



In at the deep end

One competitor in the Round-Britain Powerboat Race 2008 will be different to the others – he got there by accident

Text: Rob Peake Main photo: Lester McCarthy



Dean (left) is put through his paces at the Plymouth Powerboat School.

Less than a year ago, Dean Gibbs had never done any boating in his life. Yet in June he lines up with the most experienced and competitive powerboat racers on the planet in the toughest powerboat race there is.

Learning the ropes from scratch and getting to a point where he can even think about being competitive, as well as planning the complex logistics for the support team, has required a radical life change for him and his wife Amanda.

But even more incredibly, this was not something they had planned. This was something thrust upon them after Dean entered the Round-Britain Powerboat Race by accident. "I'm a bit of a fan of endurance racing, whether that be Paris-Dakar or Le Mans, and I came across the Round-Britain Race website," he explains. "It asked if you'd like to be a friend of the race for £25. There was also a bronze membership for £250. It was a lot of money but I wanted to follow the race – whether or not it got me into the sponsorship tent I didn't know, but a week later I got a letter saying: 'Congratulations, you're entry number 37!'"

So this is a boat?

Scratching his head and reading the small print again, Dean realised that bronze membership also entered him for the race, a point at which most people would have picked up the phone and explained the misunderstanding to the race organisers – but not Dean. "I thought, crikey! Having never stepped foot on a boat in my life, I am now entered in the Round-Britain Powerboat Race. I said to the wife: 'I'd better go and buy a boat'"

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From that unusual moment, things have moved quickly. Two days later Dean identified a viable boat on the internet, for sale through Boatshed Hamble. He was down there from his home in Coventry the following week and found himself grappling with a whole new universe. "This was the first boat I'd ever looked at in my life. I was still saying: 'That's the front and that's the back.' The Boatshed team were talking technical terms and trying to get me to go out on it. This thing does 80mph. Taking it out on the water was the last thing I wanted to do, so I bought it without doing a sea trial."

He had the boat, a 38ft Sunseeker XS with twin 385hp Yanmar diesels, but had no idea about how to actually drive it. Luckily Dean happened to notice a sign in the Boatshed office advertising a training school run by former powerboat champion Neil Holmes. Neil is an experienced instructor and, by chance, also the official trainer for those taking part in the Round-Britain Powerboat Race.

Dean says: "So the first time I went out in a boat was in a RIB with Neil Holmes at 70mph. I told him to train me to get round the course and just finish. But by the fifth lesson he'd given me so much confidence I changed my stance to try to be more competitive."

A crew comes together

Enter Shelley Jory, also a pupil of Neil, but slightly more experienced – 11 years of powerboat racing under her belt and a national title to boot. "We got on like a house on fire," says Dean. "She's very inspirational and very keen on powerboat racing. She's as competitive as I am, and as willing to put the time and effort in. But I didn't think she'd be willing to get in a boat with someone with such a lack of boating knowledge."

However, Shelley, who had announced she was ready to hang up her racing overalls at the end of the 2007 Honda Formula Four-stroke season (in which she was third), could not resist the chance to take part in the historic race. "I was thrilled and slightly amazed to be asked," she says. "Dean's story is a fabulous one and he is quite a

FROM A TRAINING RIB...



... TO A ROUND-BRITAIN RACER



remarkable man. It's going to be a completely different ball game from my Honda racing. I am going to have to learn all three jobs in the boat – throttles, driving, and go back to my navigation roots."

She, Dean and one other crew member will share the roles throughout the race, with Shelley doing the lion's share of the navigation. Shelley admits: "It'll be the race of a lifetime but it is going to push us all to the limit."

Getting match fit

Mindful of those words, Dean has turned his life upside down to get up to speed in time for the start in June. Working with the Powerboat Training School in Plymouth, he already had a host of safety and theory certificates by January and was confident of acquiring his RYA Yachtmaster (Power) qualification before the start.

As the boss of his own lean manufacturing consultancy he can afford to take the odd day off without getting hassle and is notching up around 400 miles every week in the Sunseeker, now branded *Lean Manufacturing and Resourcing*.

It's fairly different from his previous hobbies of trials motorbike riding and racing model aircraft (he's a member of the GB team), but it has its benefits. "For once in my life I've chosen a hobby I can do with my wife," he says. "It's great. She's really excited." As team manager, Amanda will be following the boat to each stop-over with two vehicles and a volunteer support team of eight friends and family.

"That's what is nice about this – we have been able to involve people around us," says Dean. "I am a little bit nervous but looking forward to a good race. In our class we're up against the record-breaking *Hot Lemon* and all the Scorpion RIBs, so we're hoping for a few rough days to equalise it. As long as we can keep the boat going we should do well. I just want to finish and be alive." **MBY**



Dean and Shelley raise a glass of bubbly to the new boat at ExCeL.