

# ONE AMAZING DAY

## PAUL LARSEN

“It was 27 November 2007, Walvis Bay, Namibia. We had overstayed one sponsorship and still hadn't shown the potential of *Sailrocket*, in which we were trying to break the 40-knot barrier.

It had never occurred to me that the project might fail, but with four days left to get a result, the worst had happened – we'd wiped out. We'd had a nagging problem with steerage and on this occasion, the boat had spun out of control into the beach. The wind got under the wing, picked it up and smashed it over the front of the boat. The main beam folded in two. I couldn't see any way out. I certainly couldn't see myself selling *Sailrocket* as a project in this state.

We began the sorry job of dragging the wreckage back to base. There was no team; just my girlfriend Helena Darvelid and I living in a container to save money. I lay awake that night faced with one soul-destroying option and a desperate one. I chose desperation – I had just 72 hours to turn it around. I couldn't watch the project disintegrate before my eyes. So, that night, I started cutting pieces from the boat. Helena went on an all-out effort to repair the boat and give her a last chance to prove herself.

We worked flat out day and night, only sleeping when a laminate was curing. We laid laminate after laminate and finally when all the bits were finished it was about 0400 of

our final day. Thankfully, the workload had distracted me from the possibility that it might be hopeless. I remember saying: "The goal is going to be this and this, and on the last day the wind's going to blow perfectly (because it has to), we're going to go out there, do 40 knots, chuck the thing in a container and jump on an aeroplane with a huge champagne hangover – simple as that." It was such a ridiculous feat, it was kind of funny. The locals who had followed our struggles looked on with shades of pity.

On that last morning – a Tuesday – before the sun had even come up we'd put the boat back together. At 1130 I tried to catch an hour's sleep in the container while I had a chance. I was lying there thinking: 'We've done our bit now. All I need is a decent wind.'

As if in a corny Hollywood script, a clackety old windmill on the container roof started to wind itself up. As the wind began to build, the sound got louder and louder – music to my ears. I jumped up and stepped outside and sure enough the Walvis Bay wind machine was winding up. We loaded up the boat, took it over to 'speed-spot'.

The conditions were odd; lots of wind yet glassy for 50m offshore, as though the wind wasn't touching the water. Perfect.

The boat was set up with a lot of lee helm to make it want to bear away from the beach (in theory). As I bore off at the top of the



Australian-born Paul Larsen, pilot/project manager of *Vestas Sailrocket*, has sailed fast multihulls such as Skip Novak/Bruno Peyron's 86ft *Commodore Explorer* and Pete Goss's *Team Philips*. He competed in *The Race* with Tony Bullimore on *Legato*, the *Transat Jacques Vabre* 2001 and 2003 with Alex Bennett/Conrad Humphreys and in 2002 joined Tracy Edwards's *Maiden II* campaign for a record-breaking season. Larsen was also part of the *Oryx Quest*-winning team and raced round Britain with Goss on a 30ft *Seacart*.

course I knew the whole project rested on this one run. I sheeted on and felt in control of the rudder. The strong lee helm told me she wasn't going to round up uncontrollably again, so I sheeted on further, brought in the wing and she just took off.

She felt fantastic and I could feel she was as straight as a die. She was doing everything she should and just flew down the course. Just past the timing hut she got a gust and took off. I held my breath until she peaked and knew I had a good number in the bag. A GPS was strapped to the dash and I looked forward – over 42 knots. As I was slowing the boat down I looked at it again, but it took a while for it to sink in. It was unbelievable, especially that it happened on the last day.

I laughed and yelled out loud all the way back to the beach. We'd turned it around and it was from that moment we knew we had our sponsorship/future sorted. We'd finally learnt to walk as a speed-sailing team and proved the boat had potential. Helena and I were so happy and relieved it had come together. We struggled to tell everyone what the run meant to the project, but we knew.

Everything that now happens with the *Vestas Sailrocket* project is based on that day [the team is now attempting to smash the current 51.38 knots record]. Everything we have and will achieve is a result of that last desperate run when we dragged the project out of its darkest corner. The way you deal with the lows will carve a road to your highs.

It was a turning point. I'd never felt happier and we're here because of it.”

*Paul Larsen talked to Sue Pelling*

### SNAPSHOT



As I was packing up at the end of the day that we broke the record, rushing to catch that plane, I found this bin of splintered carbon fibre mixed in with bottles of Mumm Champagne. To me it sums up what we as a team had been through – the agony and the ecstasy of the *Sailrocket* project