



Charlie Capelle poses with the real woman in his life, his 'loyal' trimaran *A Capella*, after bringing her back from Spain where she had lain in a field after being dragged upside down into a Galician harbour by local fishermen. The Spanish authorities had been unable to identify the boat (sic...)

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Obsession

Not a new range of *Seahorse* colognes but Charlie Capelle's love affair with an iconic Walter Greene racing trimaran that did not want to die. Jocélyn Bleriot traces a most unusual biography...

He bought her twice, lost her at sea on two occasions, yet this winter he will take his third Route du Rhum start at her helm. Meet Charlie Capelle and the 42ft trimaran *A Capella*, sistership of the first Rhum winner, in a story where Mike Birch, Walter Greene and the coming of age of racing multihulls all collide.

Born in the US at Walter Greene's yard, where Charlie learned his profession of boatbuilder, the yellow trimaran that became *A Capella* was the sistership of the famous *Olympus Photo* on which Mike Birch had won the first edition of the 'Rhum' against his much larger monohull rivals, making a public and important case for ocean-racing multihulls. Many years later Capelle would himself take second place in class, in the 1998 Rhum, but only after it had already taken him seven years to restore his little historic monument...

Then, a few months later, in early 1999,

Charlie would be back in Brittany and hard at work on a modern Irens and Cabaret-designed replacement, while his original *A Capella* was being delivered back to France... But Capelle soon got news that his boat had capsized in a storm mid-Atlantic and had been abandoned (the crew were rescued).

Though he was mentally now well into the process of preparing himself for a new boat, it took Capelle a while to get used to the idea that *Capella* was this time really lost forever. And then 15 months later his old boat was back scratching at his door.

'I've always had a hard time believing in coincidence,' says Charlie. He's not the type of man you would expect to use words such as 'destiny', yet *A Capella's* epic life, so closely tied to his own for the past 25 years, would sow doubt in most people's minds.

'*A Capella* really is the story of a boat

that did not want to die,' he says. 'She crossed the Atlantic on her own after capsizing and being abandoned off Newfoundland in April 1999. When I heard she had washed ashore in Spain I jumped in my car and drove down to bring her back,' says Charlie. 'Really, I had no choice!'

The man and his boat go way back – to 1980 to be precise. That was the year Charlie decided to become a boatbuilder, joining other new apprentices at Walter Greene's office in Maine. There Charlie started to work on the *A Capella* series, a family of small trimarans that had already achieved glory with *Olympus Photo*, winner of the first Route du Rhum.

In 1980 skipper Mike Birch was also in Maine with Charlie, along with Nigel Irens, Marc Lombard and Jean-François de Prémoré – who later became the CEO of Jeanneau. A fine quintet of trainees, who learned their trade under the supervision of Greene before all making names for themselves. Charlie eventually sailed back to Europe with Philippe Poupon, who had himself come to Maine to pick up a new *A Capella*, of course, aboard which the two friends would win class 3 in the TwoStar the following year.

Capelle then founded his own Technologie Marine yard in La Trinité, while Poupon's little tri was sold on to Yves Le Cornec (the man who came up with the idea of the Jules Verne Trophy). But after colliding with a wreck the boat eventually ended up on a beach in Brittany in 1983. 'Already I wanted to rescue her,' says

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Act 2, scenes 1 and 2... A *Capella* sets out for the start of the 1998 Route du Rhum (top) and a fine second place in class 3. Abandoned on the return delivery, the same boat was not looking quite so smart (above) when Capelle was finally reunited with her in Spain some two years later, after the little tri had drifted upside down across the Atlantic before being dumped as flotsam in the port of O Vicedo

Charlie, 'so I patched her very roughly on the beach two years later in 1985 then brought her back 150 miles to my yard.'

In 1990 he finally tackled the complete restoration of the now very sad-looking trimaran. 'It was always a very personal project, I wanted to carry it all out myself.' After all, that's what A *Capella* means, singing alone without accompaniment.

Soon the vibrant racing community of La Trinité heard about Capelle's labour of love and help began to appear. Laurent Bourgnon came up with a new deck layout, Loïck Peyron's technical team provided drawings for a new boom, Nigel Irens – the school pal – drew plans for new carbon floats... and as the 1998 Route du Rhum approached the 'little yellow one' had turned into a thoroughbred.

After seven years' hard work, during which the project swallowed all of Charlie's spare time and most of his personal savings, A *Capella* was ready again. For the christening, who better as godfather than another schoolfriend... Mike Birch.

In the 1998 Rhum Capelle took a good

second place in class 3, right behind Stève Ravussin, then went back to work while two friends jumped aboard in Guadeloupe for the delivery home. 'Unfortunately, they met a massive low pressure system. The Canadian Coast Guard told me about 50ft waves and 80kt winds,' Charlie recalls. 'The guys were quite fortunate to be rescued but we lost all trace of the boat.'

