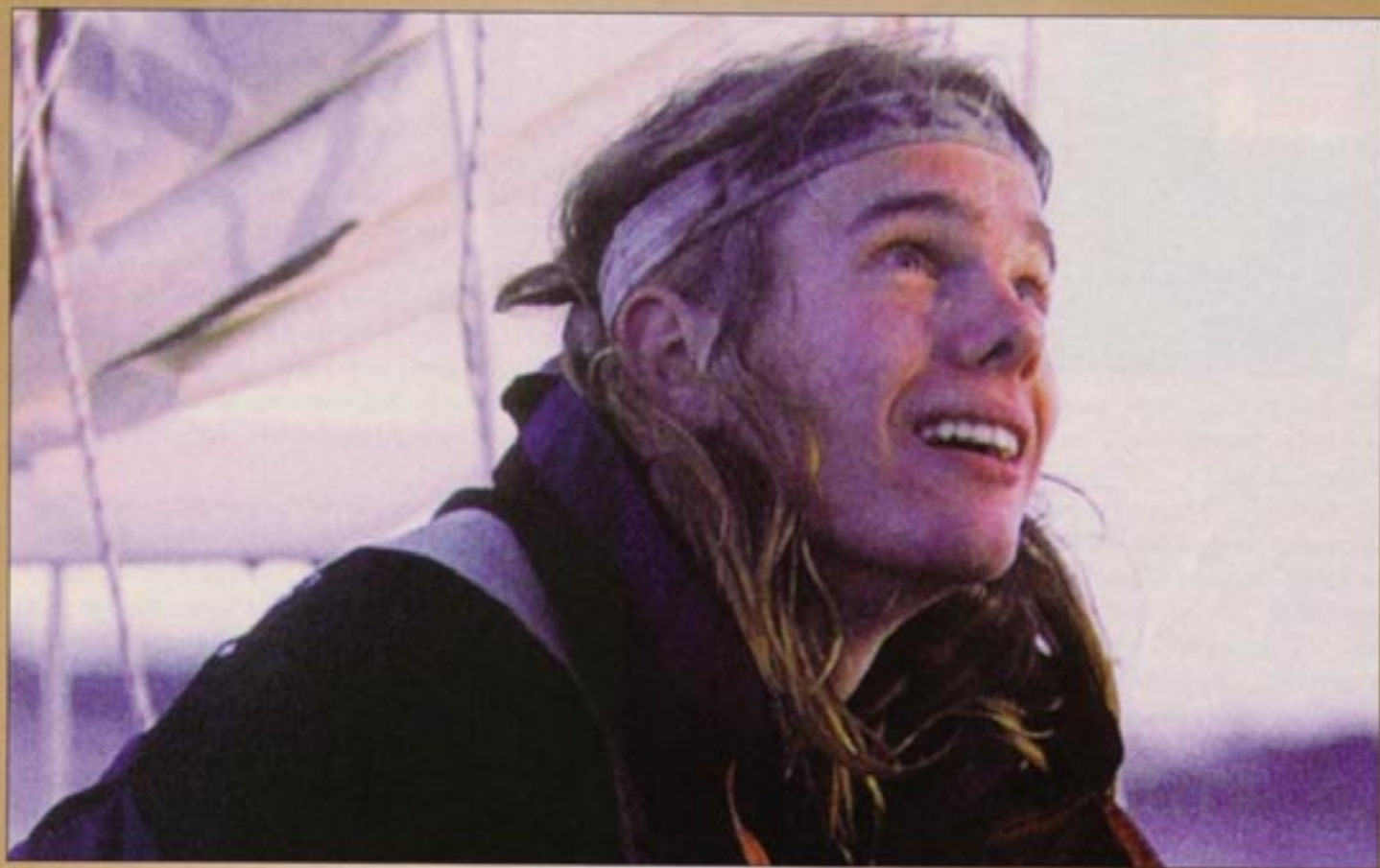


# Jesse Martin



## The youngest person to sail non-stop around the world, *UNASSISTED*

by Briar Jensen

What is it that drives a normal, long-haired, pimply-faced, girl-obsessed teenager of 17 to want to sail solo and non-stop around the world? For Australian Jesse Martin, it was simply for the adventure and the desire to fulfill a dream.

