

# julian megson

## *Interview*

Julian Megson, 43, from Bradford in West Yorkshire in the UK, has a day job as a network engineer for a company which makes wireless mobile routers, but is also a disabled sailor with some ambitious singlehanded sailing plans, including a solo circumnavigation of the British Isles this year and ultimately an entry in the 2013 OSTAR (Original Singlehanded Trans Atlantic Race).

Sail Racing Magazine tracked Megson down recently to find out more about these plans and exactly how close he is to bringing them to fruition.

**SRM: What is your disability and how does it affect you physically?**

JM: I have Spina Bifida, a disability which affects the nervous system and anything below the damaged part of the spine. Both legs and feet are affected which means that I have difficulty with my walking, which is awkward and takes up a lot of energy. Balance is also an issue; I can't stand for long without having to hold on to something. I have lived with it since birth so I don't know any different.

**SRM: How does your disability affect your everyday life?**

JM: I don't really let it affect anything. I mean I've adapted my life around my strengths and limitations. I know it may sound obvious, but my everyday life is based around what I can do not what I can't do. I will never be able to run a marathon, but rather than tear myself apart trying to achieve the impossible I focus on realistic challenges – like my sailing. My sailing ambitions are hard but completely possible. I have a pretty normal life really, a normal job, I

can drive a car, I have a lovely family and the best friends in the world – what more do you want?

**SRM: Tell us about the campaign to circumnavigate Great Britain and Ireland single handed?**

*to cross the Atlantic Ocean single handed - that still remains my ultimate dream*

JM: The plan is to complete the voyage this year over a period of around 4 weeks or less if possible, with about 5 stops.

**SRM: What made you choose a Round Britain and Ireland as a sailing challenge?**

JM: It is something I've wanted to do for a while. It's a pretty cool thing to do I reckon. There is just something about the British Isles; it seems like the obvious challenge to try.

Also to sail around the British Isles in just a few weeks will mean extended periods at sea. It will be a showcase of my talents and a good warm up for my future project and my main ambition: to compete in the OSTAR in 2013.

**SRM: What about funding? How much money do you need to raise to make Great Britain and Ireland Challenge happen?**

JM: I need around £65,000 (\$97,500) in total.

Right now I sail a 24 foot Hurlay. She's an old girl and quite slow, but I love my little boat.

The intention is to acquire a bigger and faster boat designed for offshore sailing. As much as I love my little boat, she was not designed to spend extended periods offshore and she would be very slow. It would be good to secure a single sponsor for the full amount but I can split it up into smaller packages if I need to. I'm pretty flexible.

**SRM: What is your ultimate sailing ambition?**

JM: Since I started sailing, my ultimate ambition has always been to cross the Atlantic Ocean single handed - that still remains my ultimate dream. But the campaign to cross the Atlantic has undergone some mission creep over the last couple of years. I've moved on from wanting to treat this as personal endurance challenge to instead wanting to compete in a single handed Trans Atlantic race.

**SRM: Why the OSTAR?**

JM: As my confidence and ability has grown I've realised that with some proper training and a fast boat, I might actually stand a chance of doing well in a Trans Atlantic race. On a boat, the difference between me with my disability and any other able bodied person is greatly reduced – so why not take them on in a race? The idea that I just might pull off a shock result against the able bodied is just too good an opportunity to resist. Given the right opportunity, if I compete in the OSTAR in 2013, I will be aiming to win - however farfetched that may sound.

**SRM: Any thoughts about what you will want to do beyond the OSTAR?**

JM: If everything goes well with the round Britain and Ireland challenge and the OSTAR, then I will almost certainly want to go on and do bigger and better things. But I'm purposely not thinking that far ahead, I have more than enough to think about with the immediate future and I don't want to lose focus on what 'm trying to do now.

**SRM: What drives you?**

JM: Success. For instance, I've found that putting together a sailing campaign that requires sponsorship is not for the faint hearted – particularly if it's your first attempt. The learning curve is steep and lots of mistakes are made (in my case anyway). When I'm not at work, I spend every spare hour working towards my sailing campaign. It's not unusual for me to be sending out sponsorship proposals at 2 o'clock in the morning then getting up for work the next day just a few hours later. Chasing sponsorship is by far the toughest thing I've ever done and the only way I can keep going and driving towards that goal, is to imagine myself crossing the finish line having finally achieved my dream.

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**SRM: Why single handed sailing?**

JM: I enjoy sailing with a crew, I enjoy the crack and working with a team. But single handed sailing puts you on a whole other level. Once the mooring lines have been cast off, it is just you and your boat and you become responsible for everything. Your senses are heightened as you become aware of every noise and movement of the boat - it's exhilarating.

**SRM: Sailing is not the obvious choice for someone living in land-locked Bradford, why you?**

JM: I grew up as kid in a small back to back terraced house in Bradford, so when we went on family holidays by the sea, it was such a contrast – I loved it. I never looked forward to anything quite so much. So I think it was only a matter of time. I've always leaped at any opportunity to go boating, whether it be in the little wooden angling club boat or slipping someone a few quid so I could jump aboard a ferry to do a round trip at sea! (But that's another story).

**SRM: Was there a pivotal moment when you knew that sailing was for you?**

JM: Yes very much so. When I first had the idea to take up sailing, I had to find out whether my

disability was going to allow me to handle a boat and be able to move freely around on deck. The other important thing to check was that I didn't become afraid of the sea when the going got tough. So with the latter in mind I booked an RYA "Competent Crew" course in the Irish Sea in February. I was actually hoping for some bad weather to test both my nerve and my physical ability. The forecast was for a few days of calm, but the good news was there were gale force winds due before the end of the 5 day course. The storm delivered the goods during a night sail at the end of the week. The wind gusted to over 60 knots, it howled through the rigging like a Hollywood sound track. I was at the helm, my skin was bristling and I knew there and then that sailing was for me.

