble shoot your electrics. Most of these skills come with experience. And, when at sea, you should be able to do without any of your navigational aids.

If anyone reading this thinks this showed the necessary seamanship and fundamental knowledge to undertake this voyage then, again, we are on different planets and you should read no further.

3. A bit more open to argument but, again from Jessica's blog, when she was in a South Atlantic gale, she said words to the effect of – “There was nothing I could do on deck so I went below”. Apparently the boat was laid flat a few times and some damage to the solar panel frame resulted.

While I was not on board the boat, I have been in Atlantic gales and have been in significant gales in that boat and would hazard a guess that the conditions in deep open water would not have been as dangerous as the 60 knot gale I encountered in Bass Strait. (where I sustained no damage to the solar panel frame or anything else). What I do know is that in serious conditions, in my opinion, the place an experienced sailor will be is on deck - looking after the boat – at least I would be. This is something I put in an email to Jessica post the collision with the bulky.

If anyone reading this thinks that is a great feat of seamanship and showed the necessary experience, tenacity and maturity to undertake this voyage then, once again, we are on different planets and, again, you should read no further.

If anyone does agree with me on these three points, then read on. I should say that I have absolutely no regard whatsoever for any armchair sailor's views but if you are an experienced offshore sailor and disagree with me, I will listen and will hopefully learn something, it is something I try to do every day of my life.

Again, reading Jessica's blog, she encountered nothing more than about 45 odd knots wind speed while rounding Cape Horn. How lucky is that??? So here's one for you people who knocked my supposed comments.

A mate of mine, single handed, was 250 West of Cape Horn, he had three deep low pressure systems come through in close succession. Each gale built the waves higher and steeper, the final one dealt out more storm force winds. When it took hold, it produced phenomenal seas. His boat was rolled 360⁰, the new, a few weeks before, rigging gave way and the mast came down. The forward hatch was ripped open and the broken mast prevented it from being closed. His dinghy, (also his life raft) was hanging over the side on its painter. The boat had taken on a significant amount of water and the electrical system was down. The seas were enormous, the fabled Cape Horn Greybeards.

This guy had already sailed around the world in this boat, single handed, and had a lot of offshore sailing experience prior to acquiring the boat. This gale was simply too much, he had been worn down by two prior gales in close succession and this one nailed him. This guy is a strong, fearless, experienced offshore sailor. In freezing conditions, he secured the mast, closed off the open hatch, retrieved the dinghy, baled out the boat, got the electrics going again, then got the boat 100's of miles to the safety of a port where he could repair her. He did not put out a mayday, he did not even request assistance, he got on with the job and got the boat going again. See the pics below and then I'll ask you a question.



Taken after the seas had died down.

Question:

Given that Cape Horn is well known for dishing out huge winds and phenomenal seas, how do you think 16YO Jessica would have coped with this situation?

Just two days ago, in Hobart, I was talking to a Tasmanian fisherman, (of 50 years experience) a tough guy, who has been in 15 + metre seas South of Tasmania – he told me - he was afraid. In that gale another fishing boat close to him foundered, he picked up the two crew. One survived but he failed in his attempt to resuscitate the other.

Now, this is my view.

I absolutely congratulate Jessica on successfully completing a circumnavigation of the world, a fantastic effort that deserves applause. Albeit with a bit of luck.

I do not think she was adequately prepared for the trip – experience wise.

I believe that the highly orchestrated extreme commercialism of the voyage that sees people saying – “No, don’t come in now, the media isn’t ready”, is wrong – going to sea is fun but it isn’t a game. Jessica had been at sea on her own for months, let the girl come in when she arrives. I don’t recall Kay Cottee, Jesse Martin, or that legend, Jon Sanders, (twice around the world single handed non stop in an S&S 34) waiting outside to get the appropriate media attention, they obviously did their voyage for other reasons. If you haven’t read Bernard Moitessiers – “The Long Way”, find it and read it. In it he says: “If you sail around the world for money or fame, it will break your neck”. It almost broke Jessica’s on her first night out.