That dream began when he was just 14 and his father took him, and his 12-year-old brother Beau, on a two month sailing trip in a 14 foot day-sailor cat. The 620 mile trip took them from Cairns on the North Queensland coast of Australia to the Cape York Peninsular. Jesse sums up the adventure as, "... floating about on two slivers of fiberglass eating burnt fish and getting our salt-encrusted bodies fried to a crisp."

It was during a stopover on Lizard Island, a resort which sees many luxury yachts, that Jesse decided he

would like to sail around the world in his own yacht, doing it his own way.

"I could imagine sailing to exotic ports, meeting people, swimming in crystal-clear water, diving and catching fish. It would be fabulous."

As it turned out, this was a far cry from the way it would eventuate.

Upon his return, a family friend gave him Tania Aebi's book about her journey around the world and he borrowed 'First Lady,' the book by Australian Kay Cottee who was the first woman to sail solo, non-stop and unassisted around the world. Inspired by their

accounts, Jesse contemplated doing his voyage solo.

"The idea of being on my own, in control of my destiny and master of my boat was awesome. By the time I





finished reading those books, my decision was made: I wanted to become the youngest person to sail around the world."

Realizing he needed experience, he started taking weekly tuition with an Offshore Yacht Master and applied for several crew positions, which unfortunately fell through. Undaunted, he planned an interim adventure, a five-week kayak expedition in Papua New Guinea with Beau. Jesse was 16, Beau 14.

Still determined to get some serious offshore sailing experience, Jesse finally secured a crew position aboard an Adams 40 sailing from Florida to Australia. In early 1998 he flew to Belize to join skipper Dave Smith and two Australian women aboard the yacht *Imajica*.

Once through the Panama canal, Jesse got his first taste of serious ocean sailing on the journey to the Galapagos Islands. While there, the two women decided to leave the boat, so Dave and Jesse continued on their own. This gave Jesse the perfect opportunity to extend his knowledge and develop his sailing skills.

"I learnt how to sail a long trip in those weeks. But, more importantly, I learnt to take it easy and not push myself or the boat to the point where either may fail."

Their next stop was the Marquesas where Jesse, intoxicated by their beauty, succumbed to his first tattoo – a procedure which he describes as having two parts. "The first is getting it done. The second is telling your Mum." – Which he didn't do until he got home.

They sailed on to Tahiti where Jesse left the boat. Not because he found out the beautiful lady he had been dancing with wasn't actually a lady, but because he had decided to attempt to become the youngest person to sail solo, non-stop and unassisted around the world. In order to beat fellow Australian David Dicks' record, he had to leave in less than six months.

Arriving home in Melbourne, he had no money, no boat, no equipment and no supplies. But he did have a plan and most importantly, determination. He departed five months later.

"My school work was taken from the back-burner and placed in the freezer ... I only had five months to find a boat, set it up with all the gear, get enough practice on it and, most importantly, make myself look better than I really was to possible sponsors."

Preparing for any solo circumnavigation is always a difficult and hectic time, but Jesse and his family had an additional problem – dealing with the many doubters and numerous critics. There were those who didn't think they would be ready on time, those who criticized the boat, the equipment and their decisions, and those who thought the whole trip was foolhardy as Jesse had no solo experience. However, as he says, he had learnt the necessary skills aboard *Imajica* and was confident he could physically do everything Dave did.



generosity of Sandringham Yacht Club, things started looking up.

"How can one get solo sailing experience without getting out there on their own? ... The point is, they can't. It was just so wearing on us to have that doubt and negative vibes hanging over our heads ..." But in the face of this negativity, Jesse pushed on. "Maybe I didn't have the experience, but I made the decision because I was confident I had the ability."

