



ROLEX/KUPT ARRIGO

TICKING THE BOXES

Chairman of Wing On Dept Store, Karl C. Kwok (also President of the Hong Kong Sailing Federation), has achieved much of his regatta ‘wish list’. He tells Robby Nimmo of his sailing past, present

PORTRAIT BY GUY NOWELL

ABOVE:
Beau Geste rounds the Fastnet Rock at sunrise

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Karl Kwok in the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club

According to Karl C. Kwok, there are many parallels to business and competitive sailing. “It’s a management game, it’s a mind game. You’ve got to hire the right team. And also you have to listen to the ‘inner circle’, whether it’s your crew or your directors.”

Kwok started sailing at college in Minnesota. “If you went to study in America then, they had a tradition of a family taking you under their wing. I was assigned a family with a Hobie 14 on a lake. It was in the area they call ‘the Land of 1,000 Lakes.’”

Since this humble beginning in the late 1960s, there are not many races in the world that rate that Kwok hasn’t competed in – and won. He’s probably taken home more silverware internationally than any other Hong Kong yachtsman.

Ever a man with a plan, he’s bided his time and picked his strategy, his races, his boats and his crew.

When Kwok returned to Hong Kong in 1975 after an MBA and a stint on Wall St, he started sailing with Gaston Chan. “We had a few boats together over 15 years, from a Nicholson to a Dubois 36. We had some good times in local regattas and a China Sea Race and sometimes still race together.”

Kwok wanted to cast his net wider. “I got addicted to the sport. I realised there was lots of great racing elsewhere in the world, and that there was lots of boxes I wanted to tick. All the best blue-water classics around the world beckoned – the Bermuda Race, the TransPac, the Hobart and the Fastnet.”

Kwok credits much of his success to choosing the right boat – and hiring the best sailors. “Amateurs and professionals can win. You can learn a lot from them.”

Therein lies Kwok’s charm. His self-effacing modesty belies the fact that many crews might see the input he’s given





ROLEX/CARLO BORLENGHI

ABOVE TOP LEFT:

Gavin Brady and Karl Kwok after the Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup in September last year

ABOVE BOTTOM LEFT:

Beau Geste crew Cowen Chiu and Margaret Chan with Karl Kwok after the Rolex Fastnet Race in August 2009

ABOVE RIGHT:

Beau Geste charges through the Mediterranean during the Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup last year

as to their benefit. For starters, there's Gavin Brady, who was given his first overseas break by Kwok back in the mid 1990s. Says Brady, "Working with Karl for 15 years has been the highlight of my sailing. Back in 1997 we built a state of the art race boat. We put in place a strong challenge for the Southern Cross Cup and Sydney to Hobart Race. We won everything that year, but when I look back on it I realise how much I leaned from Karl about management and how to build a winning team."

"The boat we have now is the ultimate challenge – it's an 80ft maxi which presents the same challenges as our first campaign, but on a much larger scale. Beau Geste is more than a series of race yachts; it has been my sailing career."

Kwok's philanthropic streak has helped create his winning streak. Ironically, the name of Kwok's boats reflects his philanthropy. "I had a favourite dog called 'Beau'. When naming my first boat after the partnership was dissolved amicably with Gaston, I asked a friend who is fluent in French to incorporate 'Beau' into a name for the boat. He came up with Beau Geste, meaning 'magnanimous gesture.'"

The Chinese name for the boat, '騰龍' (Teng Long) means 'Vibrant Dragon.' Hence the dragon motif on all 10 incarnations of Beau Geste, either owned or chartered.

In 1996, Kwok bought Brady to Hong Kong to sail in the China Sea Race, which they won. Brady encouraged Kwok to buy a new boat, a Cookson IMS 49, another Farr. "When it was brand new, we sailed it in New Zealand and then shipped it to Sydney – we won the [1997] Southern Cross Series and the Sydney to Hobart. Hong Kong had a strong team that year, with Warwick Miller's Exile and Neil Pryde's boat, Hi Fidelity."

Despite the "easy year", there were still 4m waves, and being "not comfortable." And it's all about tactics. As Kwok says, "This is a race that's often won or lost on the last gasp in the Derwent River." Other blue water classics Kwok has sailed in include the Fastnet in 1995 and 2009, the Transpac in 2003, and the Transatlantic Southern Route in November 2009. The latter race departs in Tenerife, headed for St Maarten in the Caribbean. "This race is 2,600nm miles long and took us nine days." Some might think that might be long enough, but Kwok

has his sights set on the 3,600nm South Atlantic Race (Cape Town to San Salvador).

More recently, he has also enjoyed sailing in warmer climes, competing in "the classic race", the Middle Sea Race last October. The Middle Sea race is a very mystical experience, as you pass two volcanos. There's ash in the water from Mt Etna and Stromboli."

Racing in the Caribbean was "unfinished business" for Kwok, who had to renege on his plans to sail it 12 years ago, due to business.

This year, he achieved another holy grail, sailing the new RORC (Royal Ocean Racing Club) Caribbean 600 race. This race, developed last year, has injected new life into this part of the world's racing calendar along with Antigua Sailing Week and the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta. "Like the Middle Sea Race, it is a very evocative race, with volcanic ash from an active volcano on Monserrat, weird wind holes, and a sulphurous smell in the air."

Kwok was pleased with his "hat-trick" in the RORC Caribbean 600, winning First Monohull to Finish, First in Class and First Overall. The cup for this sits in his office, with pride of place, along with a trophy from the Fastnet, and a model almost as tall of him of the latest Beau Geste, a gift from Gavin Brady. As Kwok sums it up, "I sail to win; some might take a Corinthian view and pick any race. I believe you have to pick a race that you have a good chance of winning."

"I never think about cruising." With a smile, he says, "My New Zealand friends say that you haven't lived unless you join the 700 or so modern-day sailors who've sailed the Magellan passage from New Zealand to Chile. This run on the Volvo [Ocean race] sounds incredible. It's real 'Discovery Channel' stuff, offering a great sense of adventure and the chance to see incredible wildlife."

However, this is not a race. Yet. Kwok smiles and says, "Maybe I'd have to race against friends to make it even more exciting. The albatross on this passage have a massive wing span of around 15ft. I've seen them at sea, but never this large."

It seems that Kwok will always find a way to spread his wings and find new challenges and new horizons, no matter how much he keeps winning. 🐉