

## SPORT

## SAILING

# The 1968 Middle Sea Race

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In the early 1960's the Royal Malta Yacht Club calendar of medium distance offshore races was limited to Syracuse, Messina, Lampedusa, Tunisia and a 206-mile race to Tripoli which was won by Saluki a 30 ft Sloop skippered by the Club Commodore Tabby Zammit Tabona, with Freddy Borda and myself as crew.

At that time, most of the English RMYC club members raced their boats against a handful of keen Maltese sailors as a result of which a friendly rivalry developed.

During a post race chat at the club bar, someone remarked that our race results might turn out to be quite different if races were held in the windier conditions of Autumn – preferably in a long distance offshore race, similar to the renowned Fastnet.

This was a challenge I could not ignore, though I knew that Tailuk, my lovely 40ft cruising yacht with which I had very successful results, was hardly suitable to face the conditions expected in a race in December.

However, the seeds were sown and RMYC members Alan Green and Jimmy White took the initiative to plan and develop such an offshore race – though their original idea was a 520-mile race starting in Malta and finishing in Syracuse.

It was thanks to the objections of my late brother Paul that this idea was scrapped in favour of a race starting and finishing in Malta. And so the Middle Sea Race organised by the RMYC in collaboration with the Royal Ocean Racing Club was launched on November 30, 1968 when eight boats crossed the starting line to circumnavigate Sicily.

As luck would have it, my sailor friend Albert Debarge offered to buy a new boat for me to compete in the new race. His only condition being that the boat should be named after his wife – Josian.



Josian, with John Ripard at the helm, sailing up the Maltese coast in its adventurous race to victory.

He left it to me to choose the boat and I knew that Sparkman & Stephens had designed a 36ft sloop to be built by Nautor.

I flew to Finland, placed an order for this exciting new Swan which was shipped to Malta in the late spring of 1968. My crew and I spent summer of 1968 getting to know the boat, and sailing her in all conditions in preparation for the daunting task ahead.

We bought what we thought was enough food and drink for a week for seven hungry sailors, stowing it all under the floor boards to keep weight as low as possible and out of the bow or stern of the boat.

A set of Admiralty charts, a list of lighthouses and RDF stations covering the whole course, and importantly, predicted currents in the Straits of Messina for the first week of December, were essential to have on board.

Navigation involved keeping a detailed record of our course and estimated speed, then plotting our "dead reckoning" position on the chart. Without today's GPS Chart Plotters which show your position, course and speed just by pressing a button, navigation in the sixties was a serious undertaking.

Weather forecasts were difficult to get – reliable ones were quite rare. In fact you simply had to be

prepared and ready for whatever weather you are faced with.

With all these thoughts and worries behind us, we were on the starting line on the morning of the November 30, 1968 and with a fresh northwesterly blowing we made an excellent start.

The wind freshened on the beat to round Gozo, and with San Dimetri lighthouse abeam we set course for Lampedusa, a good 90 miles of open seas that were soon testing Josian and us in what had now developed into a full Force 7/8 northwest gale-the feared Mistral.

Crack of dawn on December 1, found us within sight of Lampedusa and to our great surprise Stella Polare was only a few miles ahead with Stormvogel to leeward of and about to round the island.

We had covered the 125 miles from the start to Lampedusa in the same time as these two "maxis" – which meant that we must have made a remarkably fast passage during the night – but we were in a pretty sorry state, everybody wet through, miserable, hungry and some suffering seasickness.

In the horizon astern of us there was no sign of any of the other competitors, and I estimated that we were certainly leading the race on corrected time.

Yet we needed a respite from the conditions so I decided it would be wise to drop anchor in the lee of Lampedusa, dry ourselves, have a hot meal, sort out the mess below before weighing anchor to resume racing.

Those couple of hours gave us the strength and determination

to face whatever came our way.

After rounding the south west tip of Lampedusa we found the wind had abated to a light west south westerly which diminished to, and remained, very light conditions all the way to Pantelleria.

I could not believe that here we were in December in the famed Canale di Sicilia in a flat calm, sailing, at times drifting, ever so slowly to Favignana, Capo San Vito, the Eolian Islands and Stromboli.

We had sailed some 425 miles to just north of Messina before we picked up a fresh south southeasterly wind which stayed with us right up to Malta, crossing the finish line 191.13 hours after the start!

## Corrected time

Naturally both Stormvogel and Stella Polare had finished several hours before us – but we had beaten them all on corrected time, to be declared winner of the inaugural Middle Sea Race.

Final results showed that we had the best corrected time at all the reporting positions of the course, Lampedusa, Pantelleria, Levanzo, Capo San Vito, Messina, Capo Passero though not at Stromboli. But we had regained the lead again at Messina, then on to Capo Passero and the finish in Malta.

We were proud and overjoyed with our win – a win for the Royal Malta Yacht Club, a win for Malta and above all, a win for JOSIAN and my crew... Arthur Podesta, Paul Micallef, John Fiorini, Andy, Pat Torrance, and Louis Brincat.



The winning crew... (from left) Louis Brincat, Paul Micallef, Arthur Podesta, John Fiorini, Andy, Pat Torrance with skipper John Ripard, looking worn out, squatting in the middle.