OSTAR 2024:

THE ORIGINAL SINGLE-HANDED TRANS-ATLANTIC RACE

by David Southwell (**s/v** *Alchemy*)

(New member David Southwell cites his qualifying passage as Plymouth, UK to Newport, RI – however, the directory neither mentions that this passage was completed under race conditions as part of the OSTAR, nor that he won! He is only the second American ever to do so. David is a keen racer, and has competed in four Chicago-Mackinac races, a Marion-Bermuda, a Marblehead-Halifax, four Newport-Bermuda and four Bermuda One-Two races. He sails a J/121, Alchemy, and his homeport is Nantucket, MA. His Instagram handle is **@alchemyracing1***)*

"If you're lonely when you're alone, then you are in bad company" Jean-Paul Sartre

David Southwell

As a child in the 1960s and 70s I dreamed of escaping the humdrum world of schools and parental supervision to sail around the world on my own. No one had sailed the clipper route single-handed until Francis Chichester became the first in 1967 with only one stop in Sydney. When I was seven, Robin Knox-Johnston went on to win the Golden Globe race in 1969 becoming the first solo non-stop round-the-world sailor. I was gripped by these adventurers, and my childhood was full of these sailors.

The Observer Single-handed Trans-Atlantic Race – known as OSTAR – was conceived by Herbert 'Blondie' Hasler, the inventor of the first self-steering system in the late 1950s. The challenge was to race, solo, in May and against the prevailing wind, across the North Atlantic from Plymouth in England to New York. On average, four lows coming eastwards across the Atlantic would traverse the course, and there would also be the challenge negotiating the ice, fog and fishing boats off Newfoundland and the Nantucket shoals. Chichester won the first race in 1960, and it has been run every four years since. The OSTAR became the precursor for transatlantic races such as the Route du Rhum and the Transat Jacques-Vabre (in 2025 this was renamed the Transat Café-L'Or), as well as being a training run for round the world races such as the Vendée Globe.

The dream of being alone with the sea was the ultimate counterpoint to my protected life on land but it took me 50 years to experience it. I couldn't wait to trade the self-imposed stresses of civilisation for the real challenges of the ocean. As Ayn Rand wrote: *"The question isn't who's going to let me; it's who's going to stop me?"*

Alchemy *in training for the OSTAR*

Alchemy *flying her asymmetric in training*

THE RACE

The OSTAR, by tradition, has very few rules. There are no ice gates off Newfoundland and competitors are free to sail the course they wish so long as they leave Eddystone lighthouse off Plymouth and Nantucket Island in the US to starboard. The easiest – but longest – route is the 'Azores' route which goes south to catch the easterlies, the shortest is the 'northern' upwind route which traces the great circle south of Iceland and Greenland, brushing (but hopefully not touching) Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Cape Cod and Nantucket. These days World Sailing has deemed Traffic Separation Schemes off-limits, and the finish has shifted from New York to Newport, but otherwise the rules are the same.

The OSTAR winners board has, predictably, been dominated by the French. Of the 17 races run, only two British sailors have won: Chichester in 1960 and Geoffrey Williams, then only 25, in 1964. Two Americans have won: Phil Weld in 1980 and the author in 2024. The remaining 13 winners are primarily French, including legendary names such as Eric Tabarly, Philippe Poupon, Loick Peyron and Francis Joyon. The most interesting perhaps was Alain Colas who won in 1972 with Tabarly's trimaran; he then built a 236ft long four-masted schooner for the 1976 race! The race record of 10 days was set in 2000 by Francis Joyon in a 60ft trimaran.

Over the years the number of OSTAR entrants has varied considerably from five boats in 1960 to 125 in 1976. In 2004 the organisers limited the size of boats to 60ft, and the Transat was born to optimise reaching and larger boats. The OSTAR lived on and added a double-handed division. Even so, there were only five boats competing in 2024, three of whom were solo sailors. My 40ft J/121 *Alchemy* was one of those, completing the race in 20 days 11 hours.

PREPARATION FOR SINGLE-HANDED SAILING

It is said that getting to the start of a solo ocean race is half the battle. Single-handed ocean racing is, in any country except France, a very niche sport. In the US, the major solo race is the Bermuda One Two which I've started four times and completed three. The inherent dangers of single-handed offshore racing require most competitors – including me – to become pretty obsessive about training. Safety at Sea courses, CPR, first aid certifications and extensive qualifying voyages are required, but most of us go well beyond that. I've been

trained in sail repair by North Sails and carry a substantial kit of glues, tapes and sticky stuff that was put to very good use in the OSTAR. I also used an excellent service called Regatta Rescue to equip me with and train me in the use of a medical kit that included IVs (along with training on self-administration), seemingly every painkiller available, and all manner of splints, traction devices and bandages.

