

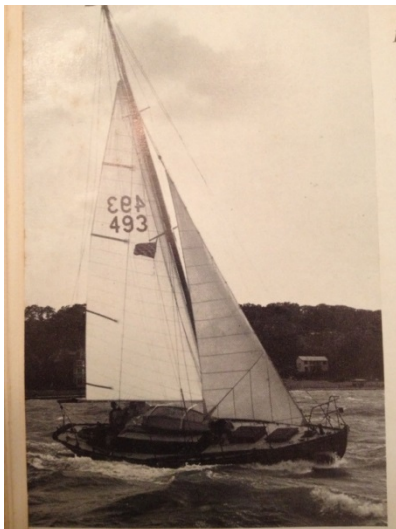
## San Sebastian Race 1956

By Alan Nicol

August 13, 1956

20:15 – As far as we are concerned, the race was over as we crossed the line. The start had been postponed from noon to 1800 hours due to a gale, which was still blowing about 6-7 at times. All three classes, about 15 boats, started together and in the strong wind and quite large seas, we were unable to avoid Jolliette who rammed us on the starboard quarter. As we were on port tack, we had to retire, and we lowered the main which was in danger of being torn as J had pulled our boom back to put back to Cowes to inspect the damage

Very disappointed at being out of the race. Heartbreaking to see the others beating off toward the Needles. The damage was only superficial – the handrailing had carried away on the Starboard side bringing half the pulpit with it and a piece of the deck aft. This was put right and after a meal, we followed on at 20:30.



By this time, we had missed the tide, and although there was a good breeze blowing, the first four hours was wasted as regards distance. We passed the Needles about 4am in a very nasty chop which sent Mike's supper over the side and made him ill for most of the day. My effort at porridge – making produced contented grunts from the skipper but sent me to the side for the first time ever. We made good progress across the Channel either under Yankee, Staysail, and Main, or reefed main, yankee, and ----. Alderney sighted about 18:00. Later on, a shipping forecast gave a gale warning so we handed the terylane main and set the storm main and staysail. We came through the outer passage on the tide. The wind really came at about 0400 on Monday morning and soon we were doing 6-7 knots under a well-reefed main and staysail. We handed the staysail and set the 30 sq ft storm jib, and rolled the main down to the bottom cross-trees. This made it bag a lot, despite rolling in a sail bag and green wrap so we could only lay something the north of west. The 4-8 and our 8-12 watches were miserable. Wet

seeping in below rolling nastily and taking the odd one in the cockpit to wet the watch-keepers. Spirits pretty low as the weather forecast at 7:40 announced an "unusually deep depression" (my second in three weeks) and gales in all areas.



At mid-morning, Francis and I decided to make for Plymouth or Brixham some 30 miles away to shelter as he was pretty unwell. We were all wet and miserable and we

weren't racing anyway. We eased sheets and laid a course for Brixham.

However, just before 12 the wind eased and I got the larger staysail set. The wind died away and the line across the way came fast to reward us followed by blue skies. Francis and I simultaneously said we'd make for San Sebastian again so all plain sail was set and we went back on course for Ushant. Start point was then just in sight. The afternoon's sail was very pleasant. The ship was aired a bit and



Neville scrambled eggs on toast. This was our first food since the night before when luckily, we'd had a good supper. Cooking is very unpleasant in any sort of sea, and the unfortunate cook can usually reckon to be unable to keep his down.

It is evening now and we are assured 3-5 winds W or NW for the next 24 hours. Gypsy Moth is making about 5 knots with her terylene main back on again.

14 August – Tuesday

Been a very cold night. Our watch from 8-12 and 4-8 we had a half moon out for the first watch and then brilliant starlight but it was as much as we could do to keep warm. We are moving at about 4 and a half knots with moderate sea coming in from the Atlantic.