With very little response from potential sponsors, Jesse's Mum remortgaged her house to fund the purchase of a boat, a 17-year-old Sparkman & Stephens 34 called *Lionheart*. (Initially, Jesse thought the name a bit 'wankerish', but eventually grew to love it.) With a boat and a place to moor it, thanks to the



Although the boat was well equipped, there was still a lot of work to be done to prepare it for a solo voyage. With so little money for fitting-out, Jesse's father took time off from his job to work on the boat.

About this time, Jesse got a call from one of Melbourne's major daily newspapers, the Herald Sun. They had heard about his planned trip and approached him in regards to writing a weekly column. As Jesse was planning to take laptop computers, he would be able to send his copy by email, so a deal was struck.

With only eight weeks to go, Jesse finally secured a major cash sponsor through a contact at the yacht club. Mistral, a company who made electronic switches, agreed to cover Jesse's total budget (excluding the purchase cost of the yacht). Jesse was flabbergasted, but immensely relieved, and with this commitment preparations moved into top gear. However, he still needed enormous help from both family and friends to ensure the boat was ready on time.

"... Everyone helped in every aspect they could. My Mum and Dad had been separated since I was about four years old and it was great to see family and friends all working together to get me away on time."

Jesse was determined to do the trip unassisted. (David Dicks was forced to accept a mast bolt while at sea, so was unable to claim the record 'unassisted'.) "That meant having good equipment, good workmanship and plenty of spares. If something wasn't new, it was taken off, fixed, cleaned up and put back on."

He took three laptop computers, mainly because he was terrified they would fail in the salty, moisture-laden environment. He used them to write his weekly newspaper column and to send and receive emails, which became his lifeline. "I became obsessed with the email box, always checking when the light was coming on. It was like a focus point."

Other electronic equipment included GPS, radar, satellite phone, satellite email equipment, CD player, two video cameras, spare battery charges and batteries.

Preparation went right down to the wire. Packing of equipment and supplies took place through the night before departure. (This had its consequences as Jesse forgot to take a comb, and more importantly, his almanac for celestial navigation.)

Finally, on the 6th of December 1998, after only an hours sleep, with many jobs still left undone and equip-



