



100 YEARS OF HEADING TO THE ROCK

The RORC centenary Rolex Fastnet Race is set to be another bumper edition. The 50th in 2023 attracted a record 430 starters, although there was a high attrition rate with, for example, only 56% of the 358-strong IRC fleet making it to Cherbourg-en-Cotentin due to the severe weather at the start and early on in the race.

The Club has confirmed that the 2025 and 2027 editions of the race will continue to finish in Cherbourg-en-Cotentin. This is possible thanks to the generous support of the City, the Communauté d'Agglomération du Cotentin and the Département de la Manche & Région Normandie, that includes berthing for the race's giant fleet.

Among the high profile French classes, the giant Ultime trimarans are expected to take part again, alongside the flying IMOCA monohulls. The former will, this winter, have been undertaking attempts on the Jules Verne Trophy while the latter will have competed in the 10th Vendée Globe. They will be joined by the Ocean 50 and MOD70 trimarans and



*Wet ride on board the De Graaf family's Ker 43 Baraka at the start of the 2023 Rolex Fastnet Race.
Photo: RORC/Rick Tomlinson/rick-tomlinson.com*



the MOCRA multihull class. 21 Class40s competed in the last Rolex Fastnet Race and the centenary race once again features in their calendar.

As ever, the vast majority of entrants will be in the IRC fleet, from fully 'pro' maxi yachts down to family, club and sailing school entries on 30-footers. For this special edition, the fleet will be bolstered by yachts taking part in the historic west to east Transatlantic Race, starting on 18 June from Newport, RI, and the Admiral's Cup, reinstated this year for the first time since 2003.

After heavy weather starts in the last two editions, we may well be due for more clement conditions this time, which would result in more competitors reaching the finish in Cherbourg-en-Cotenin. France, where many pro sailors have become household names over the decades since the late great Éric Tabarly put our sport on the map there,

is renowned for its enthusiasm for offshore racing, so competitors can expect a rousing reception from residents, both local and from the wider Normandy region.

Located alongside Port Chantereyne, the Rolex Fastnet Race Village will again feature a mixture of exhibits, activities, local food, drink and evening entertainment. Prior to the start, around 200 yachts from France and the continent are expected to visit Cherbourg-en-Cotenin to register and make final preparations for the race. The Village will officially open on Saturday 26 July with the start shown live on giant screens in various places. The celebrations will then gather momentum with each new arrival.

A special party to celebrate the Admiral's Cup is scheduled for Thursday 31 July, followed on Friday 1 August with the final prize-giving, including a fly-by from Les Patrouille de France and a live concert.

Navigator's notes

Ironically, given that the race now finishes in one of France's most tidally complex of ports, the last two races have been won, not - as you might imagine - by French yachts with Figaro/Tour Voile aces navigating, but by those with British (*Sunrise*) and Australian (*Caro*) navigators on board.

In 2025, Volvo Ocean Race winning navigator and Gurnard's own, Jules Salter is set to race with one of the leading Admiral's Cup teams, while Mike Broughton, who finished second overall in 2023 on Clarke Murphy's chartered VO65 *Team Jajo*, will next time will be on the Ker 56 *Varuna*. Given the lengths teams are going in order to win the Admiral's Cup, it is very likely that nav for the, still relatively new, last leg of the race between Bishop Rock into the Cherbourg-en-Cotentin finish will be undergoing intense study by the top teams.

Both Salter and Broughton note that the last two editions of the Rolex Fastnet Race have been fairly breezy affairs and so, for the most part, haven't presented the problem of boats finishing in light or no wind on a 'make or break' tidal gate, as would be the case in high pressure.

As reported at length in 2021, the change to the new finish port has increased the length of the race by 90 miles to 695 miles and, according to the stats, has increased the downwind percentage of the race compared to upwind. In addition, the southwest corner of the Casquets TSS and Alderney lie close to the rhumb line between Bishop Rock and Cap de la Hague, the northwest tip of the Cotentin peninsula, where competitors must turn a few degrees to starboard to cover the last 12 miles to the finish line. Given that the TSS is an exclusion zone, this effectively creates a bottleneck for the fleet some 35 miles out from Cap de la Hague.

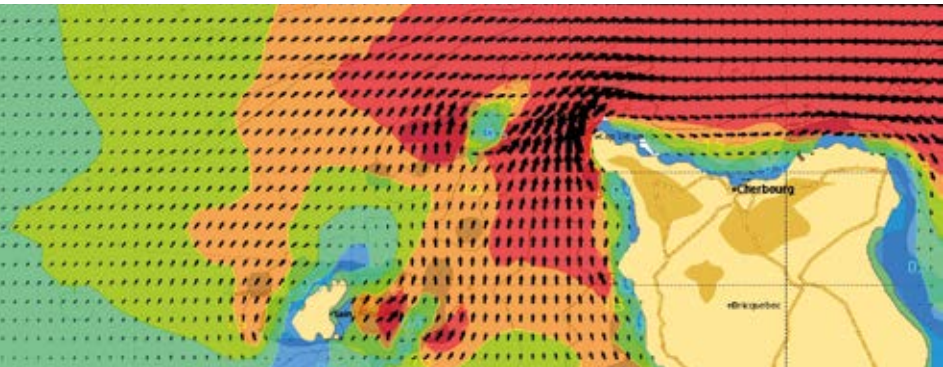
Salter observes that the 'new' last leg provides many more tactical choices: "Routing using historical data can take you along the Cornwall-Devon coast, or along Brittany and through the Channel Islands - so more than 60 miles of lateral separation..!"