Finally Charlie had to say farewell to his faithful old trimaran, whose restoration had dominated the previous seven years of his life. 'But I now had other ideas. I had the plans for the new 50-footer, plus it was a busy time at the yard, so I moved on...

'Then in September 2000 Nigel [Irens] calls me: "A *Capella* has just been found in Spain..." Imagine that – the boat had drifted across the Atlantic and, incredibly, a Scandinavian multihull enthusiast had stumbled upon her, saw Nigel's name in the cockpit, found his contact details and sent him an email to warn me! The boat literally came back to me,' says Charlie. The new 50-footer was on hold. A *Capella* had to be rescued. Again.

'I arrived in O Vicedo in Galicia where I found my boat lying in a field, completely stripped yet structurally fairly sound... She was being used as a playground toy by the local kids who were having fun jumping on the nets. I started investigating and found that she had spent some nine months upside down in the harbour, knocking against the dock without fenders. The authorities had just left her there after she was towed in.

'Finally they had taken her out of the water, but they never did try to contact me even though my name and the boat's registration number were still clearly visible.

'I must say the Spanish authorities have not shown their best side in this episode... And to recover my boat I then had a further seven months of negotiation involving endless bribes. I finished up buying her back from the pillagers... a real scandal.

'After 15 days' work on the boat I tried to leave Galicia under jury rig but my sailplan didn't allow me to go upwind and soon I was in the middle of the shipping lanes off Cape Finisterre. And then my temporary mast fell down... A crew of



Above: Act 3 – or is that Act 4... *A Capella* goes afloat once again in 2010 ahead of this winter's Route du Rhum after her third extensive restoration; a change of colour from the boat's traditional bright yellow will hopefully deliver better fortune. The interior is again as immaculate as it was back in 1998 (*left*) with the delicate but strong timber construction clearly visible



fishermen called the coastguard, and the "rescuers" who appeared were the same crew who had towed *A Capella* upside down into port in the first place!

'It really was turning into a nightmare – those pirates left me in the small harbour of Carino, where of course I had to pay once more. I flew back to France for a few days to recover, where I saw my friend Jean-Luc van Den Heede. Right away he told me, "I often come to La Coruna. If we use *Adrien* (his 24m holder of the solo west-about round-the-world record), it'll be easy for me to tow you back." Which he did, under sail! I was in my boat with my son, trailing behind Jean-Luc's *Adrien*. He literally dragged us all the way back to La Trinité. A fantastic man...'

And so *A Capella* re-entered the shed at Technologie Marine in September 2002, and Charlie started to rebuild her for the second time.

Initially, the plan was to have the boat

ready for the 2004 Ostar, but there was not enough time. And furthermore, the Ostar then became The Transat, open only to 50 and 60-footers. But Charlie had waited long enough, he could wait for the Rhum in 2006. As ever the perfectionist, he patiently rebuilt his little trimaran, and one could only admire the commitment he displayed in this second restoration.

In her new colours, an even brighter yellow, she took the start of her second Rhum... before a violent gust caught Charlie off-guard just a few hours into the race. Fortunately, Class 40 competitor Philippe Legros (aboard *Seahorse* contributor Patrice Carpentier's Pogo 40) came to his rescue – but *A Capella* had to be abandoned at sea for the third time.

Charlie explains: 'But this time we were monitoring her position thanks to the beacon, and soon the word spread and people everywhere were offering their help. Obviously the story had touched a part of

the public and we did not have to campaign very hard to raise the funds to get a salvage operation underway!' Once more the Technologie Marine technical team welcomed back their jaded trimaran, which quietly took her little space in the corner awaiting the next instalment. By now, however, Charlie's team were flat out creating moulds and appendages for rather larger trimarans such as *Groupama* and *Sodeb'O*.

'For me it was obvious,' says Charlie. 'I knew I would eventually invest yet more of my time to get my *A Capella* back in shape. I didn't have a plan, but I knew it would happen.' And so it did. 'I had to rebuild the electronics, change some of the rigging... the usual things after a capsize, I won't bore you with the details!

'In total I spent maybe another 2,000 hours on her and, to cut a long story short, I found myself in a position to take part in the 2010 Rhum for a good cause: I'm flying the colours of Sidaction, a charity that raises funds for the fight against Aids.

'I think it's very fitting, my boat is very resilient, she never wanted to die, and neither do the people who are affected by this syndrome. I hope it's an inspiring story. I never gave up on her and I think I can, to a certain extent only of course, pass on a bit of hope?

'I'm very proud and happy to dedicate this next adventure to a cause.' Adding with what can only be called innocent understatement: 'It lends meaning to a story that's been an important part of my life.' □