Fact is, if her position had been different by mere meters, 10, 20, 30, maybe, the outcome of the collision with the bulky may have been very different. If he had T boned her dead centre, she could have sunk in seconds, she would have had no chance to get out a radio signal, she would not have had no time to launch a life raft. Even if she survived the collision and were wearing a life jacket at the time and managed to not go down with the boat, there is a chance she would have been dragged into the ships propeller.

After the collision, the question was posed as to whether or not the government could stop her going. They decided there was nothing in legislation that made provision for that. **“But they thought about it, they checked it out and would have stopped her if they could have”**.

My main concern is, had she died that night, or at any other time during the voyage, or had even needed to be rescued, what would Mr Rudd would have been saying.

He wouldn't have been getting popular exposure by greeting Jessica in Sydney, you can bet your last \$ that he would have been getting equally popular exposure in parliament saying: **“This is a tragedy and we must do all we can to ensure it doesn't happen again”**. That means even more legislation and all the responsible sailors and the yachting community in general would pay a heavy and ongoing price for this escapade. Let's face it, it's easy for Rudd to say a few words that have probably been written by someone else, but has he ever been to sea in a small boat, does he know what he's talking about? My guess is that he doesn't.

You don't think so? Look at all the new rules that get introduced to the Sydney – Hobart every time there's a disaster.

Even if Jessica had a need to be rescued, the cry would have been: **“This is a huge cost to Australian tax payers, who is going to foot the bill”**.

You don't think so? What about Tony Bullimore?

I have no desire to rain on Jessica's parade, I think she's done a great job and I hope she makes a fortune out of it, but I do not want to see this trend continue. I believe that doing a stunt like this for purely financial or commercial reasons invites un-seamanlike practices, compromises safety and will, eventually, produce a disaster.

Whatever your Everest may be, go climb it, I have climbed a few and still have some to go. But, go climb it in such a way that if you fall off, you don't drag everyone else with you. When this level of commercialism is introduced to this particular pastime, I believe this is exactly what will happen.

You don't think so? What about the over the top PFD legislation in Victoria after a couple of deaths?

I supported Jessica's attempt, (until the collision with the bulky and the fuse affair) I organised a wind generator for her and supplied another with spare blades. I am a nautical adventurer and I would be a hypocrite if I knocked others for doing that which I would do, but, my opinion is that Jessica "got away with it". She was not a strong, fearless, ex army, highly experienced sailor and navigator on a personal adventure when hit by 3 consecutive gales off Cape Horn, she was a 16YO girl with very limited, (if any) single handed offshore experience who fluked getting around Cape Horn in nothing more than 45 odd knots of wind. This is the stuff dreams are made of.

Just yesterday I returned from a yacht delivery trip, we departed on the day Jessica arrived in Sydney, one of our crew, a highly experienced guy who has many thousands of ocean miles under his belt and has been caught in some nasty open ocean weather, in general conversation, said to me: "You know, Marty, I don't think this is Jessica's dream, I think it has been orchestrated by others and if that's right, they have rolled the dice with her life". He went on to say: "I wonder where the parents would stand legally, as legal guardians, had Jessica gone missing in the collision, would they be considered to have been negligent"? I am no legal eagle so the answer to that one is neither here nor there but it is food for thought.

This was pure conversational conjecture but I do find it hard to believe that Jessica alone held this dream of sailing around the world for, in her words, "so many years" or something like that. She was 15YO when she said that, just how many years were possibly available to her to be dreaming of sailing around the world single handed? And if it was a dream, where did all the commercialism come in? A manager, a marketing team, a 700k media deal come on, I've been around long enough to question that one. This was a business venture.

Anyway, sufficient concern has been expressed by the fact that official bodies are not going to recognise this voyage as any kind of record – even if Kevin Rudd does – and there will no longer be a

“youngest” anything. Why is that? It’s not my doing. It’s because they recognise that it is getting unacceptably dangerous. What I am supposed to have said is, apparently, only what many people think but were too afraid to say. For my money, these official bodies carry more weight than Kevin Rudd or any of the people who sent abusive emails to me. My friends, experienced offshore yachts people and professional mariners all agree with me, their opinion carries more weight than Kevin Rudd or any of the people who sent abusive emails to me, I believe these people haven’t thought it right through.

