

ON THE CREST OF A WAVE

The Southampton Boat Show is one of the country's premier maritime festivals. Andy Evans discovers what makes this nautical celebration unique, and talks exclusively to the Ladies' Day Ambassador, British powerboat champion, Shelley Jory-Leigh.

For over forty years, the PSP Southampton Boat Show has been one of the UK's premier social events. Last year, 122,000 people attended the ten day event at the city's Mayflower Park, and organisers are hoping for an even bigger turnout in 2010.

The show takes place in one of the world's largest purpose-built marinas, and features a wide array of exhibitors who showcase the thrills and spills of a life at sea. But the show has also gained a reputation for innovation. Every year, there are new interactive features and attractions. From makeshift beaches to 'water warriors' (giant floating spheres which allow people to stand upon the Solent) the Boat Show has always tried to introduce new aspects to its raison d'être, and could never be accused of resting on its laurels, something which Rebecca Jackson, Press Officer for the Southampton Boat Show, is particularly proud of.

"In its first year, the show had just 13 boats on the marina and 37 exhibitors in total. This year, we have over 500 exhibitors and over 340 boats afloat on the marina. Exhibitors choose Southampton to launch to the world the very latest boats and products, and as you can see, over the past 42 years, the show has gone from strength to strength."

This year, the Boat Show's main attraction is guaranteed to draw in the crowds. "We're really excited to be welcoming the Royal Navy's very latest warship, HMS Dauntless, to the show," says Jackson. "HMS Dauntless is the most advanced warship in the world and one of the world's greatest engineering feats. It's a real coup."

The Boat Show itself could also be described as an engineering feat, as the growth of the event has inevitably led to a logistical operation of epic proportions. "The show takes 15 days to build and six to break down," explains Jackson. "It spans two roads and takes over part of the existing docks, a park and two car parks."

"A great deal of planning goes into an exhibition of this size, which includes the construction of two footbridges, the removal of car park 'furniture' such as barriers, and the assembly of the show's purpose-built marina, which – from the start through to dismantlement – takes about five months."

In recent times, the event has also been noted for attracting the rich and famous. In the past five years, the regatta has attracted luminaries including Dame Ellen MacArthur, Jean-Christophe Novelli, Ben Fogle and

Eddie Jordan. This year, the honour of opening the show goes to the comedian Nick Hancock and TV presenter Dawn Porter. The pair appeared together on the ITV show *All At Sea*, where they were among six celebrities travelling from Cornwall to London in a variety of vessels, including a Sunseeker Yacht and a 'cosy' fishing trawler.

Of course, the negative aspects of the 21st century celebrity world are well documented. However, Jackson is unapologetic about the Boat Show's foray into this world, and believes that the event has managed to dip its toe into this arena without losing its credibility. "We're pleased to have celebrities of all types join us to officially mark the openings of various Southampton Boat Shows, from Sophie Ellis Bextor last year, to the full Olympic sailing team in 2008."

"And it's not just people. One of our feature boats for visitors to see is the war boat RAF102, which also appeared on the TV programme *All At Sea*, so reuniting the celebrities with this historic boat was an ideal opportunity."

Another way in which the Southampton Boat Show has evolved is the introduction of Ladies' Day. Created in

Main image and inset:
The Southampton Boat Show showcases more than 500 exhibits in the world's largest purpose-built marina



2008 to mark the show's 40th anniversary, this event has grown into one of the focal points of the entire week, as well as an important money-spinner for local charities.

Shelley Jory-Leigh, one of the world's leading powerboat racers, has been the Ladies' Day ambassador for the past three years. "It's fantastic," she says. "A few more women come on that day and we all dress up. The ladies go out on one of the big powerboats and have a nice lunch, and just spend a really nice day in the luxury of all the powerboats and sailing yachts, so it's really nice."

Jory-Leigh is currently recovering from a horrific accident during the Powerboat P1 World Championships (see our exclusive interview with Shelley Jory-Leigh on page 50), but this has enabled the former British Champion to concentrate on her duties as Ladies' Day ambassador – something that she's quite happy to do. "They asked me if I could be the ambassador for Ladies' Day again this year, and I said no, because I was supposed to be racing in Sicily. It was actually the final race of the World Championships, so I should have been there," explains Jory-Leigh.

"Then of course I had my accident, and then everyone said, 'She's got three months' resting', so the Boat Show



rang me up and said, 'If you've got three months' resting, could you come and rest with us on Ladies' Day?' And so I said yes!"

Although the event is relatively new compared to the history of the show itself, Jory-Leigh feels that Ladies' Day has certainly added to the glamour of the event. "We don't dress-up as much as Ascot or anything, but we certainly put nice dresses on and probably a pair of new shoes – as all women like to do – and look at some amazing boats. There's lots of champagne on offer for all the ladies, and it's just lovely.

"It's just an excuse really to get dressed up and have a right old girly day!"

With innovation and interaction at the heart of the Southampton Boat Show, no matter what course the



event takes in the future, the 2010 event is guaranteed to add to the show's rich history. As Jackson puts it: "The Southampton Boat Show is not a regatta; it's an on-water spectacle!"

The Southampton Boat Show takes place each year in early autumn. Please visit www.southamptonboatshow.com.



SHELLEY JORY-LEIGH

Southampton Boat Show's Ladies' Day Ambassador talks exclusively about life at sea, and her on-going recovery from her recent horrific crash in Sardinia.

