

# A matter of records



**Geoff Holt**

The former professional yachtsman who was paralysed in a swimming accident and inspired sailors when he became the first quadriplegic to sail the Atlantic.

IT may come as a surprise but the inspirational sailing achievements of the likes of British quadriplegic sailor Hilary Lister, blind sailor Aly Gunn or paraplegic Alan Grace are rewarded with little more than column inches in the press.

Despite headlines like "sailing into the record books" which featured after my sail around Great Britain in 2007, there is no formal recording of these events other than the ensuing publicity and most of that is restricted to the marine press.

The WSSRC—the World Speed Sailing Record Council - official keepers of sailing records, specifically exclude disability as a separate category. In fact their rules exclude any claim based on a "human condition" and that includes age.

And apart from recognised Paralympic sports, the Guinness Book of Records adopts a similar policy.

So why is this and is it discrimination? Well it is more complicated than it may initially seem.

First, it's worth qualifying the term "disability" of which there are broadly three categories; sensory (blind and deaf), intellectual disability (what was until recently referred to as "learning disability") and physical disability (everything from amputees to spinal injury).

Let's take just one aspect of physical disability, spinal injury, and of that classification, one tiny sub-set of spinal injury, quadriplegia, which is the paralysis caused by nerve damage to any one of the eight cervical vertebrae.

Hilary Lister is a quadriplegic, so too am I and so too is Australian yachtsman Jamie Dunross. Yet Hilary can move nothing below her neck and is fully dependent on others for her care. She sails using sip and puff straws.

I have partial arm movement but still fully rely upon on 24 hour care and I sail using the back of my wrists and my teeth.

However Jamie, currently planning a sail around Australia on his own, is an incomplete quadriplegic and is capable of living (and sailing) independently.

But all three of us are medically classified as quadriplegics.

There are quite literally hundreds of permutations of disability for quadriplegia alone. It is therefore understandable that the WSSRC and Guinness Book of Records find the prospect of recording a specific sailing record multiple times for each and every disability to be too complex.

So much so, it is simply easier to have no official recording of records for disability whatsoever. In which case who is recording these feats and is it important that we do so?

Let's take Hilary for example. She's the first quadriplegic, male or female, to sail across the English Channel single-handed. She's the first female quadriplegic to sail around Great Britain and now she is undertaking another great achievement, sailing around Bahrain.

It seems a shame, and I include myself in this, that we need to always be looking for the "first", the "fastest" or having to state our gender or specify disability to somehow lay claim to a "record" that actually doesn't officially exist in the first place.

I have followed Hilary's achievements for years and they stand alone as amazing, inspirational events that capture the public's imagination for what they are - an inspirational person doing inspirational things.

When I sailed around GB in 2007, I too encouraged the press coverage claiming to be the "first quadriplegic to sail around GB" but quickly realised the event didn't need that hook

to get the public's attention. The same applies to the trans-Atlantic I did a few months ago. But with hindsight, all of these stories and events stand on their own without need for the media hype.

So does it matter that these events receive no official

*"Horatio Nelson... the one and only truly inspirational disabled sailor"*

recognition by the WSSRC or Guinness?

In part yes. I do think at least there needs to be a record of who does what and for sailing historians of the future to not just rely upon a pile of contemporaneous press cuttings.

Later this year paraplegic (broken back) Alan Grace will set off to beat the around Britain speed record set by able-bodied duo Mark Angell and Luke Yeates in a beach-cat in 2006. Whether or not Alan beats their record, he will almost certainly beat my time, a "disabled record" of 109 consecutive days I set in 2007.

Alan isn't really courting the media like I did and is chasing the overall round Britain speed record, regardless of disability. If he succeeds, his name but not his "human condition", will be recorded by the WSSRC, and rightly so.

But if he fails to beat their record and still succeeds in getting around, who will record his time if he becomes the fastest disabled person and/or the first paraplegic to sail around GB? And does it really matter? I think it does.

I mention all of this with my tongue well and truly in my cheek. Most disabled people, myself included, dream of a day when people with disabilities will be integrated into a society without barriers and without discrimination. So there is an element here of wanting our cake and eat it.

But for sailing history's sake, if not our own, it would be good to have a record, albeit unofficial, of these incredible sailing endeavours.

And although Jamie's sail around Australia planned for this summer will be an amazing feat, I still think Britain rules the waves. With the one and only truly inspirational disabled sailor, Horatio Nelson, to call our own, sailors of all abilities in the UK will continue to sail in his wake.

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## Further information

Jamie Dunross: [www.solo1.com.au/](http://www.solo1.com.au/)

Alan Grace:  
[www.alanrgrace.com/spirit.htm](http://www.alanrgrace.com/spirit.htm)

Hilary Lister: [www.hilarylister.com/](http://www.hilarylister.com/)

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