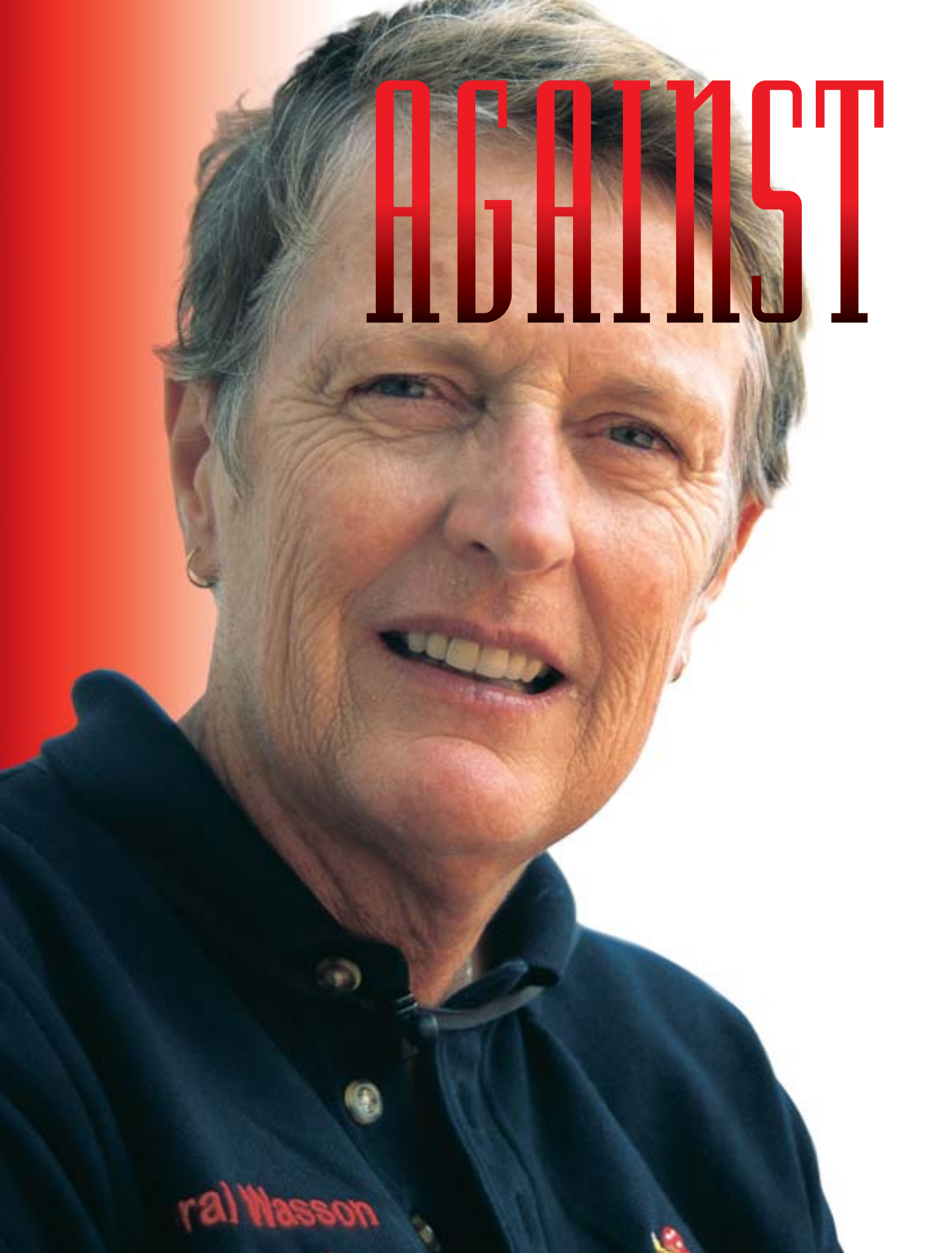


AGAINST



ral Wasson

THE WIND

by Briar Jensen

— Coral Wasson's Global Challenge

Sydney sailor Coral Wasson decided to give up her day job and go in search of adventure on the high seas. And she found it, with a berth on *Team Save the Children* in the Global Challenge, billed as the world's toughest yacht race.

"At the present moment I hate this boat race," complained an exhausted Coral Wasson from her unfurnished Sydney home just before departure for the Global Challenge in 2004. "Not because I'm even thinking of the actual race. It's the preparation. D'ya get what I'm saying? The disruption to my life." And she is talking serious disruption – eight years in fact. "But in relation to giving it away or walking away – no, it doesn't come across my mind."

Coral Wasson, 57, is the oldest woman competing in the 2004-2005 Global Challenge, often described as the world's toughest yacht race, in which 12 identical 72-foot steel yachts race around the world 'the wrong way' against the prevailing winds and currents. Established by Sir Chay Blyth in England, the Global Challenge offers 'ordinary people' the opportunity to compete in a seven-leg serious ocean race; no previous sailing experience necessary.

