



Project Amazon and the Unstayed Rig

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An atypical Open 60-class aluminum cat-ketch designed for the grueling Around Alone race is fitted with an unstayed rig. And proponents of wingmast setups are watching closely.

by Eric Sponberg

On September 26, an Open 60 built to my design, *Project Amazon*, embarks on the Around Alone Singlehanded Race (formerly called the BOC Challenge), with owner-skipper Sebastian Reidl (rhymes with “bridle”) at the helm. *Project Amazon* is a cat-ketch, equipped with two carbon fiber free-standing wingmasts; that is, the masts are shaped like wings, rotate to follow the wind, and have no wires holding them up. They carry a fore and a mizzen, as well as headsails, staysails, and an asymmetrical spinnaker.

The only other boat ever to compete in an around-the-world event with a rig in any way similar to *Project Amazon's* was *Lady Pepperell*, Tony Lush's much-modified 54' Hunter that he sailed in the 1982–83 premier running of the BOC. She was a cat-ketch, and her masts (round-sectioned, not shaped like wings) rotated to roll up the sails for easy reefing and stowage. Unfortunately, Lush was forced

to abandon *Lady Pepperell* on the second leg in the Indian Ocean when she lost her keel. His being plucked off the boat by fellow competitor Francis Stokes literally minutes before *Lady Pepperell* sank was one of the most spectacular events of that race.

I've been active in the design and development of free-standing rigs since 1980, when I was chief engineer at what was then Tillotson-Pearson Inc., builder of Garry Hoyt's Freedom Yachts. In that year, TPI switched the building of Freedom masts from aluminum to carbon fiber, and I did the original engineering for the new carbon fiber spars. (Freedom Yachts now builds its own boats in Middletown, Rhode Island, and Goetz Marine Technology in nearby Bristol builds their masts.) I left TPI at the end of 1981, and in my career have designed over 50 free-standing masts.

From time to time, I and others, most notably Garry Hoyt, have appeared in

print and in person to speak about the sublime simplicity, safety, and improved aerodynamics of free-standing rigs—often to skeptical listeners. Their reaction is always the same: sailors simply don't trust a sailboat mast to stand all by itself without any wires holding it up. Never mind that these same skeptics will board a 747 airliner that weighs 800,000 lbs and flies at 500 mph seven miles above the Earth—with no wires holding the wings on! Well, no one ever claimed that sailors are logical beings.

Although the virtues of free-standing rigs are compelling, people are not spurred to buy new-and-improved boats, and I am not really surprised by that. It's like computers—just because the latest and greatest computer is 10 times faster than mine doesn't mean I'm going to spend \$4,000+ right this minute to upgrade. My computer works fine for what I do, and I'll upgrade when I am forced to do so by my clients or my competitors, con-