Left: Shelley Jory-Leigh is Ladies' Day Ambassador at this year's Southampton Boat Show

As one of the world's leading powerboat racers, Shelley Jory-Leigh is used to facing challenges head on. In an illustrious 15 year career, she has working her way up the sport to become the first ever female British champion and one of the most renowned pilots in the Supersport class – one of the two 'Formula 1' categories of powerboat racing.

But the 40-year-old is currently facing her biggest trial yet, after suffering two serious crashes within a month. The initial accident in June resulted in concussion, but the second crash, during training for the Sardinia Grand Prix, has left Jory-Leigh with head injuries and a shattered nose – thereby ending her season and putting paid to her P1 World Championship ambitions.

"Compared to my normal, very loud, robust self, I feel very fragile; and my friends say I'm very quiet," says Jory-Leigh, recuperating at her Southampton home.

"My nose has been mended – they've managed to get that all back together and it's straight – but my biggest problem is that I've had double concussion, which takes absolutely ages to mend and makes you feel hungover most of the time! That's going to take three months, so basically my season's finished, my World

Championship is over and I've got three months of just trying to rest and get my head settled down."

But the outcome of the Sardinian crash could have been a whole lot worse for Jory-Leigh and her co-driver, Patrick Huybregts – with Jory-Leigh describing the dismantling of their boat, Spirit of Belgium, as "a near-death experience" for the pair.

"Because we were running second in the World Championship, we couldn't just sit back. We had to really try and get some points for the weekend, and keep our position," explains Jory-Leigh. "And unfortunately there was a big rolling swell. The boat came off a wave and the bow dug in, and it shattered on impact.

"It's like going 83 miles-an-hour into a brick wall. We were basically thrown into the console of the boat and then back into our seats, so it was just like a crash test dummy. And unfortunately there was a lot of blood and carnage everywhere. It was quite a horrific scene to be honest."

It's obvious that the crash has hit Jory-Leigh hard, both physically and metaphorically, and has left her with a series of questions. One of which being how the accident

occurred in the first place. "We were both absolutely amazed because we were going in a straight line – we were in conditions which we were very used to, and then, bang! It was a very unusual, freak accident, and there's a huge investigation into what actually happened. Unfortunately, it's ruined our championship."

But Jory-Leigh's greatest uncertainty is her future in powerboating. "At the moment I'm very much 50/50 as to what to do. I mean, I love my sport, I will never leave it, but when you've had two accidents back-to-back, you sort of think, 'Is this someone telling me that it's my time to stop and take another role in the sport?'

"I guess in about October or November, I'm going to have to sit down and think about that, but right now, all I've got to do is get fit again."

Despite her recent setbacks, Jory-Leigh retains an unabated passion for powerboating – a sport that she fell into purely by accident. "It was my boyfriend at the time, back in 1995. He had a powerboat and he wanted to race. So I became his team manager, and got him and his mate racing. It was basically a hobby at the weekend we used to do – it was never meant to be anything serious or a semi-professional career. →

Main image: Shelley Jory-Leigh in action in the P1 World Championship, Inset from left: Jory-Leigh and co-driver Patrick Huybrechts win silver in Ukraine; Jory-Leigh and Huybrechts celebrate together; Jory-Leigh's P1 powerboat 'Spirit of Belgium' lifts off mid-race



“Then I started racing with him, so I became his navigator. And then slowly other people asked me to race for them. They said, ‘My God. You’re smaller than a man, so you’re lighter. And you’re obviously quite fearless, so will you come and race with me?’ So I was going off to World Championships in South Africa, and picking up bronze medals, and slowly my career just went from there. I literally went up every single ladder.”

Jory-Leigh’s early career culminated in 2005, when she became British Champion – before stepping up to the P1 World Championships three years later. But these achievements are even more remarkable when one considers that in between her racing, she runs the family bridalwear business – Brides of Southampton. “I’m never sure how I fitted it in. It’s 50/50 – like running two full-time businesses. At the shop, I have some fantastic staff,”

explains Jory-Leigh. “Since the accident in Sardinia, I’ve been in very randomly, to check and see and help on things, and they’re just brilliant. They just look at me and say, ‘Shelley, you look absolutely awful. Please go home.’ So I do!”

This resolve to get back to full fitness reflects Jory-Leigh’s determined character; a necessary asset as a woman in a traditionally male-dominated sport. “I’ve been in the sport for so many years now, and I’ve had to fight my way through the men. But I’ve gained huge respect from all the racers, and in the last few weeks it’s really shown,” says Jory-Leigh. “Some really top male racers in the world have written to me, and said ‘Please don’t give up, Shelley. You’re one of the best drivers on the circuit.’ They’re actually all begging me to come back, which is really nice.”

It remains to be seen, of course, whether she will return to frontline racing. But whatever her decision, there is no doubt that Shelley Jory-Leigh’s achievements have opened up powerboating to a new audience – something she can’t help but be aware of. “When you go and do motivational talks and ladies’ lunches, they all say, ‘You’re a real icon for us. You’re out there fighting with the men and showing them we can do exactly what they do’, and I never really see that until people tell me. And then I think, ‘Well, yeah, I guess I am really.’”

Shelley Jory-Leigh will be appearing at the Southampton Boat Show in 2010. She recently launched her own iPhone app Aquaspeed. Visit www.shelleyjory.com for more information.