The first question asked by potential single-handers is invariably about sleep. In a way it's like asking different cooks about their sourdough recipe: we all handle it differently. Inescapably, when we are sleeping there's no human on watch for passing ships or changing conditions, so we rely on catnaps close to shore and anti-collision (AIS) alarms offshore to wake us up. As a practical matter we get so attuned to the motion of the boat that if anything changes weather-wise we almost always wake up immediately. Many fishing boats don't carry AIS and they have right of way over us. As a result, when I'm in the fishing grounds of the European shelf, the Grand Banks off Labrador or the approach to Newport, I can't sleep for more than 20 minutes at a time. I don't find it all that difficult to sleep in nap cycles for two days, but as soon as I get off the continental shelf I start to take one-and-a-half hour sleep cycles, REM and all with crazy dreams. I am relatively safe as my AIS alarm will go off if a ship gets to within 5 miles, so long as the alarm wakes me up!

Starlink has truly transformed the experience of solo ocean sailing and enabled the experience to be shared by a wide audience via Instagram (Alchemy's is @alchemyracing1) and other social media. It has also significantly improved the amount – and quality – of available weather data. Until two years ago, I relied on a slow and quirky Iridium satellite phone which limited my downloads to 100kB. With Starlink, the internet speed is almost the same as my home wifi. This is a double-edged sword, as the whole point of being out there is to be alone! On the other hand, I prefer the safety advantage and the ability to call home. The benefits extend from my boat to my family, who have the peace of mind of knowing I'm okay through frequent phone calls. We are also tracked by Yellowbrick which, as I was about to find out, can cause unneeded consternation on shore

THE OSTAR RACE

The race started in a pouring rainstorm on 5 May 2024 in Plymouth, beginning with a close reach to the iconic Eddystone Light, after which I hoisted my A4 spinnaker and had a wonderful sail west down the English Channel past the Lizard to the Irish Sea in 15 knots of breeze. As the sun set on my first day I was approaching the Isles of Scilly and passed them all at night. I've always wanted to visit these lovely islands and was sad that I couldn't see them. Before dark I took the spinnaker down to be conservative – there were many miles to go and I didn't want to get the asymmetric wrapped around the forestay at night. The following day brought the prevailing southwesterlies to the Irish Sea as I headed west, dodging fishing boats and the occasional ferry. I was hoping to pass within sight of the Fastnet Light, but my course kept me several miles south of that.

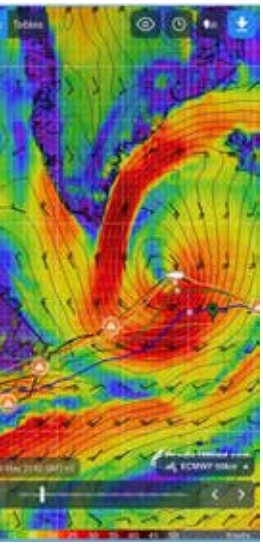
Eddystone Light

By day 3, I was pretty exhausted from the 25-minute napping cycles. I was happy to see the depth increasing from about 600ft

Flying the OCC burgee

to over 6,000ft in a few miles. That meant I'd crossed the edge of the European continental shelf so I could set my AIS alarm and get my first full sleep cycle of 90 minutes without worrying about trawlers. I was beginning to track the first low coming towards me that would have me going directly upwind in 25–35 knot winds the following day. I decided to sail northwest towards the centre of the low with the wind on my port quarter, through the middle and then down to the southwest with the wind on starboard quarter to resume my course on the other side. This seemed, as they say, like a good idea at the time . . .

As I sailed north at 10–15 knots, my initial exuberance turned to real concern when I realised that the storm had taken a turn to the north as well! I clearly wouldn't make it to the centre in time to avoid the strongest winds, so I reduced sail to the third reef, rolled the storm jib out and battened down for a rough night. We spent the next 12 hours sailing into 30-knot winds, gusting to 50 knots. As daylight broke, I took a look at the mainsail and saw several holes, a separated leech in places and some worn batten pockets. I didn't have a spare mainsail, so I'd have to repair it on my own. I turned off the Starlink, headed the boat south to give myself a good mid-reach to sail under jib alone, and took the main off the mast. The repairs, which involved pinning successive parts of the sail to the bunk below, took six hours during which we were clearly not headed to Newport!