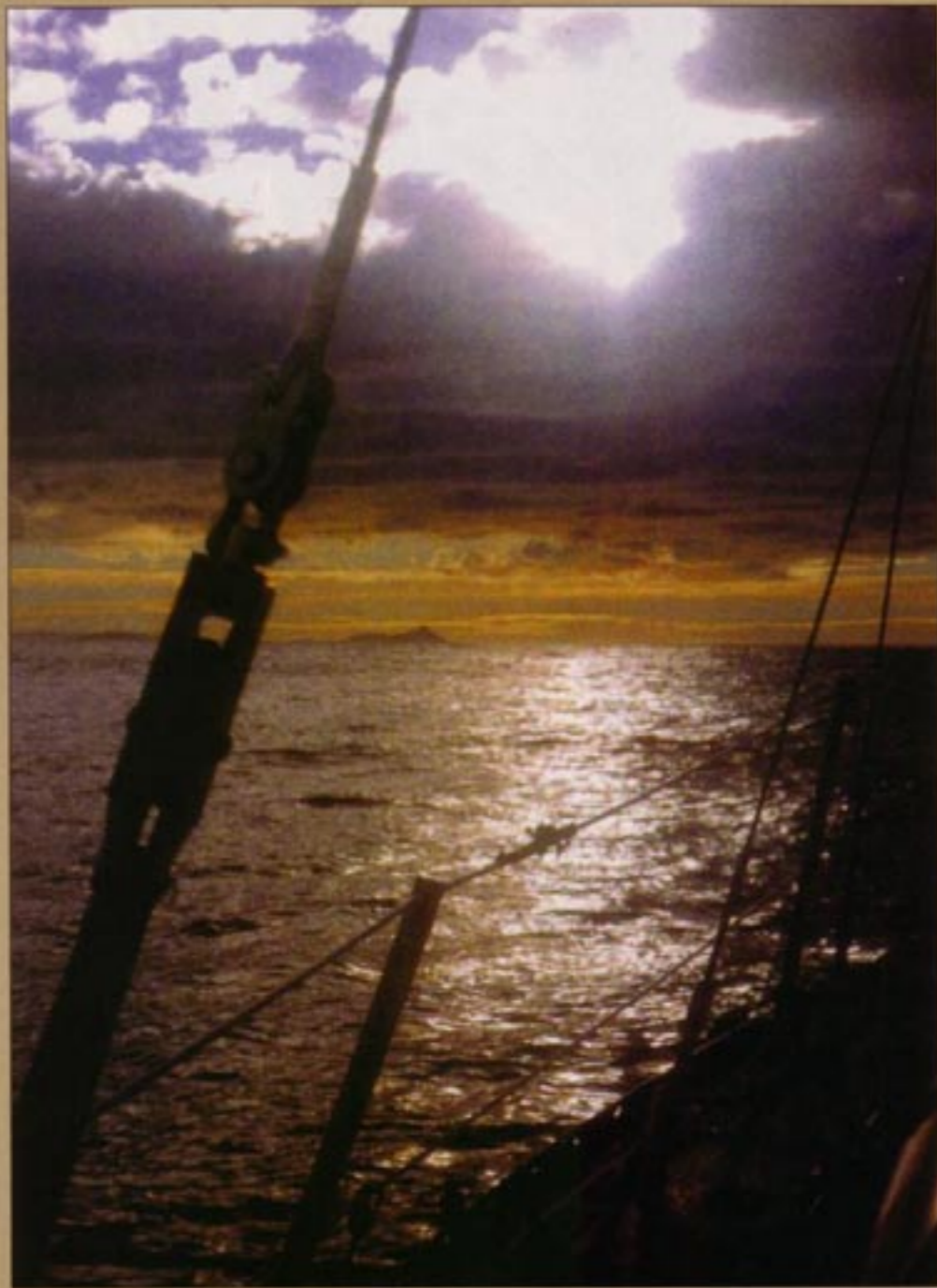
ment untested, Jesse took the helm of the modified boat for the first time and motored from the Yacht Club jetty. Once through the break-water, relieved he hadn't collided with anything in front of the crowd of spectators and media cameras, he hoisted the new mainsail.

On the long sail across Port Phillip Bay to the harbor entrance, which was to be his official starting line, he discovered a serious leak, so wisely spent the night inside the harbor in order to make repairs the following day. (Had it not been for this delayed start, he would have left without the boom brake and bunk leecloths.)

Finally, at 5.36 p.m. on the 7th of December, Jesse crossed the starting line. As the sun went down, the enormity of his endeavor overwhelmed him. "I was ... headed for experiences larger than life on a task which was beyond my comprehension—it suddenly hit me how much this trip was bigger than me."

On the third day out, all the emotion of the previous months came to a head and Jesse sat at the navigation table sobbing. "But they weren't tears of sadness or pity—they were tears of realization at my new life." After being so busy prior to his departure, life aboard, with nothing much to do, left him feeling empty and frustrated. "It was a culture shock which took my feelings of loneliness to their climax."

Throughout his trip, Jesse received weather information via email from Roger Badham, one of Australia's best known yachting meteorologists. However, the anticipation of bad weather plagued him and he began to dread the inevitable first storm. Mid January it came, a force eight. Jesse made some serious mistakes and things got out of control. But he made it through and despite the loss of his only sea anchor and having to clean up the sodden mess below, Jesse was on a 'mega-high'. "...I'd made it through a force eight gale ... I had made mis-



takes, but I would learn from them. The journey was going just how I'd planned."

