

OFFSHORE

BIG RICHARD

Richard Carr barged into the Class I with an all-British team to set about the Italians. His win in Jesolo – in rough seas – proves he can mix it. Graham Scott profiles this self-made sportsman

WHAT DO you make of Richard Carr? What do you make of the only Englishman to set up and run his own British team in Class I, who prepares a beautiful boat costing hundreds of thousands of pounds, and who then gives it the number 69 “just for a laugh”?

Offshore doesn't have the upper class image of some sailing factions, but it's not exactly Millwall is it? The European image, particularly the macho chic of the Italians, is a major influence, so dapper Englishmen can slide into this world with hardly a ripple. Richard Carr has dropped in with a splash. Not knowing the form at Cowes is one thing, but it's quite another to moon at an awards ceremony, or miss a race because you have been arrested for brawling.

There are two other problems: he is a successful racer and he is very rich. It is all very well the old guard dubbing him a nouveau riche, but it would sound more convincing if the recession had not reduced so many of them to nouveau poverty.

Mr Carr breathes in luxuriously. “A millionaire? Yes, I suppose I am. A million pounds really isn't a lot of money any more,” he adds without any trace of irony. He is the chairman of Allied Leisure plc at 33, a corporation in the “entertainments” industry that is currently turning over around £27m a year and making a profit. One could draw an obvious conclusion as to where the funding for an offshore team comes from but Richard is adamant.

“None of my racing has any involvement with Allied Leisure. You shouldn't mix business with pleasure too much because they contaminate each other. Racing is not a business for me, I do it because I love doing it,” he says.

If you talk to some people Richard comes across as many things; lager lout, sharp businessman, an overrated racer to name just a few, but everyone



Above: Carr – “I like the challenge”. Right: raging bull – Carr's challenge is making headway in the 1992 Class I World Championship. Photographs by Chris Davies.

changed their tune when the tape recorder was switched on. He does indeed seem a perfect example of New Lad, an alarming mixture of street-wise savvy, cultural insecurity and confident opportunism. But if he is what people say he is he wouldn't have come fifth in the World Championships last year in his first attempt at Class I. Neither would he be up there with Steve Curtis after winning the fifth round of this year's new World Championship. To understand how he races so successfully you have to understand how he does business.

His parents ran a 60-bed hotel in Bournemouth, and the young Richard would “wash up, make the beds, fix hinges and so on. That was my apprenticeship into the hospitality industry”. He then moved on to run a burger bar called Hamby House in Boscombe, which is where the career ladder might

have stopped. Not so Richard, who moved into Wimpy franchises and rapidly built up the biggest in the country with 20 outlets.

He sold this franchise to Grand Metropolitan for £13m and moved into the leisure industry, which he continues to shake up.

By 1987 he had floated Allied Leisure on the USM and went on to the full Stock Exchange last year. He now owns the Megabowl bowling alleys, theme bars and night clubs and employs more than 1,000 people. Sitting in the chairman's suite, behind a massive desk, Richard ponders why he does it: “I like the power. I like the challenge.” He gazes down at his enormous desk: “I suppose another thing that drives me is that I was a dyslexic child and I was never particularly good at school. I had to go to a school for dyslexic children.”

The drive that took him from serving burgers to company chairman in ten years is also applied to his offshore racing. In the leisure industry he is a high-profile achiever with a reputation for the maverick.

The man who sponsored the disastrous Cowes-Torquay race last year is also the man who wants to transform Bournemouth into what some people say would be a tacky Disneyland and others say will be a new mecca for boating. Richard really stirs it up. The Lamborghini bull on his boat is the perfect symbol for this most bullish of businessmen who likes to race offshore in his leisure time.

It was a natural progression of a sort since he had always been around boats, and many of his friends raced – friends like Steve Curtis. But at first Richard couldn't go out and play with the lads because he had no money. It wasn't until 1985 that he started racing, with a Class II 27-footer. Ever since he has been racing boats and driving them for >



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fun – “I’ve spent more hours driving boats than Steve Curtis,” he reckons.

The comparison with Steve Curtis is inevitable. A bizarre article in the *Mail on Sunday* magazine in March set the two up as antagonists, but it also set up Richard as a sex symbol, which he laughs about now, but not very hard. The article made him out to be a macho lout, knocking off beer and women and, according to Richard, “did an untold amount of damage”. Mark Pascoe, his team manager, is sure that the feature lost at least two major sponsors so Richard is more circumspect about what he says about himself, if not about his friend.

“We used to be friends – I went out with his sister – but now our friendship is rather tense. I suppose it’s because I’ve taken a bit of the spotlight off Steve in the UK and I’m competition to him. He is very, very aggressive so he either gets into trouble or breaks something.”