**SRM: What do your friends and family think about your ambitions?**

Living near Bradford and being a sailor makes me quite a novelty, people tend not to know many yachtsmen where I live – hence the long list of people wanting to come along for a sail. But everyone is very supportive if somewhat staggered at my choice of "hobby".

I wasn't a sailor when I met my wife so the poor thing has had to put up with a big transformation in her husband. Thank goodness she has the patience of a saint.

My parents think they picked up the wrong baby (joking!)

**SRM: What do you like best about sailing?**

JM: Being at sea and harnessing the power of the wind to move the boat just fascinates me. The remoteness of being far out to sea feels primeval. Whatever the voyage it makes you feel like a pioneer, like you are on an adventure and exploring new boundaries – even if many have gone before you (I've probably got an over-active imagination). No two days at sea are ever the same. The sea has a kaleidoscope of moods. It's beautiful and awesome all the same time.

**SRM: What was your best day sailing?**

JM: I have a lot to choose from, but the day that stands out is helping to deliver



Steve White's Open 60 across the Channel to France. With gale force winds we were flying along at around 25 knots – it was unreal. The sea was cascading over the decks and there was an awesome following sea. For 8 hours it was like sailing the Vendee Globe.

**SRM: What is the furthest you have sailed?**

In 2009 I sailed the 1200 miles from the Azores to Portsmouth with a crew on a 65 foot yacht. Unusually it was upwind all the way. Despite my walking and balance problems, I coped really well with the constant slamming into waves and with my world being on its side for 8 days. I made sure that I mucked in and kept busy. I was determined not to be a passenger but an active member of crew. I did pretty well.

**SRM: Who are your sailing icons?**

My most thumbed book is that of Sir Robin Knox-Johnston's 'A World of My Own'. Robin was the first person ever to sail single handed and non-stop around the world and this is the book he wrote of this voyage. I never get tired of that book and I use it sometimes to remind myself why I'm putting myself through all this hard work. Of all the well known personalities, he's the one I really want to meet. (And he looks like he would be good for a night out at the pub!)

But equally I admire Steve White for his successful Vendee Globe campaign in 2008/2009. Actually not just Steve, I include his whole family. It was a

real team effort and they made huge sacrifices just to make it to the start line. It's a proper boys own story of succeeding against the odds – sterling stuff. My family and I have been lucky enough to have become good friends with the Whites over the last couple of years. You couldn't wish to meet nicer people.



**SRM: Does your disability affect your outlook on life?**

JM: Definitely. If anything, it makes me more determined to succeed. I have never let my disability hold me back. If I've failed for any reason, I've never used my disability as an excuse. I feel very lucky that I'm living the sort of life I have. I've had periods of feeling down like anyone else, but this is usually because of circumstances out of my control and nothing to do with my disability. I feel pretty upbeat about life.



**SRM: When growing up, were you ever bullied because of your disability?**

JM: I never came across any bullying or anything like that. I think possibly because I was inclusive and I made an effort to get on with people. My friends often forget I have a disability even though it's quite obvious when you see me.

**SRM: How does your disability affect your sailing?**

JM: Honestly, it affects me very little. In some ways, sailing puts me at the same level as other people; it really doesn't affect my ability to sail in any considerable way. Everyone struggles to

balance on a boat so it is a great leveler. For once it makes me the same as everyone else.

**SRM: You started sailing in your late 30's which is quite late in life, why then?**

JM: My wife calls it my mid-life crisis; she's probably right, but it depends entirely on how you choose to view things. You can either let it get you down or view it as an opportunity to make a change. I took a long hard look at my life and realised that I was coasting along with no real purpose. I've been stuck in an office all my working life and although I now have a good job, I've never felt that I belong cooped up inside an office all day. If you don't have any goals then you are in danger of giving up and accepting your lot, even though there is potential to do so much with life. Looking back made me feel pretty depressed and I knew that if didn't do something about it now, I would regret it for the rest of my life.

**SRM: What has been the hardest challenge you have faced in your life so far?**

JM: Trying to find sponsors for my sailing campaign. This is the first time I've attempted such a venture and I'm learning some harsh lessons about putting together a campaign. It's incredibly hard and disheartening sometimes. Living in land locked Bradford doesn't help either, I feel quite isolated. If I lived on the south coast I could mix with people who have experienced what I'm hoping to achieve and bounce ideas around. If I need advice I mainly rely on emailing people I've never met. But I'm constantly looking for opportunities to move south.

**SRM: What is your biggest fear?**

JM: Failure.

**SRM: Why do you want to help raise awareness for the ASBAH charity in particular?**

JM: ASBAH (Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus) is a registered charity, which helps families and individuals affected by Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus. I have Spina Bifida so it's the perfect fit. Once I have the funding and am able to move on to doing my sailing challenge, I hope to put some ASBAH branding on the boat and use the campaign to raise funds for the charity.

ASBAH have the motto, "Ability Beyond Disability" and I just love that. I can't wait to have that motto written on my boat during the campaign.

**You can find out more about Julian's campaign at his website:**

<http://julianmegson.com/>

and on his Facebook Page:

<http://www.facebook.com/Julian.Megson.Ocean.Ventures>

or his Twitter Feed:

<http://twitter.com/julianmegson>

For more information about ASBAH you can visit their website here: <http://www.asbah.org>