For my money, Jessica got away with it and I am very glad about that, being a mariner myself I wish no ill to any fellow mariner. She had a good boat, which is very important, perfect for the job, I would say - but.

I would have to wonder how she would have coped had she not been able to speak to Mum every day.

I would have to wonder how she would have coped had she not been able to get assistance to change a fuse via satellite phone.

I would have to wonder how she would have coped with three consecutive gales going around Cape Horn.

Read the Smeeton: “Once is Enough”.

If you really want someone to idolise, read Joshua Slocum “Sailing Alone Around the World”, Captain Voss, Vito Dumas. No GPS, no email, no satellite phone, no radio, no manager, no weather router, no marketing company, canvas sails, no engine, no electricity, no self steering, no auto pilot, no sponsors. These are inspiring people.

Personally, I take ocean sailing very seriously and I wouldn’t have taken Shanty – Ella to sea if she were not up to scratch. Even when I do a delivery, I check the boat out first and if it ain’t up to scratch, I don’t go – simple, in case you don’t know, it’s called seamanship. Perhaps this is the forgotten factor.

Conclusion:

Jessica did a great job – with a good measure of luck thrown in – but I do not agree with the way it has been done.

I believe the full on marketing of this kind of activity is wrong and compromises safety.

I agree with official bodies canning the “youngest” anything.

I sincerely hope there are no more “youngest attempts in this activity and if there is – do it quietly. A 15YO is next, where does it stop? At this age they have not yet developed full strength, physically or mentally.

I do not believe government should have endorsed this with the appearance of the NSW Premier and the PM.

I am aware that the view expressed here is slightly in conflict with some earlier stuff on my web site but what broke the camels back for me was the fact that after months at sea Jessica was asked to stay out to maximise media coverage. I don't quite know where she was but the East coast of Australia is a shipping lane so, in my opinion, that was not a good idea. My earlier view slowly changed while reading Jessica's blog as the voyage progressed and I slowly concluded that she simply should not have been out there because, I believe, she would not have been able to cope with something extraordinary. But she got away with it. Even if she left again right now, even with all the experience she's gained, I would question whether she would have the physical strength to deal with an extreme Cape Horn situation.

Just reflecting on the distance debate.

The course has to include two crossings of the equator. I have heard it said that the course Jessica took was the normal course. I'm not so sure about that. I feel pretty sure that the course taken by other single handed circumnavigators has been around Cape Horn and crossing the equator in the Atlantic Ocean. This may go a long way to reducing the overall distance covered. But I'd have to look into that one.

All that aside, I believe going up the Pacific was the correct move. It gave Jessica a chance to get her sea legs in conditions that were more likely to be moderate – and certainly warmer. It gave her a chance to get to know the boat and her behaviour and to get into a routine. Had she headed straight for the Southern Ocean she may well have found herself in some nasty stuff very quickly, this could, at best, have been demoralising.

One of the emails I received said, “You are only doing this for what you can get out of it”. So, for the record, I have got nothing out of

this, a big fat zero. I understand Jessica has a 700k media deal for TV rights etc. I feel fairly sure her manager is not working for nothing. I feel fairly sure her marketing people are not working for nothing. I feel fairly sure her major sponsors stand to make a packet. Who else stands to gain I don't know and I don't care but what I do know is that, whoever does stand to gain out of all this, the only person who's neck was on the line was Jessica's. Perhaps my mate was right that her life was at the role of a dice.

One other thing I have thought about is the "Unassisted" part of the voyage. Not that it matters when no record is being recognised. When you have someone weather routing for you, telling you where to go to keep away from anything nasty. When you call home twice each day on your sat phone. No-one actually jumped on board and pulled strings but is it really unassisted? I suppose it depends on your definition of "Unassisted".

There you go, I had no intention of writing anything about this little lot but, thanks to journalistic license, that's my view in its entirety.