



# Mastman

**'Y**ou're very tall!' As opening lines go, it wasn't my best, but it was definitely my first impression of in-demand mastman George Skudos – currently sailing onboard the TP52 'Christabella', who's also an America's Cup veteran with an Olympic Games under his belt.

It's a common misconception that all you need is a big, tall, grunty person – you can have anyone on the mast. However, chat to a top mastman like George and you'll soon realise how far off the mark this perception is. He explains, 'A rugby analogy could help here – a mastman is like a second row or a blindside forward where a hell of a lot of work is done with very little reward, but if you are not doing that job then things do start to fall apart. On boats upwards of 40ft, the mastman

is very important.'

There is no escaping the fact that you need to be strong, athletic and being blessed with some extra inches does give a straightforward advantage: 'It does help with some of the jobs. For the actual act of pulling a spinnaker up, you need to be able to pull as fast as you can – long arms are just long levers. Look at my arms compared to yours – there is one reach of mine compared to a couple of yours.' With my 5'4" compared to his 6'8", the man has a point.

Strength is vital. George adds, 'It is not only the actual act of helping work the front of the boat, I do a lot of secondary jobs, some grinding and moving sails around, that also benefit from being strong. I was lucky enough to be part of the last America's Cup and when you are in that sort of

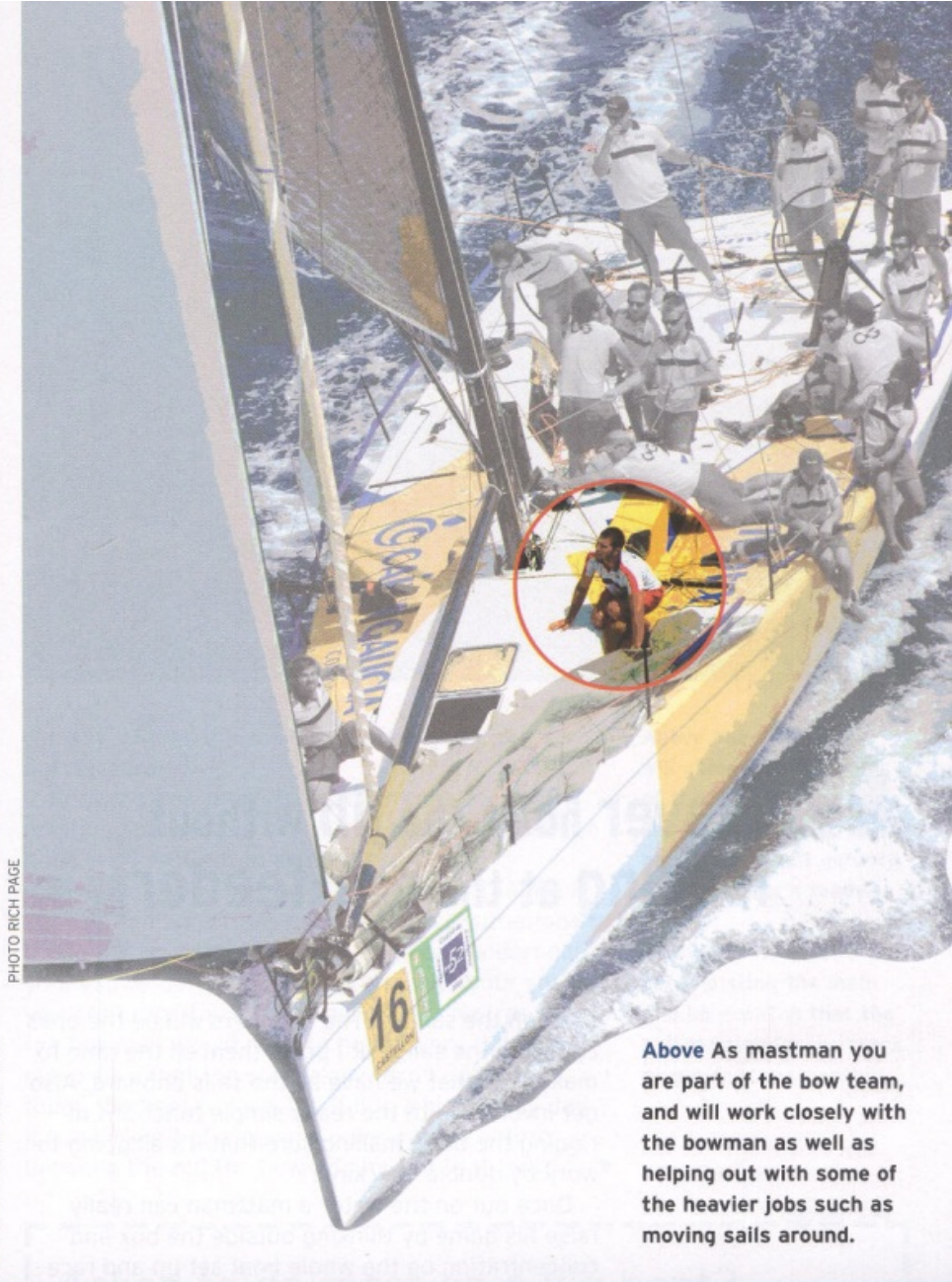


PHOTO RICH PAGE

PHOTO CARLO BORLENGHI/ROLEX

**Above** As mastman you are part of the bow team, and will work closely with the bowman as well as helping out with some of the heavier jobs such as moving sails around.

You're the big man of the boat, but it's not all about grunt – there's plenty of technique to being a mastman too, as **Harriet Prest** discovers...

cycle, training is everything as the boats are far more physical than any other. That still shapes a lot of the sailing I'm doing. There is no situation on a boat where you can be too fit or too strong.'

Wanted: athletic ability; excellent communication and concentration skills; a deep and meaningful love of ropes; and some attitude.

### Physical and mental

Starting with fitness, the mast role requires some specialised training, not surprisingly around the upper body area – important for hoisting sails as fast as you can but also vital to prevent injury. George advises, 'It's a lot of upper body strength – arms and shoulders – weights and a lot of repetitions as you tend to work in short bursts – hoisting spinnakers, dropping jibs. There will be a

lot of manoeuvres that double-back each other so you will have a five minute period of activity and then you will have a break. You need to have explosive power as well.