He continues that this has several implications such as, on the one hand, making it far harder to cover opponents and leaving one of the most complex parts of the race to the very end, when crews are potentially fatigued. On the other hand, it potentially keeps the race alive and provides options all the way to the finish. If you are upwind or downwind on this leg, how many times do you want to cross a strong current stream, or dive north towards the Cornish coast or south towards Brittany/

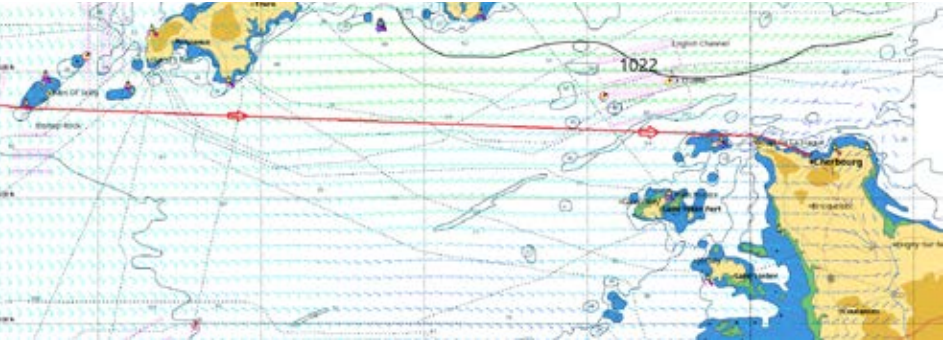
Channel Islands in order to seek tidal relief? How may tidal cycles will your boat experience between Bishop Rock and the finish?

He adds that the effect of strong currents can also have a significant effect on apparent wind speeds and angles, which in turn will affect routing.

Mike Broughton says that because the Bishop Rock to the finish leg provides so many options, along with the constraint of avoiding the Casquets TSS, Channel Islands etc, it is an occasion when using routing software to examine the options becomes very valuable. This comes with the usual caveat: the quality of the data - both wind and, especially in this case, the tide, will have a huge bearing on the routing's accuracy. Given this, Salter adds that it will be necessary to verify the strength of the flow tidal models to the nearest 15 minutes to determine if they match reality.



Powerful flood tide in the Alderney Race shows the benefit of leaving Alderney to port. Image: Predictwind.com



The rhumb line passes close to the Casquets TSS to the north and Alderney to the south. Image: Predictwind.com

If the finish is light, then it will provide some major headaches for crews tackling the Alderney Race and the last 50 miles of the course. Salter has queries, such as how will the Channel Islands, especially Alderney, affect the breeze and how will the sea and night breezes interplay off the Cotentin peninsula? With big decisions to be made, will weather models be up to the task of forecasting accurately? As ever, it will be vital to see if the wind and

tidal forecasts are accurate, mis-timed, mis-positioned or plain wrong.

All but the fastest yachts in the Rolex Fastnet Race will be equipped to kedge, however Broughton warns that in the event of light winds in the last 50 miles and the prospect of a foul ebb tide, it may be necessary to kedge around the Channel Islands. Here, where there are rocks, shoals and many other underwater obstructions, depths are typically deeper than they are off the English coast.

Studying the Alderney Race (Raz Blanchard in French) beforehand will be vital. Typically, the ebb runs west along the top of the Cotentin Peninsula but then does a hard left to follow the coast south at Cap de la Hague. Broadly, the Race is slack at around HW Cherbourg +3 and between -3 and -4. In the former, it is followed by the ebb kicking in hard, southwest-bound out in the Channel and

At peak flood in the Alderney Race, the current could be 5-6 knots

20:54; Wednesday 09:20 or 21:27; Thursday 09:56 CEST) could be very favourable. At the peak of flood in the Alderney Race (HW Cherbourg -1), the northwesterly or northerly current could be 5-6 knots, building further near Cap de la Hague, while at the peak of the ebb in this same zone the current could be sluicing south at 6-7 knots.

In 2023 Broughton sent *Team Jajo* south of Alderney. "Knowledge of how the tidal streams scoot around Cap de la Hague is really important - it is a big part of a navigator's race. Most yachts go north of Alderney because it looks the logical [shortest] way, but for us at the time, we made a good gain by going south of Alderney, pretty close in, and then swooping across with positive tide to Cap de la Hague and into the finish. Even if it is a relatively small area, the tidal streams are really important..."

Once past Cap de le Hague, there are distinct times to avoid hugging the coast, the current turning foul here from HW Cherbourg -1, while at the beginning of the flood the tide turns first inshore here at HW Cherbourg -3. Broughton advises that in the westbound ebb, it pays to go right into the shore where there can be favourable eddies. "You might have 4.5 knots against you further out and close into the rocks you can have 0.8 knots with you."

On *Team Jajo* in 2023 he recalls: "We were hugging the coast, in the middle of the night, and it was quite windy and dark and there were a couple of yachts close behind who were going even closer to the rocks...and we were trying to match race them! I didn't think I would be pushing that hard at the end of the race. But it adds to the flavour."

Truly, this is an area where experience pays, as it is not just the well-logged speed of the current here that affects competitors but the complex seabed and, of course, the wind direction and its strength relative to the current and how this churns up the sea state: In wind against tide, this is not a fun place to be. Both Broughton and Salter have sailed extensively in this area in the Tour Voiles, while it is the bread and butter for French Figarists and local Cotentin Peninsula sailors, such as past winner Alexis Loison.

Obviously the entire Alderney Race can be avoided by going north of the Casquets TSS, which adds 11 miles to course. But to err from the rhumb line that much, you'd need to be on a fast boat; in 2023 the only boat to employ this tactic was the Ultime trimaran *Maxi Banque Populaire*, when she was able to reach into the finish line at a cool 30 knots.