

Jester Challenge 2022

Start off western end of Plymouth Breakwater, 1200 Sunday 8 May 2022.

Finish at a line extending due west (true) from Castle Hill Lighthouse on Newport Neck, Rhode Island.

SitRep 5 (1/6/22)

The figurative Jester pennant was lowered from the figurative yardarm at about 0830H this morning, as the last remaining participants, Bernie Branfield and *Louisa*, signalled their retirement. Bernie needed to do a rigging check, for which he needed flat water. Having arrived at anchor at Angra da Herismo, just around the corner from Praia da Vitoria on Terceira, he has wisely concluded that he has already used up too much of his allotted time for the Challenge and is unable to continue. He has fought gamely through awkward conditions for more than three weeks now, and it is the seamanlike decision to retire gracefully and not push on against the odds. The Atlantic weather forecasts are not improving at all; the tail end of Hurricane Agatha might well be crossing mid-Atlantic later this week. That being so, it is good to know that Bernie and Andrzej, who has now made port at Flores, are both in safe havens.

So there will be no finisher this year, for the first time in the history of the Challenge. There is of course nothing to stop any of this year's starters trying again next year...or even the year after, such is the flexibility of the concept (remember that a 'retirement' can just as easily be interpreted as a 'non-retirement'). Our man in Newport, Norm Bailey, will be spared any hands-on work this year, but his rock-solid presence and support from the other end is highly valued.

A big thankyou to all the participants. They all made their port of choice safely and so they are all, in the final analysis, 'winners'.

SitRep 4 (29/5/22)

Two intrepid skippers and their yachts were diverging on a wide ocean – Andrzej Kopytko and the bigger, faster *Opole* heading inexorably west; Bernie Branfield and the rugged little *Louisa* taking a more south-westerly slant. But now they may well start to converge. Having overcome a number of mechanical problems, which failed to deter him, Andrzej has now suffered a rigging failure, and has diverted to the Azores for much-needed repairs. In so doing he will give up a huge mileage already gained: to all intents and purposes he is now going backwards. Not surprisingly, therefore, Andrzej has decided to retire from the Challenge. This is of course a great disappointment for him, as he had been going so well. We have heard that he is being widely followed online in Poland, so his many fans and supporters will be disappointed too. A big thankyou to him for his huge efforts this year.

Meanwhile, to the south east, Bernie plugs quietly away, as yet unaware that he is the sole remaining participant in this year's Challenge. With three weeks now gone since the start, it has been a slow and frustrating passage for him, but his mood seems positive and his resolve no less than Andrzej's. Maybe sometime soon their tracks will cross once again.

SitRep 3 (22/5/22)

At one stage it was looking as if the fleet may be reduced to only one skipper and his boat – Bernie Branfield and *Louisa*, with Andrzej Kopytko and *Opole* suffering mechanical

problems and deciding to retire. But full credit to Andrzej: he seems to have fixed his malfunctioning wind generator, and the water circulation problem in his engine, to the extent that he has now resumed his westerly trajectory. This is excellent news, with half the fleet once again heading for Newport. Let's hope Andrzej can maintain the power he needs, presumably for his autopilot, as he is not equipped with windvane steering.

The first two weeks of this year's Jester Challenge have not been easy, with very heavy weather and headwinds dominating, but for the moment the weather charts look more benign and should hopefully give the skippers some respite and easier sailing. They have earned it, and need it too – there is still a very long way to go for both of them.

We should still spare a thought for John Apps and *Arelia*, and for Howard Chivers and *Sandpiper*. Retirement, for whatever reason, is never easy. A huge effort is needed to get a boat across the starting line ready for a long and difficult ocean passage, and while sea time is never wasted, it is tough to see so much preparation not reap its full reward.

The leading OSTAR boats are now starting to overhaul the Jester pair, but as anticipated are somewhat to the north, and after all sorts of deviations during the destructive depression, are more or less lined up along the Great Circle Route. Six out of their ten starters are still in the race, by the looks of it, so their attrition rate has only been slightly less than the Jesters so far. Hopefully from here on both fleets will remain intact to Newport.

