

Next stop Boston, and it's no tea party

The boats are faster, but the Transat challenge remains as gruelling as ever, says **Max Davidson**

One man, one boat, one ocean." In 1960, when Blondie Hasler spelt out his vision for a solo transatlantic yacht race, Dame Ellen MacArthur had not been born. Today Hasler would have to say "one person".

Sexual politics aside, the concept has proved enduringly popular. The 2008 Artemis Transat, which begins tomorrow, when the competitors sail out of Plymouth, bound for Boston, is the 13th in the series. The race, sponsored by Champagne G.H. Mumm and held every four years, is one of the highlights of the yachting calendar, a gruelling contest between some of the best in the business.

Competitors can expect to face mountainous seas, storms and technical glitches. As their masts creak and they fight waves of tiredness and nausea, some will wonder why they bothered. Only the spirit of the Transat will keep them going.

"In sailing terms, the race is a full-on sprint, with all the associated intensity," says 34-year-old Dee Caffari, who will be making her debut in her yacht Aviva. "You need extraordinary resilience, both physical and mental. The race is upwind, which should suit my style – I've already sailed around the world the wrong way. But it is going to test me and the other competitors to the absolute limit."

The Transat is a good-humoured confrontation in which the rivals strain every sinew to win, then have a beer together afterwards. The 1960 event, the first single-handed ocean yacht race, was amateurishness writ large, a sort of early Monte Carlo rally with sails. Hasler, a former Royal Marine and a war hero, was happy to take on his friend Francis Chichester for a mere half-crown wager. Only at the last minute did *The Observer* step in with sponsorship.

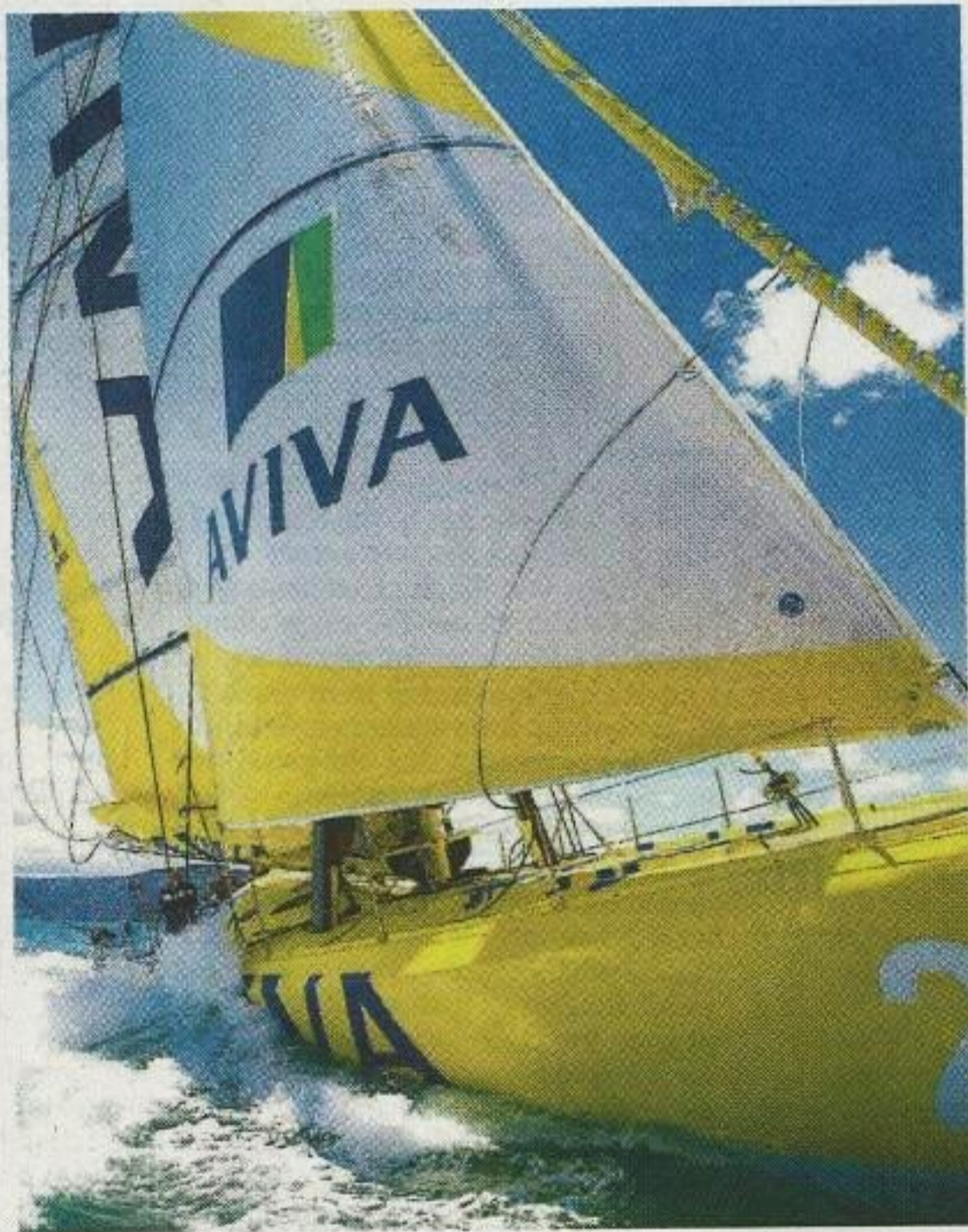
For that first race there was a field of five, one of whom was three days late starting. Chichester crossed the finish line first, in *Gipsy Moth III*, having taken 40 days 12 hours and 30 minutes to cover the 2,800-mile course (he later described the experience as "like trying to reach a doorway with a man in it aiming a hose at you").