They forgot to give our weather forecast for the sea areas last night. Several times we have sent mythical letters to the Times about the weather. On Sunday evening when we were warned of gales it was perfect sailing weather. Then we wrote to congratulate them as the predictions went ---- when we were in the thick of it. After giving gale warnings in all sea areas the announcer finished by saying, "Not very pleasant, gentlemen, I'm afraid. Good sailing and good luck."

The sea is now up and it looks as though it may be a wet day.

1830 hrs. We have now been practically becalmed for 6 hours. We are 8-10 miles NW of the Ayr Man buoy and the tide is against us till 2000 hrs.

Soon after 10 this morning the other watch got the spinnaker up and by now we were opposite Ushant which we could just see on the horizon. This afternoon has been in part one of great activity. Firstly, trying to get the spinnaker to work – this was eventually abandoned as I was in danger of getting wrapped about something or chaffing and the large genoa was set. Secondly, in getting things on deck to dry and thirdly in dips over the stern and sunning and airing ourselves.



A sail is in sight dead ahead, but too far off for recognition. Wonder if she is a competitor. If we don't get a move on soon we won't have any time in San Sebastian at all before starting back for Belle Ile.

Francis cooked a very good breakfast this morning – porridge, fried eggs, and bacon. Toast and marmalade. 2 parts seawater to 3 of fresh is however too salty for porridge.

Wednesday, 1130 am

Still becalmed. This is exasperating. Yesterday when I said we were becalmed we were doing about 2 knots. Now we are doing very well if we do one knot. Last night in our watch 12-4, we did half a mile in the log despite a continual effort of trimming the sails (main and ghoster) to catch any little puff. The only puffs that came were caused by us rolling at the top of the swell. Actually there is very little swell running and the sea is glassy smooth.

The language on board is beginning to suffer! We've come to the conclusion that one's language gets better as the wind increases up to about Force 5-6 and then gets worse again. Last night during the gales, it was chronic by some members of the crew.

The yacht we saw ahead is now only about a mile away. We are forced to the conclusion that she is sailing this way! Which shows how fast we must be going.

We've tried all tricks to keep her going. Neville has a theory that if everyone gets on the leeward side and keeps very still, she goes faster. My theory is that judicious sail trimming is the answer. The only real answer is wind, of which there is a capricious lack.

We are still about off the Ayr Man buoy and about 16 miles out at sea. Never thought the Bay of Biscay would be like this. When we turned for San Sebastian off start point, Spain didn't seem very far away. But now it might as well be in New Zealand. 300 miles will take years to do at this rate. This is exasperating.

Meanwhile, shipboard life continues. Had a good meal last night before turning in and Francis' breakfast this morning was a masterpiece. There has been a mysterious loss of all the forks bar one and the two cooking knives. Can't believe they are overboard, but there is no sign of them on board. We revert more and more to the way of savages. There was a big wash-down of the cabin this morning. Got dirty from the stove.

It is amazing how used we are to taking sleep in not larger periods than 4 hours. The watch off quite often doesn't sleep during the daytime whereas at the start every off moment was spent in the bunks. Maybe it's the sun – it is again a very nice day for anything but sailing.

Thursday 0600

The yacht we thought was coming towards yesterday evening was eventually identified as Gauntlet, a competitor who was in fact going our way. We watched her row over in her dinghy to a fisherman who had stopped nearby. When we caught up with her during the afternoon we asked if she had any spare fish, as the trawler had buzzed off after serving her. We managed to get close enough for them to pass across two lovely hake although we dropped our bucket in the process and had to gybe to pick it up. Good man overboard drill.

We tried setting the spinnaker soon after but it was no good. The air was too light to lift the weight of the sail, which only presented the same area as the genoa. The wind was just in the beam.

It was another good drying day, but we only did 35 miles all day. Mike cooked a good lunch and Neville served up the baked hake – very well done this evening. Realized we had over a pound each.

Had a bit of breeze tonight although the maximum speed reached was just now when we clocked 4 knots on the log. We changed back to the genoa after about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour of the spinnaker yesterday, but by that time Gauntlet was about a mile ahead and to wind (sic) ward. During Neville and Martin's watch, they drew up to them again and had another conversation. They couldn't pass to leeward and then worked up to windward and now we are racing neck and neck about a  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile apart.

