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# SUPERYACHT RACING - a new game

Words by Peter Craig  
Images courtesy of Jim Teeters



Records of sailing competitions date as far back as 1661. The famous America's Cup races began in 1851 and sailing in the Olympics got its start in 1900. But by any standard, 'superyacht racing' is a new game.

Superyacht racing simply did not exist 25 years ago and as recently as 1997 there were only two regattas on the calendar. Fast forward to the present day and there are over 12 regattas forming the annual race circuit. What a few short years ago was typically a gathering of owners with large cruising yachts, seeking a new experience with low-key racing and fun social programs, has changed in a number of ways and practically out of all recognition.

A growing number of yacht owners have found a further passion racing their superyachts, spending time, effort and resources preparing the yacht and crew to compete at ever higher levels.

Regatta fleet sizes that were 6-8 yachts now routinely number 15-20 with the 2012 St Barths Bucket featuring a record 47 entries.

What has changed more dramatically than fleet size, is fleet composition. New, performance-oriented 60 metre superyachts, with drafts of 10 metres and acres of sail area, race against pure cruising and classic designs. A more disparate group of sailboats sharing

the same racecourse is probably impossible to find. This creates interesting challenges for event organisers on two fronts – safe sailing and fair racing.

An increasing number of incidents in the form of equipment breakages, injuries and near-misses have become a source of concern for owners, captains and many in the superyacht industry. Additionally, a perception from a growing number of owners that their respective yacht is not competitive with the current handicap rules.

The high loads experienced with standing rigging, running rigging and winches presents safety issues on cruising yachts that were quite possibly not designed or engineered to handle what one can encounter on a race course. Add a lack of racing experience or expertise and there is a very real potential for problems and danger.

As some superyachts are now designed and built with race performance being a high priority, there is growing scrutiny regarding handicap rules and the issue of fair play.



*"We needed an organisation focused simply on safety and fair racing."*

Many superyacht owners are looking for transparency in the handicap system and a finishing place that reflects skill on the water. However, the disparity in yachts (size, displacement, sail area, draft, speed, etc.) makes establishing equitable handicap rules an extraordinarily difficult task.

Following serious injury to a superyacht crew member in the summer of 2010, Ed Dubois decided it was time to act.

In November 2010 he held an exploratory meeting in London attended by 10 yacht owners/representatives and 30 industry professionals. It was agreed that the superyacht racing arena had expanded significantly, both in event numbers and competing yachts, and that the issues of safe and fair racing needed to be addressed. A 'Working Party' was formed and tasked with identifying the issues and defining the next step. The Working Party, chaired by Barry Houghton (owner of Dubois-designed *Salperton*), consisted of prominent yacht designers, builders and sailmakers.

The following St Barth's meeting, held four months later in March 2011, showed that there was sufficient interest and consensus to take the next step – establishing a Superyacht Association. Items presented for discussion included membership, scope of work, composition of an Executive Committee, hiring an Executive, funding, and defining the Mission Statement.

It was agreed to form the SuperYacht Racing Association.

The SYRA is a non-profit organisation formally established in May 2011.

Membership is open to any owner (or owner's representative) who races or intends to race, event organisers, and companies involved with the superyacht industry. It is envisioned that the SYRA will be an owner-driven organisation with members of the industry remaining involved in an advisory capacity.

SYRA was formed for a straightforward reason: "to enhance the enjoyment of racing for superyacht owners".

Safe racing and fair racing are integral to enjoyment. Addressing both of these complex issues is a major undertaking, with safe racing the top priority in the first year. Presently, the Association is an advisory and informational organisation with the potential to establish future policy.



Maintaining the mandated 40 meter separation between yachts can be a challenge with bigger fleets and increased congestion at turning marks.



The new ISAF approved superyacht racing rule for 'overtaking' is critical in the pursuit racing format from both a competitive standpoint and to ensure adequate separation between yachts.

The SYRA has had a very productive first year, now with three active sub-committees dealing with the priority issues – Uniform Racing Rules, Onboard Safety and Handicapping/Fair Racing.

An early breakthrough regarding safe sailing was achieved with the help of the International Sailing Federation (ISAF). The SYRA requested and obtained formal approvals for changes to the Racing Rules of Sailing for six superyacht regattas on the 2011 calendar. These changes were later extended for all 12 regattas in 2012. A submission for a formal Superyacht Racing Rules Appendix has now been submitted for ISAF consideration.

This is a meaningful achievement in such a short period of time and something for the SYRA Uniform Racing Rules sub-committee to build on. Having uniform rules for superyacht racing and tailoring the ISAF Rules to take into account special safety considerations specifically for superyachts, is critical for collision avoidance.

All of the superyacht regattas have

incorporated SYRA recommendations regarding Safety Officers, a dedicated VHF safety channel, post race declaration forms for reporting safety, and numerous other items. Without question this has enhanced safe racing over the past year.

A thorough, vetted Safe Racing Manual has been produced by one of the most experienced superyacht captains and is posted on the SYRA website for captains to review, helping ensure that the necessary preparations for racing are made on board.

The SYRA Fair Sailing Committee recently concluded a comparative handicap study based on the 2012 St Barths Bucket times and results. This Committee will continue to make recommendations to Rule Authorities and address problem areas unique to superyachts. Additionally, resources will be allocated to fair sailing issues such as class splits, owner driver scoring, racecourse configuration, and accurate measurement data for yachts.

The members of SYRA are enhancing safe racing and advancing fair racing initiatives,

and other meaningful issues, as superyacht racing continues to grow in popularity. Through SYRA, members have a voice in the development of superyacht racing policies and can help ensure that this dynamic, growing part of the industry, continues to expand.

Members are encouraged to take an active role in reviewing procedures and a 'members only' area of the SYRA website will provide a place for non-public forums, idea sharing, documents and pending policy decisions. There were 40 members on board at the close of the 2012 Caribbean regattas and the aim is to increase to 50 members by the end of the SYRA's second year.

For more information on the Association, please contact:

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