For Coral, just getting to the start line has been a challenge in itself.

It started back in 1996 when she decided to take up sailing. At 49, she felt it was time to give away soccer: "I thought I'd like to have a go at keel boat sailing, so I trotted down to the Australian Sailing School and did a beginners course."

Coral was no stranger to the water though, having surfed since her youth. "I still surf. I now own what they call a speed bump, or tin lid." And she admits to loving the adrenaline rush: "I'm a white water rafter. I'm a big wave surfer. I like big waves. I just get a buzz."

After the course, Coral attended a farewell for one of the instructors who was leaving for the 1996-97 Global Challenge. "I heard him talking about the Global Challenge; that's when I thought 'I'd like to have a go at that.' When they came into port here [Sydney] in January '97, I trotted down to get a bit of information. I had to pay for the paperwork, then I had to pay a deposit of 775 pounds in March '97."

With visions of doing the 2000-2001 race, Coral went into 'survival mode'. "I had a goal and, being a single female, you've got to give up things to get your goal. I left contract accounting and got a permanent job. I hated it, absolutely bloody hated it. I did that for three years. I stepped up and paid the mortgage off, stopped buying clothes, stopped going on holidays and started to save like mad."

Coral joined Middle Harbour Yacht Club and loved the excitement of round-the-cans racing. But she began to worry about her lack of offshore sailing experience, so she contacted Sydney sailing identity Hugh Treharne and secured a berth aboard *Bright Morning Star* for the 1998 Gosford to Lord Howe race. "The year of the bad Hobart was the year of the bad Lord Howe. So we went there, we came back, we survived and we didn't hate it."

Coral then worked the foredeck for several seasons aboard *Katinka*, based at the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia. Skipper Paul O'Connell was happy to have her aboard: "She would give anything a go, she fitted in well and worked hard. We always had a ball," he said.



Keen to extend her offshore experience, Coral did the inaugural Coffs Harbour to Suva race in 1999 with Hugh and Ian Treharne. Bad weather saw several boats withdraw, but *Bright Morning Star* came home in first position. Coral remembers, “I was in pain from gunnel-bum and I lost my voice, but I found I could hack it.” And she was hooked. “The sea is beautiful in ocean racing. Once you get away from the influence of land, the sea changes. It moves differently. You seem to be more at peace.”

While Coral made the standby list for the 2000-2001 race, she did not get to sail, although she did, at least, get priority for the next race. But while giving her more time to prepare, it was almost too much time. She spent it renovating her house for renting out during the race; a decision she later regretted because of the cost.

**JEREMY IRONS
CALLING**

When Coral finally received her phone interview with Global Challenge representative, Jeremy Irons, she felt she might have been a little too frank. When asked why she wanted to do the race, she replied, “When I’m 90 and I’m dying, I want to look

“When I’m 90 and I’m dying, I want to look back at my life and say ‘I did the Global Challenge. It was a (bleep)ing bitch, but I did it.’”



back at my life and say 'I did the Global Challenge. It was a (bleep)ing bitch, but I did it.' Then I thought, 'Oh, I've blown it because I swore.'"

Despite her frankness, she was selected as a core crewmember and was soon parting with more money.

"When it was only going to be 26,000 pounds, it was quite all right. Then the bum fell out of the dollar and it got more expensive."

There was also the cost of insurance, flights to and from the UK for training, food, accommodation and boat supplies, as her boat sponsor, the Save the Children charity, doesn't provide for its crew like some of the corporate sponsors.

"Not taking into consideration lost wages and renovations to the house, I estimate I will have probably outlaid \$120,000."

While some crew raised money to cover participation costs, Coral has not received any personal sponsorship, just a donation of \$200 from her hockey team. One of the girls on another yacht did a nude calendar to raise money, but Coral didn't intend following her lead – "That would be indecent exposure."

However, paying the entry fee doesn't guarantee a place; all applicants must pass the training and qualifying sails. Coral flew to England in late 2002 for her first training session.

"At the same time they're assessing your personality," she explained. "They tried to make it as difficult as possible and I know people were asked to leave."

Coral went back to Southampton for more training in March-April, 2003. "The Poms used to whinge about coming down from London, and I'd sat on a plane for 30 hours!"

OLD BAG LADY

Not to mention the difference in travel costs. Coral was very short of money and had nowhere to stay between training courses. "Whereas the locals would trundle off the boat, pack the car and go home, I'd be like the old bag lady. I'd get off with the rucksack with nowhere to live. But I'm a survivor."

Having survived sleeping in a roadside ditch in Africa with lions wandering around, Coral is used to the hardships of travel. And her sense of humour helps. "Whilst trundling through one of Southampton's many parks with my suitcase, I was asked by six gentlemen to join them for drinks out of brown paper bags. I graciously declined."