'From an injury prevention point of view, mastmen by nature tend to be quite tall like myself – I once had three months out with a bad back. Probably I might have done some of those injuries in the gym through bad technique and with the general grind of being in the Cup cycle you tend to wear yourself down. A lot of sailors suffer from back problems and it can just come down to posture and core strength. Core strength is important throughout the boat.'

Besides working out, what should the mastman be doing to prepare? George advises getting involved as soon as you hit the dockside: 'Go



## Crew like you...

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■ 'Mast is an active team position. You've got to be sensitive to both the front and back of the boat, and be prepared to support the bowman at all times. You need to maintain enough controlled aggression to get the sails up in time — and keeping fit for short bursts of intense activity is critical.'

Mark Ferguson, mast, J/109

## “ Never hoist the jib without looking at the pre-feeder ”

through the sail list. The trimmers will be the ones choosing the sails but I press them all the time to make sure that we have all the sails onboard. Also get involved with the really simple functions of rigging the boat, making sure that it's all going to work by double checking.'

Once out on the water a mastman can really raise his game by thinking outside the box and concentrating on the whole boat set-up and race plan — he or she gets really involved with manoeuvres so it's always important to be aware of what's coming up. George benefits from, '...being able to not only know the physical parts of my role but also the mechanical and the tactical parts of the job. For instance, thinking about the next weather mark, which side you are going to drop the spinnaker — that might save five minutes of clearing up on the next beat. You are trying to

**Below** As mastman you're responsible for the inboard end of the pole, setting it to roughly the correct height before the hoist, and raising it through dip-pole gybes.



PHOTO JANEY DEVINE / AQUARIUS

think as far ahead as possible. If you have a 20-minute beat the level of concentration is high. Knowing how long you think you've got on port and starboard makes the set-up a whole lot easier.'

If you are an amateur mastman, you should be able to perform the mechanical parts of the job and then start thinking about how you can be more useful as part of the team. George adds, 'I enjoy coming into a weather mark, having seen the breeze go left, and anticipating a gybe set. I like being able to say, "A gybe set here is an option", rather than [having the afterguard] surprise us. I like to keep the options going for them and I will get much more out of the day.'

