



The Teenage Solo Sailor Syndrome

For 11 years, I've resisted the urge to write about teenage circumnavigators. The last time I did, the protagonist was a young man named Brian Caldwell, the son of cruising sailors who, in 1998 at age 19, briefly held the title of youngest singlehanded circumnavigator. I probably wouldn't have had the pleasure of knowing Brian, except that he happened to stop for repairs in Port Vila, Vanuatu, while my wife and I were there. His 26-foot Contessa was anchored a stone's throw away from our Atkin ketch, and the story was too compelling to pass up.

I filed a few more stories as Brian's voyage unfolded, and then it was over. A few months later, a young Australian bumped Brian from the record books. Brian turned toward his next goal of ocean racing singlehanded (www.liquidflight.net), and I decided never again to write about "youngest" quests. The current wave of young circum-

Brian Caldwell, shown here pausing in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in 1996 during his circumnavigation, is now a delivery skipper and offshore solo racer.

navigators—whose names I purposely won't mention here—drove me to break that promise.

In 1997, when 7-year-old Jessica Dubroff died in a crash while trying to become the youngest trans-continental pilot, audience backlash prompted some talk shows to stop publicizing attempts to become the "youngest" in certain high-risk ventures. Like teenage suicides, the subject should be taboo for obvious reasons. Are TV ratings or newsstand sales worth putting dozens of fame-seeking copycats at risk? When the media fuels these follies, it also must bear the burden for their predictable consequences.

Of course, in the Internet age, any fool scheme is news and the moral high ground is a low-tide sandbar. A 13-year-old's plans for an around-the-world sailing adventure pales in comparison to the half-baked schemes on the Internet and cable TV.

I personally am not against the idea of an experienced and safely equipped teen setting off to sea by herself, but there is one practical issue to overcome: Solo sailing necessarily violates good watchkeeping standards and can put others at risk. For these and other reasons, this magazine cannot support it without grave reservations.

A better rite of passage, in my opinion, would be the type of experience

enjoyed by the crew in the Disney film *Morning Light*, in which well-trained young adults work together toward a common goal—in this case the 2007 Transpacific Yacht Race. (They need not be so blatantly photogenic.)

Whether alone or with others, offshore sailing involves prolonged periods of introspection interrupted by exhausting, mission-critical tasks, two character-building activities that are in short supply among teens these days.

What worries me though is that the real message of the "teen sailor" story has been lost in the hype. When taken in the right context, the adventures of these young sailors inspire others to greatness in their own chosen fields. "You can do anything you set your mind to" is a powerful and unselfish lesson to pass on.

Unfortunately, this is not the message I am picking up from the current crop of young soloists. Instead of "Look what YOU can do," I'm hearing "Look what I can do." To me, these wunderkind sailors are starting to sound like, well . . . teenagers.

May good fortune be on their side, even when good sense is not.

Cover photo: Jon Perkins paints Satori, his Cape Dory 25 at the Sarasota Sailing Squadron in Sarasota, Fla.

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