The fact that Coral is single with no children is a consequence of her adventurous lifestyle. "Where do I fit in marriage and kids? I never said I wasn't going to get married, I never said I wasn't going to have children. I was just too busy, then all of a sudden, as you get older,



the talent bank drops. And I was so independent I scared the living daylights out of the fellas – so I'm not really a very good catch."

Coral can tell a great yarn and, given free rein at our interview, continues to talk while stripping to her holey singlet to model her team t-shirts. While her adventures make fascinating conversation, she doesn't want to sound a 'know-it-all' to acquaintances or fellow crew.

"I'm not worried about the hardships of the boat race. But I'm very worried about my interaction with fellow crew. Like all people, I would like to be accepted for what I am. You don't have to like me; just tolerate me."



WHINGE-FREE ZONE

Normally one to avoid people who whinge or won't have a go at things, Coral realises she has no choice when it comes to her crew and their response to the difficulties of offshore racing. "My attitude is, if you don't like it, let's not whinge about it. Just shut up and sail the boat faster and you'll get into port faster. If you can't hack it, then you can get off."

Each crew is made up of a professional skipper, 17 core crew and one or two 'leggers' (people doing only one leg of the race). All crews have to have the same combined weight, so no boat has a weight advantage, and they try to balance the ages, sex and personalities aboard each yacht.

The crews were announced in January, 2004, but did not sail together until final training in July, after which they were allocated their on-board duties. Describing *Team Save the Children* Coral said, "The boat consists of chimpanzees on the bow, gorillas in the middle and the 'brain trust' at the back – how I got to be part of the back I have no idea." Coral is collating numbers. "I do not pull pieces of string, I collect data, i.e. sails up, wind angle and strength, boat speed – then enter it into a spreadsheet, get averages and then advise the watch leader/helmsman. I also spy on the opposition."



"I dropped a bombshell by informing them that I do not curtsy to anyone and if required to do so for Princess Anne I would not attend the naming ceremony."



While delivering the boat to its naming ceremony, conducted by Princess Anne, Coral had some fun with her crew.

"I dropped a bombshell by informing them that I do not curtsy to anyone and if required to do so for Princess Anne I would not attend the naming ceremony." Unsure if she was joking or not, the crew was relieved to learn they only had to shake hands with Her Royal Highness.

There's no doubt Coral is competitive: "I don't go out there to come last, I go out to win, but if everybody gives between 95 and 100 per cent – because nobody can give 100 or 110 per cent all the time – if everybody tries and we are beaten by a better boat, I don't have a problem."



While Coral said the crew gelled well pre-race, she felt *Team Save the Children* would probably not be a podium winner, though she was sure it would win best-looking crew and best party-animals. Unfortunately, her intuition on the former was right. In the first leg from Southampton to Buenos Aries, *Team Save the Children* came last, five days after the winner and two days behind the eleventh boat.

LIGHTNING STRIKE

After crossing the start line in third position, they were beset by problems. On the first day out, they tore the top four hanks off their number two Yankee. Then they split their lightweight spinnaker, ripped a flanker due to a Chinese gybe, and sustained damage to the spinnaker pole. A strop attaching the main halyard to the top of the mainsail broke, and on the last morning the boat was struck by lightning. Coral claims she had no part in these dramas, saying she was off watch or below deck mending sails when they took place. She was also fortunate to be one of the few who didn't sustain any injuries.

The highlight of the leg was the donation of two huge yellow fin tuna from a passing fishing boat toward the end of the race. While not legal (no outside assistance is permitted), the crew, which by then was on emergency rations, was elated.

"To sum up the Atlantic cruise from a sailing perspective – it was hot, sweaty, lousy food, accommodation was on an angle and we constantly had to move bunks."

Coral lost almost 10kg, blaming the freeze-dried food: "It's not a good marriage with my intestines and I got progressively sicker during the leg. Then, with a week to go, I got a touch of seasickness – God send – threw-up, cleared the nether regions, did not eat for 24 hours, then yellow fin tuna arrived and I felt 120 per cent."

The camaraderie between the yachts ensured *Team Save the Children* was treated to a hero's welcome on its arrival in Buenos Aries and crew members spent the following days maintaining their position as best party-animals. "In fact, I was drunk or fairly drunk and lacked sleep for about three days," confessed Coral, concluding, "sailing is not a very healthy sport." Although she regained weight with the "fabulous food in Argentina", her hands and feet were still shedding skin three weeks after the first leg.

"I have nothing but respect for her dedication to the race and basically think she's amazing. Totally and utterly stark raving mad, but amazing!"