1530 hours

The wind has at last arrived. The weather buoys have been forecasting Force 5 winds but it has taken two days to arrive. However we are now making over 7 knots under yankee, staysail, and main. It is great to be sailing again as we only 230 miles to go.

All morning we were within spitting distance of Gauntlet. Sometimes she was ahead, sometimes us. Then about 12, they came shouting by us with rude comments about being aground (or something). This was the first of the breeze. After a bit, we tried various combinations of sail to try to catch up and eventually tried plain sail, under which she seems to do so well. Gauntlet has gone away to windward and is hull down but abaft our beam.

There has been great rivalry between our watches over who can make the most distance during a watch or who can catch or maintain a lead on Gauntlet. Helps to keep the racing spirit going.

Friday 1045

Just in the midst of a most energetic sail changing programme. Just made 7 sail changes in an hour. We've now got the spinnaker set close-hauled but we cannot better  $6\frac{1}{2}$  knots on the log. We are beginning to become dominated by the wretched thing. All night long we romped along trying to get

the best possible speed. Gypsy Moth seemed to go fastest fairly close-hauled so our tactics were to go South as fast as possible, then turn South toward San Sebastian and hoist the spinnaker to a rising (forecast) wind. We cracked along during the night – one of magnificent beauty. It was fairly warm tonight, bright moonlight and starlight. We averaged 24 miles per watch. It was wonderful sailing. Gauntlet sailed straight for San Sebastian and is now out of sight to leeward so we don't know whether our theory has paid off.

The wind has dropped moderately light and it is exasperating as if we averaged 6 knots we can be in by 0600 hours tomorrow, then for a night in San Sebastian! And off to Belle Isle.

We have passed our farthest point from the shore. We reckon we were over 100 miles from the French coast in the Gironde (Bordeaux). The continental shelf goes way inshore here and there is 2000 fathoms of water below. The water is very indigo bluey.

1845

We are practically becalmed again. Have been since about midday. This is really extraordinarily frustrating weather. We are only 85 miles away and seem practically there but at this rate it will be a long time to get in. To cheer us up we have just had a gale warning for this area. That will be the last straw if we can't get in because of the gale.

Food looks like becoming scarce. Mike has done much of the cooking and he has produced good meals. We have eaten very well, but stocks are getting a bit low. So is the water – we have to get in soon.

About 1000 this morning we sighted Gauntlet away to leeward and abeam of us. We were on a converging course and when we met she was just astern of us. So our tactics last night did work. She is quite a bit bigger than us although class 3 and should have walked away from us in that breeze. We spent quite a long time side by side this afternoon chatting, and then she got a puff and is now about ½ a mile ahead. The wind is light but from the south, which means we couldn't point better than east, so we've gone about to get as much lee as possible if this is a southwesterly gale coming.

Saturday 18, 1530

Only about 10-15 miles to go. We've got a wee breeze at last and Gypsy Moth is doing 6-7 knots under spinnaker. Mountainous coast is only sometimes visible as we're in a rain squall. Makes the navigation a bit difficult. Still at lunchtime, the sun although nearly clouded over was very warm and we were listening to Spanish music on the radio. We'd felt we'd arrived.

Last night was a different story. Having prepared ourselves for the southwest-northwest gales, the southeasterly breeze persisted despite the fact that the clouds fairly high up were moving across the moon from the southwest. We felt any minute the wind would go round. However during the starboard watches' 12-4 spell it fell absolutely flat calm and I did a very dull spell on my own from 4-5:30 with the sails dropped. There was absolutely no wind. What a gale!