There are times to have your head out of the boat and be looking around the course, but there are also definite times for purely concentrating on your task onboard. 'Your head is in for your set-up. I would never have my head out of the boat when the bowman is clipping the spinnaker on. Even with professionals, they may well get something wrong.

'[Then get your] head out of the boat — coming away from a weather mark I'm often the first one who can see the spinnaker so I'll be calling the trim and then I will be straightaway looking for other boats and seeing if I can call the gybe. If I've seen that before anyone else then I can inform other people. They might be in their head in the boat moment.'

### Know your ropes

As the name suggests, as mastman your jobs centre around the mast area. The mast on a big boat has an array of different halyards and spinnaker pole controls running through it, exiting the mast just above head height on both the port and starboard side. So the first thing to do is to get to know your ropes — if it's a new boat then go over the colours and functions of each rope with the pitman and the bowman. They will have a good grasp on which halyards they use.

George still goes through this with every new boat: 'Look at all your ropes, rope terminals, clips, and then all your leads and try to anticipate how you are going to work. Try and work out best solutions. I would like to think that at any point during a race I will know where every halyard is and then I know straight away how we are going to do a peel. It would be very easy for amateur mastmen to just leave all that up to the bowman. On a symmetric boat, if a gear change is called late, how we would generally split up the work is that the bowman would stay with the sail and the sheets and the mastman would do the pole and the topping lift. So you do have that responsibility — you can't expect the bowman to do it all.

'As a mastman you can't just sit on the rail, if you need something to happen, you have to understand exactly what you are dealing with. Thinking about the top of the rig at any time I can picture it — when you are pulling spinnakers you need a mental map.'

### Power and glory

The time for a mastman's glory comes with the spinnaker hoists. Confirm with the pit which halyard you are expecting to hoist and then wait for the command. Also make sure that the pit crew is ready to tail — otherwise you will find a pile

of rope at your feet, the load of which you are holding in your hands!

George shared his top tips for effective hoisting: 'The way to take advantage of my long levers is to hand-over-hand, so generally your spinnaker halyard exits are quite high on the mast. That's something a club sailor can do to make it easier: look at your exits on your mast, and try and swop the kite halyard onto the highest exit point – if it is well above your head then you can reach up for it and get your full arm's length. Then there's "bell-ringing", which is the two-handed action, and if you don't manage to get it all up with that you are just pumping.'

Why does the halyard become so much harder to pull up? 'At some point the weight in the spinnaker you are pulling up and the friction against the jib [increases], so you naturally just have to change as you cannot hand over hand. It's a bad hoist if I have to pump.'

And how do you know when you are nearly there? 'I see the pitman's mark going through my hands, so I know that I am two pumps away from the top. You get to know your ropes, I know how long they are: I'll know how much I want to sneak. For example, I've then got 10 hand-over-hands and then a couple of bell-rings to finish it off.'

'Before I get to the top I'm telling the trimmer that they can sheet on – if he sheets on too early then the spinnaker fills and it is a bad set, and if I pull it to the top and then call the trim on it's not a good set either, as the thing is not pulling. So, as the kite gets to the top, I want it to fill. At that point I will be looking at the luff of the spinnaker, as the trimmer is generally unsighted and I will be looking to check if it's flapping.'

What about when the kite is fully hoisted? 'You



PHOTO PAUL WYETH

can say 'Made!' if it makes you feel good! But it's not necessary.'

Knowing how much halyard to 'sneak' – gently hoisting some of the kite out of the bag before the hoist – is key. George elaborates: 'That's something I know will be determined by the wind and the sea conditions and the tactical situations. If you are on a tight leg, there's a boat underneath you, you've got to be very careful with your sneak, you are lucky if you get three or four metres as the bowman would have to hold it very tight to make sure that the spinnaker wasn't going to touch the boat to leeward. If it is a big breezy day it is a little bit of a gamble – we would confirm between the pit, the bow and myself that there

**Above** The 'hoist!' call will come from the back of the boat, but watch the bowman during the set-up and don't go until the spinnaker's ready.

**Below left** Take extra care hoisting the main and jib – watch that the sail is going up the track or pre-feeder smoothly.