Hasler, in *Jester*, came second, eight days behind. Pity the first spectators, sitting in New York harbour waiting for the boats to arrive. How different it will be this time, with state-of-the-art webcams beaming the exploits of 27 boats into living-rooms around the world.

One notable feature of the Transat is the way it has inflamed cross-Channel rivalries. The second race, in 1964, was won by the French yachting legend Eric



GARETH COOKE



British triumphs have been few and far between until MacArthur's win in 2000. Oxford-educated Geoffrey Williams won in 1968 by the – to the French, dastardly – ploy of using shore-based routing assistance from a London firm of meteorologists. Williams thus cunningly avoided the rough weather into which the French sailed.

Advances in technology, inevitably, have changed the character of the Transat, not always for the better. After Chichester won the first race with a monohull, big, expensive multi-hulls have dominated, to the dismay of some purists.

The old school will be happy to hear that this year's Transat is a purely monohull race (only IMOCA 60 and Class 40 vessels are eligible). "We wanted a strong and simple race, something the public would understand, without too many classes of

Craft with graft: Dee Caffari gets in some practice for the Transat. Thanks to modern technology, action on board the boats will be beamed into homes around the world

boat," says Christine Salen, sailing director of the race organiser, Offshore Challenges.

Caffari and her rivals have extraordinarily hi-tech boats compared with the vessels sailed by their forebears. But the elements against which they must battle have not changed in 50 years: strong headwinds, up to gale force, in the Atlantic, then the mixed bag of hazards served up off the coast of Newfoundland – dense fog, with the possibility of icebergs. And all on the minimum of sleep; 20 minutes here, half an hour there.

"The race is more than an endurance test," says Caffari. "It also tests your skills as a yachtsman in a wide range of conditions. We all have access to the same data about weather, sea conditions and so on, but the winner will be the one who makes the best decisions tactically. It is an all-or-nothing challenge."

♣ The Artemis Transat starts tomorrow. For details, visit www.theartemistransat.com.

'Competitors will face mountainous seas, storms and gale-force winds'

Tabarly and the French have dominated the event since.

Chichester was knighted in due course, but Tabarly was awarded the Légion d'Honneur by President De Gaulle before he had even moored his winning boat in Newport harbour. Other French winners include Philippe Poupon, Loïck Peyron and Michel Desjoyeaux, the 2004 victor, who holds the race record of 8 days 8 hours and 29 minutes – about a fifth of the time recorded by Chichester.

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An excellent resource, the Royal Yachting Association website, www.rya.org.uk, gives details of yachting

courses and competitive yacht-racing clubs. Before contemplating going solo, it is essential to gain experience

crewing an ocean-going yacht. Visit www.crewseekers.net to get a flavour of the opportunities available.

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