Then a good breeze sprang up from the southwest and we were off again under spinny. This fell light again before midday so we changed back to ghoster poled out. We had our penultimately possible meal at lunchtime. We've just got enough for a bit of a supper and then it's odds and ends. Gauntlet, who've stayed on the eastern board last night when the wind went round to southeast is about 2 miles on our port quarter, so once again our tactics paid off. The coast is very mountainous and it is a bit hard to tell one mountain from another so we are closing to try and identify somewhere and then we'll work eastwards to San Sebastian.



Will have to shave soon. Got rather fond of my whiskers.

Later

When the next watch came on, the whiskers came off. It began to rain quite hard when the next watch took over and the wind got up. We put the spinnaker back up. The wind was dead aft and they had an exciting sail in on Gauntlet, who was closing on us. Visibility decreased for a time, down to about a mile, and we lost sight of the shore. However, the place we were aiming at turned out to be right.

We gybed round the mark just outside the bay and crossed it at 1800 hours. Exactly 7 days racing. Gauntlet finished 12 minutes after us and Galloper won the whole thing.



We carried the spinnaker right into the bay, handed all the sails, and motored into the inner harbor.



## San Sebastian to Belle Isle Race

After only 19 hours in SS we are now off again. The start was at 1 pm. We came out of the inner harbor at about 12 noon – fiddled around in the bay while we finished clearing up the down below and got ready. We crossed the line rather far down but it wasn't too bad. It was a lovely night. All the boats sailing around in the sunshine against the hill. There is quite a nice breeze, about 4, but it is from somewhere north of ewast. So we cant quite lay our our course to BI. However, it is very pleasant sailing, quite warm too. We are abit to leeward of the rest of the fleet who all hae big genoas set. Ours doesn't work on this wind. The starboard watch, who is of immediately, turned in to get back some sleep and as has the skipper, who isn't too well after taking some Alka Seltzer.

Monday August 12, 18:30

The rest of the fleet are out of sight except for one yacht up to windward of us, too far off to make out who it is. Expect the storm today – sailed us out a bit. Had a reasonably comfortable night's sail, only doing 17-20 knots a watch. The wind was lightening in the Spanish hills.

We were so tired that it was a tremendous struggle to keep awake on watch. This morning the wind, still from the north east, wnet light after breakfast. We went through the usual sequence of sails as the wind died –yankee and staysail to genoa to staysail to spinney. As the wind veered through south. We could see a bay, a big thundercloud building up, and as the wind went through south, I dropped the spinney and gybe her for when it blew again. By this time, it was raining cats and dogs as the wind coming straight down. Then the wind came. It was up to gale force in 10 minutes by which time I had the spinney away and the staysail up, and 3 rolls in the main. There wasn't much sea but with the combination of spray and rain we were soaked. the breeze lasted from about 9:30-13:00 and after that fell light again.

This afternoon there has been a big drying session as all the sails were pretty well wet. Mike is just getting supper Milan again, I hope. We had some for breakfast and it was superb. There was a very good market in SS for vegetables. Neville is under the weather no. don't know quite what the matter is. Francis is fuller recovered.

We have logged about 130 miles on our way to BI but it is about 250 from SS. After the race down one can't help feeling that this is only a short trip round the bay!

Thursday 0630

After last night's sail and the sail we are having this morning, BI might as well be as far from SS as Cowes is. Since we left SS we have had nothing but northerly wind which, since the storm yesterday, there has only been about knots. So we are neither making for BI or going anywhere very fast. Most exasperating as it must be comparatively rare to get a northerly wind.

2000

Soon after sighting the coast, the wind died away completely and we were left with a beautiful day but absolutely no wind.

We had an idle morning, airing things and drying sails etc. and all hands bathed. Gloriously warm weather. Gypsy Moth looked beautiful when looked at from below and away a bit.

After lunch a bit of breeze sprang up from the west and we got underway slowly with the big genoa. We passed through a lot of fisherman who were very friendly with their greetings. The only sail we saw was an undistinguishable one early one, but that soon disappeared.

A good wind, about 3-4, is now flowing from the south and we are making about 6 knots under spinnaker. Great sailing. We have just passed through

Here endeth the account....