The planned route through the Low

Inner genoa battle scars

Right: The view from the cockpit in mid-Atlantic

When the repairs were done and the sail was back on, I decided to check where the nearest land was, just in case. I was truly in the middle of the North Atlantic: England was 800 miles to the east, Iceland 800 miles to the northeast and Newfoundland 900 miles to the west. The closest point of land was Greenland. Those repairs had better hold! When I turned on my Starlink my emails revealed a series of very concerned messages from the race organisers at the Royal Western Yacht Club telling me they were tracking me through Yellowbrick and had alerted the UK Coast Guard who had in turn notified the Royal Navy who had a ship in the area. Yikes! I emailed them that all was well and that I was sure the Navy had better things to do.

Alchemy *sailing upwind*

The next week and a half were spent dodging other lows, posting on my Instagram, and changing sails several times a day. It was also a time to catch up on sleep as I knew there would be no fishing boats until I reached the Grand Banks. My AIS alarm, set to 5 miles, would wake me from the deepest sleep and is set to the most annoyingly jarring tone possible. I had one such encounter at 2am when I woke to a cargo ship headed right at me. Fortunately, the watch captain answered my VHF call and changed course to avoid me.

Two weeks into the voyage the weather turned markedly colder and more humid. I was approaching the Grand Banks where the cold Labrador current meets the relatively warm air from the Gulf stream. The result is high winds, dense fog and temperatures in the thirties (Fahrenheit). I was surprised to encounter no ice or fishing boats, which made me happy for the near term but sad for the changing climate and overfishing.

From Newfoundland to the finish the depth would be less than 300ft: I was on the US continental shelf with fishing boats and therefore short sleep cycles again. Georges Bank, by contrast to its northern neighbour, was full of fishing boats so I had a long night of conversations and dodging their nets. I found that they would often offer to alter course so long as I acknowledged they had right of way and asked them which way they wanted me to go.

By the last dawn, I was south of Nantucket flying along! I texted my family to say that I expected to finish in Newport about noon. Almost as soon as I'd pushed send, the wind shut off and I had to wait for the sea breeze to fill in. I made it to Newport at 6pm, just as the wind was dying. As I was taking down my sails, I was met by two Newport harbour master boats with blue lights flashing. "What did I do?" I shouted to him. "I've cleared in properly!" "You won the race and we're here to escort you to your slip" was the reply. The police escort through Newport Harbor passed at least one wedding, and I imagine they thought there was a major bust going down! After a reunion with my wife I was back to my regular land life. I immediately missed the ocean.

From left to right: Leaderboard of OSTAR winners since 1960; 1964 winner with 2024 winner

Hasler, Chichester and Jack Odling-Smee

Right: With family at Prizegiving

THE AFTERMATH

Six months after the finish, I flew back for the prize-giving in Plymouth joined by my wife and sisters. As the Royal Western Yacht Club (RWYC) dinner got underway, the Commodore stood up and introduced a man who had entered the original 1960 race but who had had to withdraw. He went on to race in 1964 and is now 91 years old. He stood up and spoke without support or notes for 15 minutes – truly a hard act to follow! When it was my turn, I spoke about how different the race is now with no icebergs, and with GPS and Starlink that he didn't have. I was amazed that he could navigate with sun-sights when I only remembered seeing the sun a few times. While the race is clearly safer today, I was envious of the true isolation he must have experienced.

As the Marquis of Halifax wrote, *"He that leaveth nothing to chance will do few things ill, but he will do very few things."* Most of us, including myself, count these experiences among the best of our lives when viewed in hindsight. The fatigue involved can bring on extreme emotions, there are times at night when I wonder why I do this and determine that I will never sail solo again. In the dark, the field of vision is typically just the cockpit, and the seas always seem higher because they can't be seen clearly. Then dawn comes, the ocean is visible and the loneliness or anxiety turn into pure joy. The great thing about offshore sailing, like rock climbing, is that you simply can't concentrate on anything else while you're doing it. There's not much downtime offshore, which keeps the mind off whatever stresses await on land. In the end, the ocean lends perspective to what really matters.