SitRep 2 (17/05/22)

The chances of crossing the Atlantic without meeting heavy weather early on are pretty low, and sure enough, the Jester Challenge fleet has had to cope with its first severe depression since leaving Plymouth. The three smaller yachts may have missed the worst, by skirting round to the south-east of it, although winds of Force 8 to 9 have still been reported. Andrzej Kopytko in the 34' *Opole*, who has been sailing a more direct westerly course, took the fast-moving storm full on, and has reported gusts of 54 knots while under storm jib. Although he is by no means on the optimum Great Circle Course, his more northerly trajectory means he is pulling away from the rest of the fleet.

John Apps in *Arelia* and Bernie Branfield in *Louisa*, almost identical boats, are still within very close distance of each other, more by chance than design, as far as we know, and well to the south-east of *Opole*. Although they are not racing, of course, it will be interesting to see how their respective crossings develop. Further yet to the south-east, Howard Chivers and *Sandpiper* are going well and we would expect, with the weather easing, that they will soon start heading westwards.

The first nine days of this year's Jester Challenge seem to have flown past and the messages we have had from participants suggest everyone is in in good form and enjoying themselves.

The OSTAR contestants are now well under way too, and their progress can be tracked here: https://yb.tl/rwyc_2022 They are of course racing, in many cases very seriously, and it is interesting to note their stricter adherence to the Great Circle Route. On that basis it is unlikely that the two fleets will find themselves intermingling as the faster OSTAR boats overhaul the Jesters, but any proximity will be worth watching out for.

STOP-PRESS!

A message is just in from Howard Chivers and *Sandpiper*: they are retiring and returning to the UK, Howard saying that he is now finding the kind of heavy weather they have been experiencing too hard on him physically. Better to retire gracefully and ahead of the game than to push beyond what may be one's natural limits. So a big thankyou to Howard for his sterling participation, and for his key input to all aspects of the Jester Helm, especially the development of the website and the now excellent tracking facility.

LATEST STOP-PRESS!

Following news of Howard Chivers' retirement, we have just heard that John Apps and *Areli*a have been forced to retire too, following damage to the boat's electrics caused by a massive wave. Again, a sensible decision. Knowing John, he could well be back sooner or later to complete the Challenge. Let's hope so.

So, as far as we know, just two yachts are left heading west, making the Atlantic an even bigger and lonelier place.

SitRep 1 (11/5/22)

The fifth edition of the Jester Challenge, that most renegade of ocean events, is now well and truly under way. Four hardy skippers and their yachts are now battling strong westerlies and the North Atlantic Current as they head towards the edge of the continental shelf and into deep pelagic water. There were to be five, but Steve Hickey and his 23' Hunter Horizon *Pipsqueak* were forced into a last-minute withdrawal, the skipper with a bad back and *Pipsqueak* with an intractable electrical problem. Hopefully they will be back for another future event.

It promises to be a fascinating Challenge to follow, with two evenly matched Invictas – John Apps's *Areli*a and Bernie Branfield's *Louisa* – making up one half of the fleet, and two bigger yachts – Howard Chivers's *Sandpiper* and Andrzej Kopytko's *Opole* – making up the other half. The Invicta is very much a Folkboat-style design, and so is ideal as a Jester Challenge yacht, *Jester* herself being a modified Folkboat. As students of singlehanded sailing history will doubtless know, two of the five participants in the original OSTAR were Folkboats, so nothing comes closer to the Jester Challenge ideal.

All five of those 1960 participants reached New York (the original destination). Will this year's four repeat last year's Jester Azores Challenge record of all nine starters finishing? Of course, we don't know. It will be a long and bruising haul. But maybe, just maybe...

Transatlantic skippers are faced with a whole range of choices as to which route to sail, each with its pros and cons, each with its challenges and uncertainties. With the yachts only two days out, it may be too early to be sure of which route each skipper is intending to take. They may well not have made a final decision yet, preferring to wait and see what the weather brings. There were hints that *Opole*, and perhaps *Sandpiper* too, might have the shorter but more challenging northern route in mind, but for the moment both have been forced south by the headwind. The result is that the fleet is still relatively tightly bunched. Given the vagaries of Atlantic sailing, that is unlikely to last.