Having made it through his first blow, Jesse finally settled into life on the water and began to enjoy himself. "There was no need for me to cry anymore ... I'd been out at sea long enough to accept this new way of life, and felt satisfied in a way I'd rarely felt before."

Jesse had chosen an antipodal route for his circumnavigation. This meant rounding the five southern capes as well as crossing into the northern hemisphere to round his antipodal point (opposite point to departure), which was the Azores.

As Jesse made his way further across the Pacific he became more focused, and when Cape Horn appeared on the edge of his chart, his attitude and confidence surged while his progress became more assertive.

It was while approaching the Horn that Jesse experienced his first proper knockdown. He woke up just as the boat was righting itself. "It happened so quickly, there

wasn't much time to be scared." But the cabin was drenched, with equipment and belongings everywhere.

A few days later he rounded Cape Horn and the magnitude of his achievement led to the realization he could do anything. "Hell, if I could sail my whimpy arse from the safety of the local Yacht Club ... to the kind of place on earth that you only read about, then I could do anything in the whole wide world."

In an article written shortly after rounding the Horn he wrote, "When I get home I will no longer be a pimple faced admirer watching the world pass by from the protection of a heated home. I will be returning a young adult who has proved to the world he is worth taking seriously ..."

However, following the incredible anticipation experienced while approaching the Horn, and the elation of rounding it, came the depths of despair. As the adrenaline drained away there was nothing to replace it. This pattern of highs and lows repeated itself many times throughout the trip.

Jesse experienced his worst weather off the Cape of Good Hope, a force ten storm that saw *Lionheart* receive five knock-downs and left a wet, freezing Jesse praying in his sleeping bag.

A few days later he was faced with a new challenge. No power. This meant no lights, radar, email, radio or CD player. To a teenager hooked on electronics this was a serious problem, but Jesse rose to the challenge and tackled the situation in a logical and enthusiastic manner.

A combination of conservative sailing, avoiding bad weather, and periods of light or no winds meant that Jesse's trip took much longer than anticipated. He had expected to be away for nine months, but had taken enough food for ten. However, at the ten-month mark he was still three weeks from home. From then on his meals consisted of items he had previously disliked and discarded. They soon became 'not-so-bad-any-more items'.

Toward the end of his trip, Jesse was under pressure to make it home in time to beat David Dicke's age record, but more important to him was getting home without doing any damage to the boat. "I've made it this far by taking it easy ... I value my conservative principles more than the record."

At 6.28 a.m. on October 31, 1999, Jesse crossed the finish line after sailing 27,000 nautical miles in 328 days. He didn't break David's record for being the youngest non-stop, solo circumnavigator (Jesse was three weeks older), but he was the youngest to do it unassisted.

When asked what he felt was his most valuable trait on the trip, Jesse said it was his understanding of the need to treat the boat carefully and not push it to the point where it might fail. "I tried as much as I could to connect to the boat, to feel where the stress was."

And his greatest fear? - The fear of pushing *Lionheart* too hard. "It wasn't so much an intense fear, it was more a prolonged worry of what could go wrong ... Whenever I was in a gale, just even a force seven or eight, I was constantly thinking, is this going to get worse? Have I been gentle enough on the rig?"

Jesse freely admits he is a dreamer and believes that, initially, dreaming helped ease the pain of his missing father figure. "While others may turn to alcohol or drugs, I retreat to the recesses of my mind in order to preserve my inner being and keep the hope alive ... Dreaming is my drug."

What sets him apart is his determination to bring those dreams to fruition. However, he realizes that dreams cannot be achieved alone. As he says in the conclusion of his recent book 'Lionheart', "I was just a normal kid with a dream who was serious about what I wanted to do. But without the support of my family, I would never have



made it, and would have eventually ... become like so many others—an unsatisfied grown-up who doesn't believe in himself."

His advice to the rest of us: don't limit other people's abilities by our own. "We need to encourage and help those around us, particularly our youth, in whatever their dreams may be, and then we'll start to see great things happen." ♪