

Why ours is the 'Sport for All'



Geoff Holt

GEOFF Holt, is the former professional yachtsman who inspired sailors everywhere when he became the first quadriplegic to sail the Atlantic Ocean.

He joins *All at Sea* as a regular columnist this month. Geoff was paralysed in a swimming accident in 1984. Since then, he has committed much of his life to supporting the concept of sailing for people with disabilities and was the inaugural Chairman of RYA Sailability. A marketing specialist by profession but more recently an author and motivational speaker, Geoff was the first disabled person to sail single-handed around Great Britain in 2007. In 2009/10 he crossed the Atlantic unassisted in all aspects of the sailing.

He sits on the national RYA Council representing disabled sailors and on the Paralympic Steering Group which is responsible for finding our Paralympic sailors for 2012.

In 2004 he was awarded the RYA Award for "Services to Yachting", in 2007 he won the BBC South Sports Personality of the Year and in 2009 he was awarded the RYA's Francis Elkin Award for "Services to Disabled Sailing".

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Portrait photo: onEdition

I WAS invited along to "Sail a Mile" for Sport Relief at Gunwharf Quays in Portsmouth last month.

Organised by Thomson Sport and sister company Sunsail, it was one of several sailing events around the UK designed to contribute to the sporting charity which, unless you were living on the planet Mars, could not have avoided on the night of Friday March 19.

HQ was a mini marquee on the quayside and the aim was to encourage people who were out shopping to sail a mile on a Sunsail yacht and to raise money and awareness of Sport Relief.

All wet weather clothing and lifejackets were supplied. Adding to the sense of occasion, and helping raise the profile, Mike Golding and Dee Caffari were also there to show support and to skipper a couple of the yachts.

What struck me most was the sheer look of amazement on people's faces that they - ordinary Joe-public, could possibly go out sailing, right there, right then, for nothing more than a £10 donation to charity.

But it wasn't about the money. You could see people's faces visibly light up at the prospect of sailing and escaping the drudgery of shopping.

For some, assuming the approach was yet another tabard-fronted student collecting for charity, said "No thank you" as they raised a hand in defiance and kept walking. But moments later, they would turn around, walk back and ask: "What did you say?" as the opportunity registered.

It got me thinking that, despite years of effort, sailing in the UK is still perceived by many as elitist or out-of-reach to the common man.

At one end of the spectrum, on Saturday March 20, Franck Cammas arrived back in France having sailed Groupama 3 around the world in 48 days in one of the most incredible feats of yachting. I've been glued to his website for the past month.

And at the other end of the spectrum, I was watching my friend Keith Harris the other day sail his Access dinghy, simply for pleasure, at his sailing club, using only his tongue to control his boat. In some ways, it was equally amazing.

Sailing means different things to different people but those who actually get out there on the water and experience that buzz share a bond that all sailors understand. It offers opportunities to everyone, regardless of ability or budge.

The challenge is communicating that message.

To see so many people take up the opportunity to sail the Sport Relief mile, to watch them sail back into harbour, walk up the pontoon, faces flushed from the spring sunshine, smiles spread across their faces, was reassurance at least that the product itself, sailing, is every bit as special as we sailors know it to be.

If we are looking to increase participation, then the challenge is to persuade people that getting afloat is available and accessible to everyone.

Well done to Thomson Sport and Sunsail for providing that opportunity which took more than 200 people sailing and raised £2,150 for charity.

Surely that's got to be better than shopping.

Passion for peace

I WOULD like you to put a date in your diary - Tuesday September 21.

It is the United Nations Day of Peace and the day is orchestrated by one of the most amazing men I've ever met.

Jeremy Gilley runs a charity called Peace One Day.

On the face of it a noble but unattainable dream, Peace One Day, supported by a resolution backed by every single member of the United Nations, aims to make September 21 each year a day when militias lay down their weapons, when bullies don't bully at school, when fighting stops.

And if you are laughing at the idea, let me tell you that last year, on September 21, in cities across Afghanistan, the allies and the Taliban did lay down their weapons and with the promise of a cease-fire for one day, the International Red Cross were able to vaccinate more than a million children against polio without fear of attack.

Ban Ki-moon, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela plus celebrities like Jude Law, Angelina Jolie, Annie Lennox, the list goes on, played their part. Supported by corporate heavyweights like Coca Cola, Puma, Nike, Ben & Jerry's and many more, Peace One Day is focussing its efforts on sport as a weapon against violence and to bring about world peace.

So where does sailing fit in and why my



WITH the help and support of famous sailors Dee Caffari and Mike Golding and more than 50 Sunsail Skippers who volunteered for the day, £2,150 was raised for Sport Relief.

Many people who have never before set foot on a yacht and wouldn't know their port from starboard were given the chance to take to the helm, hoist the sails and tack and jibe their way around the Sport Relief Sailing Mile.

The £2,150 will help transform the lives of poor and vulnerable people, both at home and across the world's poorest countries.

interest?

Well, I went to school with Jeremy and I do not just support his ultimate goal (who couldn't?) but admire how his passion drives him and how that commitment shines out through his personality.

If anyone has an uphill struggle it is Jeremy but, despite the odds, he's making progress.

I've overcome some pretty tough challenges in my life so I empathise with anyone who follows their dream, regardless of the difficulties on the way.

How does that song go? The higher you build your barriers, the taller I become. I would love the world of sailing to show solidarity with such a wonderful global cause on September 21.

Do visit Jeremy's website and I'll keep you informed of events planned for the day.

www.peaceday.org

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