STARK RAVING MAD

Despite her concern, Coral appears to have fitted in well with her teammates, with crewmember Anthony Campbell saying in the yacht's log, "I have nothing but respect for her dedication to the race and basically think she's amazing. Totally and utterly stark raving mad, but amazing!"

While drawing inspiration from female sailors Isabelle Autissier, Ellen MacArthur and Australian Adrienne Cahalan, Coral says she couldn't have made the Global Challenge without help.

"My hockey club, my sister, people at Middle Harbour Yacht Club, the two Treharne brothers and Paul and Des O'Connor. These people gave me the opportunity to do this.

"I am the oldest woman doing it [the race] and I would like to inspire people of my age to have a go at anything they want to. If you have a dream, pursue it. Don't let society tell you you can't do it."

As to the safety aspect, Coral is not too concerned: "I'm going to get bruised and hurt, but hopefully nothing will get busted. If I passed away, it would be most inconvenient because I've got a lot of things I want to do, but I've had a good innings. I've led a remarkable life. I'm very, very lucky."

And if the worst does happen, she will at least be doing what she loves.

"I get out there and I look at the sea, and whether it's a hurricane or a storm, I feel in awe and at peace with nature. D'ya know what I mean?"



*Paul Kelly,
skipper of Team
Save the Children.*



SYDNEY SOJOURN

The Global Challenge fleet arrived in Sydney in February, where we had the chance to catch up with Coral and get an update on *Team Save the Children*.

The second leg, the Southern Ocean crossing from Buenos Aires, around Cape Horn to Wellington, saw *Team Save the Children* finish eighth, despite having diverted to provide medical supplies to another boat.

However, in leg three, the sprint from Wellington to Sydney, *Team Save the Children* (or 'Team Save the Kids', as they like to call themselves) proved its ability by staying close to the leading yachts. But despite being as high as fourth place at one stage, it was the only boat to find itself in a hole with no wind and travelling backwards in a strong current. Consequently, it finished a very disappointing eleventh place.

"The first leg was a great bonding experience. With all the broken equipment and injuries we had on board, we got stronger and more determined," explained Coral.

The second leg, across the Southern Ocean, was not as difficult as she had imagined.

"The waves and the sea were not that big, it was not that bad." But she said life aboard was constantly on a 35-degree angle and the weather was monotonously grey.

"If you added up all the hours of sunlight on 39 days at sea, we would have had about 36 hours."

Coral described the third leg as the technical leg. "We sailed very, very hard. I wanted to win this leg." However, not only did she miss out on a place on the podium, but also on the opportunity to show off her beloved harbour, as *Team Save the Children* didn't finish until after dark. "I think Sydney Harbour is absolutely magnificent and I would have loved to show it to my fellow crew members in daylight." But she was very pleased for fellow Aussie, Andy Forbes, who won the leg on *BG Spirit*, saying, "I sort of got justice."

Contrary to her initial job description, Coral now 'pulls pieces of string'. "I trim the main, I'm in charge of the



"The sea is beautiful in ocean racing. Once you get away from the influence of land, the sea changes. It moves differently. You seem to be more at peace."



sheets on sail changes, and I trim the spinnaker. Being a 57-year-old, I don't have the strength of a fit young guy. I have my limitations, so I don't mind stepping aside (to let the guys help). My guys are really good like that."

Coral says the greatest difficulty is relationships. "Generally speaking, we all get on one another's nerves and you've got nowhere to go if you want to get away from it all. I undoubtedly piss people off and people piss me off, but I try very hard to fit in and I would not like to see any of my crew change or leave. I would like the whole of my crew to go all the way through."

For Coral, the worst aspect of the trip is the food. "I think if you asked anybody on our boat, and probably half the fleet, (they would agree) the food is the worst experience. How much I like it, and can tolerate it, determines whether I have one spoonful of the crap or two spoonfuls of the ruddy stuff."

The highlights for Coral so far? "The tuna fishermen in Uruguay and the fantastic way they moved their boat

around," and *Team Save the Children's* arrival in Buenos Aires. "We were so late we didn't expect anybody to be there. When we turned into the breakwater there were thousands of people. I was really quite taken with that."

So, has competing in the race been worth the sacrifice for Coral? "Ahhh... yes. But you really should ask me that question around September-October, after I've come back."

Team Save the Children is currently in eleventh position on the overall leader board. The Global Challenge fleet left Sydney on February 27 bound for Cape Town.

Other Australian Global Challenge 2004-2005 participants include: Matt Riddell, skipper *Samsung* (based Sydney); Andy Forbes, skipper *BG Spirit* (Surrey); Paul Chin, legger – Leg 3 *Barclays Adventurer* (San Francisco); Nicholas Brennan, crew *Team Stelmar* (London) and Amanda Darragh, legger – Leg 4 (Victoria).

You can follow their progress at:
www.globalchallenge2004.com. 