PHOTO RICK TOMLINSON GBR\*

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# Key points

- **Fitness:** Mast is a physical job so make sure you're in good shape for the task! Be prepared for quick bursts of action that will stretch your upper body strength and explosive fitness.
- **Concentration:** Keep your eye on the course – you will need to spring into action for the hoists so don't let the mark roundings or corners take you by surprise.
- **Communication:** Talk to the bow team and the pit – especially with regards to which halyards are plugged into the sails you are going to hoist.
- **Teamwork:** As mastman you will be required to lend a hand with lots of grunty jobs in the bow area. Keep an eye on the sharp end and anticipate situations that may call for your help.
- **Hoists:** Use the hand-over-hand method to hoist the majority of the sail – as the friction in the halyard becomes tougher you will have to swop to a bell-ringing action to complete the hoist. You may have to pump the final stages of the hoist – if this happens, talk with the crew to see how this can be avoided in the future, for example the spinnaker trimmer may be sheeting on too early.

will be “No sneak”, and that we will keep the spinnaker in the bag before we get to the mark.

‘There are other situations where you just don’t want the weight off the rail, where the most important thing is to get around ahead of a boat. Especially in tidal situations – if you will be downwind with the tide, if your spinnaker hoist is a second late it doesn’t matter, the most important thing was that you got around that mark. Generally if you are one of the bigger members of the crew then your responsibility is to make sure that your weight is on the rail.’

### Not done yet...

Following the kite hoist your job is not yet done – you may need to get involved in checking the spinnaker is trimmed until the trimmer can see it; making sure that lazy spinnaker is clear to gybe; or helping get the jib down.

Hoisting other sails also needs careful technique. For the mainsail hoist, George advises: ‘I look after the luff of the sail and I plug the halyard in at the head of the main. I would give the clew hoist call. For the drop, I call it down, and make sure that the locks are triggered on the halyard.’

And hoisting the jib: ‘I plug in the sheets, and then hoist it. Talking about concentration – if you watch an amateur mastman, you sometimes see them watching the halyard exiting the mast, which doesn’t move at all! Yes, you need to know where your hands are going but you can wreck a jib on the first hoist of the day if you pull it out of the pre-feeder, I will never hoist the jib without looking at the pre-feeder.’

### Good to talk

As with every position on a big boat, communication is vital. The loop for the mastman invariably means he is part of the bow team – a team that is talking constantly. ‘I joke with all the bowmen I work with that it is my job to make them look good. I do spend a lot of time just talking through every manoeuvre and trying to second-guess the next thing. By being on top of our job and doing it as best we can, it does make

the job of everybody around us much easier.

‘We are a bit like old women sometimes – we will talk about everything and go through every eventuality. Probably more than anyone could believe, we spend a lot of time double-checking and making sure that everything is clear. Every time you do something, you have got to know that it is not going to have an implication for the next manoeuvre. That’s all the way from when we arrive on the boat in the morning, through the day.’

The mastman, in his position between the bow and the crew boss or pit, means that he has to feed information forward: ‘A lot of the time the bowman will be out of earshot so the mastman will be that link and will collect all the information for him. I will also be talking with the trimmers to make sure that the sail that they want for the next leg is the one that we have got on deck. I will be involved with packing the one that is on deck and getting the next one up.’

### Getting started

There’s a lot more to this role than meets the eye, but it’s a great job to start with and to move your performance on with every new race. ‘The mastman is somebody who can play a very simple mechanical role or can add and really bring a lot to the team. It could be a great chance for club sailors that might not get another opportunity – the mast might be a lowly job to get onboard but if you decide to take it on, it could be a way to really get into the sport. I was lucky enough to do the Admirals’ Cup in 1989 when I was 18 years old – that was a story of opportunity. I was deputy to the mastman and I learnt a lot from him. I was sailing with an America’s Cup mastman and bowman, so it was about me making the most of my opportunity.’

His final word? ‘I think it’s concentration. Concentration with a bit of attitude as well. I can remember as a young man, I was watching the 1987 America’s Cup in Perth and I read Dennis Conner’s book. He talked about the three ‘A’s of sailing: attitude, attitude and attitude! That is something that I have never forgotten, we work as a team and the team is as strong as its weakest part.’ ■

**Right** Knowing how much spinnaker you can ‘sneak’ before the hoist varies from boat to boat, and in different conditions – asymmetric boats generally sneak the tackline out to the end of the pole as well as some halyard.



PHOTO PETER DANBY