Steve, on the other hand, is more laconic. At St Tropez for the first round of the new World Championship he had to face a new season knowing that he came 13th last season as a professional racer while his friend, not a professional, came fifth. “The first thing Richard did when he arrived down here was to come and find me, so I guess we’re still friends. Richard ran real good in Trieste but I’ll tell you what he’s best at, and that is picking a team, which is half the race. He has the advantage of a full English team – I couldn’t get that. He’s getting more press than me now but I just want to race.

“He has complained about his Cougar but how many people go out in their first season and get the best of everything? It costs. And in his first season he won three races. His boat is now almost identical to mine – they were built side by side – so we’ll see how it goes in the race. I think if it comes down to loggerheads, to hanging it out in the wind, there is not a big question in my mind as to who would hang it out the longest.”

He smiles to take away any hint of ego. “Mind you, having said that, I don’t know many people who would hang it out further than me.” And he laughs, reminding you that Steve really is only one wave short of a shipwreck.

Carr’s consistency means the Cougar is becoming a competitive machine.

Richard stands by his massive boat and grins. “It is a macho, thrilling thing to do and I’m a very egotistical, macho sort of guy.” The grin slides a little. “I’m good at what I do. I can throttle a boat well and I’ve proved that I’m consistent, which is what wins races.” The grin disappears. “I have a high regard for my life so when I get to the first turn buoy and all I can see is white spray I don’t keep the throttles open and just hope I’m going to come out the other side, I throttle off. I hate the first four minutes of a race. It’s horrendous.”

Richard has a boat, trailer, six Lamborghini V12 four-valve engines, and four staff, two of whom came originally from Steve’s set-up at Cougar. Because of friction he has replaced his driver this year, losing Peter Currington (also from Cougar) but gaining Peter Dredge, a member of the Guernsey Yacht Club, like Richard.

Peter is happy to be under the canopy with Richard. He says: “I’ve tested with both Steve Curtis and Richard. Steve has more to prove, it’s his job, but to Richard it’s a hobby. He’s more cautious.”

Team manager Mark Pascoe is similarly happy: “Richard is brilliant to work with. He knows how he wants things and he leaves me to run the team. We have the budget to do things properly, and the Italians take us seriously.

“He’s a serious competitor, he wants to win and he’s very patriotic. You’ll notice the Union Jack painted all over the boat, even the seats are red, white and blue. Richard throttles to keep the boat and equipment together and drives a sensible race.”

Sure enough, in the starting frenzy of the first race of the season, St Tropez, as thousands of horsepower and hundreds of tons of powerboat hurtled through the turn buoys, number 69 was trailing well back from the leaders like Steve Curtis and Edoardo Polli. He was running fifth when an engine started leaking oil and losing pressure. Richard watched the pressure drop and, when it got to a cut-off point he simply shut down to save the engine rather than go for death or

glory, even though it was the last lap.

As they came in to the crane, both crewmen on deck, Richard looked thunderous. “Where’s my crew?” he demanded first. I tactfully asked about the start and Richard glared at the quayside. “There were over 30 boats out there,” explained Peter Dredge, “and we made a safe start.” That’s not the sort of behaviour that hits the headlines but it ought to be as good a way as any of finishing the races and hence the championship.

Cruel luck then that the breakdown in St Tropez was followed by a breakdown in Marbella, while dicing for the lead with Steve Curtis, and a breakdown in Italy a couple of weeks later.

His luck finally changed at Jesolo in Italy when the race was run in rough and stormy conditions. After the race, squalls and thunderclouds filled the air as several competitors were disqualified for a number of reasons, but Richard Carr won the race fair and square, with Steve Curtis behind him. Only five boats finished the race but that doesn’t detract from Richard’s first Class I win, since bad weather and high seas really show up how well a boat is put together and how much stamina and commitment the crew have.

Your first win at the top level makes it all worth it, although offshore can be really hard work. “If I’m going to be involved with something it has to be right,” emphasises Richard, “and this new World Championship is the way to go. I like it here. There is an element of snobbishness in offshore, particularly British offshore, but British offshore is finished as far as I’m concerned. A lot of people in England don’t have a clue and they’d be very frightened if they went in one of the Class I boats.

“That petty jealousy and everyone being an expert doesn’t seem to happen abroad. In Britain in Class III say, you’ve got someone in a first-class rig and then someone else in a cabin cruiser with knives and forks rattling around. The funny thing is that the guys who tend to race these caravans-on-water are the Okay-Yahs. That’s funny because they actually think that’s powerboat racing. I can’t be doing with all that. In Class I now it’s so professional that there’s no time to have a jolly and go and get drunk. And I haven’t mooned for years, by the way – at least five.”

The European culture that permeates Class I is not worried about ancient class structures, it cares only about success. Someone like Richard Carr, a self-made millionaire who runs a professional Class I team on his own budget, is applauded wholeheartedly and gets some of the recognition reserved for the big boys like Edoardo Polli, without the subtle subtext that so riddles English society. The new Class I World Championship was made for the man. □