

Against all odds

Born behind the Iron Curtain, Soviet solo-yachtsman Viktor Yazykov is living proof that when the human spirit soars, anything is possible. Steve Raea chronicles the life and achievements of this remarkable Russian



Wet n' wild: Dubbed the 'Russian submarine' by fellow competitors, the Soviet Whitbread entry *Fazisi* surprised the yachting world when it sailed into sixth place in the first leg of the round-the-world campaign

True Colours: Viktor Yazykov arrives off Whangarei after a solo, non-stop voyage from Panama sailing *Daughter of the Wind*, his own unique Russian design that he hopes to emulate in a 7m One-Design race yacht to be built in New Zealand

A legend in his homeland, Russian solo-sailor Viktor Yazykov slipped into New Zealand largely unnoticed in May, having sailed solo and non-stop from Panama aboard his radical 33-foot yacht *Daughter of the Wind*.

Russia's only yachtsman to compete – and complete – a solo round-the-world yacht race (Around Alone 98/99), Yazykov's sailing achievements are many and include being the first Russian to sail solo around Cape Horn.

He was also a driving force behind the Soviet Union's only entry in the former Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race, helping to build and later race the unique but under-funded and poorly engineered *Fazisi* in the 1989/90 campaign. His memories of Russia's greatest ocean racing campaign still haunt him.

Despite finishing a credible sixth out of 22 yachts in the first leg to Uruguay – and 11th overall – the pressure of maintaining a resource-less campaign was too great for *Fazisi* project manager and co-skipper Alexei Grishenko who paid the ultimate price – his life. The now sixty-something Yazykov recalls the events leading up to his close friend's death with great clarity.

"Alexei was depressed. *Fazisi* had many problems. When the yacht was measured for (the) race it was ruled unstable... and likely to capsize. The keel had to be replaced... the fuel tank cut out. Everything had to change.

"Alexei felt responsible and quit. He came back to (the) crew four days later and raced (the) first leg to Uruguay but he resigned again when the yacht arrived and was given a ticket back to Russia."

But Grishenko never made it. The pressure that had been heaped upon him and his own sense of failure was too great: he hanged himself from a tree in a local forest. Yazykov

says it was a crippling and very depressing blow for the crew.

"Alexei did nothing wrong. He did a great job to create *Fazisi*. The whole thing would not have happened without him. He spent himself to the last drop of his blood to the boat... to the project. And he paid a huge cost with his life. He was my good friend and my teacher in boatbuilding.

"The whole story about Alexei and about the *Fazisi* project is not complete. It is not over yet," says Yazykov.

Little did he know it then, but Yazykov's own involvement in the Whitbread race was also to be short-lived, ending abruptly at the conclusion of leg two in Freemantle, Australia, when he was dismissed from the yacht and returned to Russia. Skip Novak, the American skipper hired to bring a measure of control to the campaign, later wrote in his book *Fazisi* that the reasons for Yazykov's "dispatch to the Russian salt mines" had never been made clear to him or the remaining team.

Yazykov wasn't sent to the salt mines, but instead returned to his home in Sochi to complete a 29-foot timber sloop *Laguna*. He had started building it four years earlier and would later go on to sail to England with his wife to compete in his first solo transatlantic yacht race.

Safe in NZ

Yazykov's arrival in New Zealand clicks over 35,000 miles sailed in a yacht that he designed and built in Russia, to prove unique design features that he wants to introduce into a small one-design offshore race yacht to be built in New Zealand.

Ultimately, Yazykov wants to establish an offshore sailing and boatbuilding school

through which students will build and race their yachts offshore. It's an ambitious plan, but Yazykov has support from unlikely sources, both here and in Russia.

Ambition is something Yazykov has in spades and this is reflected in his remarkable life, set against the backdrop of growing up behind the Iron Curtain in a country with no history and little interest in offshore yacht racing.

Born in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea, Yazykov's early childhood was spent mucking about with his two younger brothers on their father's small wooden fishing dinghy. It wasn't until Yazykov was 12 that he saw his first sail flying from the deck of a Sochi fishing trawler. He says watching that sail fill to the wind was captivating and flicked a light on within that has burned brightly ever since.

"For me it was the beginning of a life-long passion. I knew then that I had to sail; to learn to harness the wind," he says.

But with few yachts in Sochi the young Yazykovs' improvised, fashioning a wooden mast for their dad's dinghy from which they would fly towels as their sails.

"It was slow... yes. We paddled a lot with our hands, but I began to understand sailing."

It was Yazykov's discovery of Joshua's Slocum's self-published 1900 biography *Sailing Alone Around the World* that he says captured his imagination and cemented his decision to one day follow in Slocum's wake.

The drowning of his father and uncle in a fishing accident several days before his 14th birthday brought Yazykov's childhood to a shattering halt. As the eldest son of three, it was, he says, his duty to support his mother and brothers. He took a job at a Sochi shipyard training to build small wooden boats.

Their father's death had a profound impact on the Yazykov brothers and they committed to honour his life by building a yacht and sailing the world. Yazykov's role was to learn boatbuilding, while his youngest brother would study naval architecture. The middle brother would train in business and accounting and seek out sponsorship for the materials and funding required.

Military years

Drafted into the Soviet Army at 18, Yazykov trained as a paratrooper and was schooled in desert and arctic survival. Military life suited the young Russian, and he excelled in the disciplined and tough physical environment that army life brought. Yazykov's leadership potential was recognised early and he rose quickly through the ranks to become a junior commanding officer.

"Army life was good for me. I grew up quickly and I learnt many things," he confirms. "And no, I didn't have to kill



“...I thought I might just give up. I was at my lowest and I expected that I would be found dead drifting on the Atlantic.”

Success: Yazykov celebrates finishing a tough Southern Ocean leg in the '98/'99 solo Around Alone yacht race, proving that his own unique 40-foot canting keeler *Wind of Change* could mix it with competitors sailing 50 and 60-footers

anyone to achieve this knowledge.”

He says there have been many times since his military training that he's called on the mental toughness that he developed in the army, and credits this for getting him through some very hard times.

Released from service in his early 20s, Yazykov enrolled in Russia's prestigious Far East Nautical College near Vladivostok to study navigation, thus earning his seaman's card and a ticket to the world. It was during his nautical college years that Yazykov developed a passion for fitness and threw himself into training: juggling 18 different sessions each week rowing, weightlifting, boxing and sailing. But it remains cold water swimming – even punching through ice to find water – that he still enjoys most.

After completing his study Yazykov joined the North Pacific fishing collective and fished the Black Sea, Japan Sea and Bering Sea for three six-month seasons in a row.

"It was cold, hard and dangerous work and the boats leaked badly, but it was good training,"

recalls Yazykov. "I learnt a lot about the sea and seamanship. I also earned a lot of money; 3000 rubbles a month when the average salary in Russia was 100 rubbles."

First to Japan

Between fishing seasons Yazykov established and ran a sailing club and rebuilt a fleet of old sailing dinghies, teaching sailing to students from the nautical college. The club became his passion and later his full time job. In 1979 Yazykov approached the boss of the Nakhodka Seaport with a sponsorship request to fund a keel yacht to expand the club's sailing program. It was a big ask: not only was money tight, but there were few keel yachts in Russia to be had.

However an old wooden IOR One-Ton yacht was found in Tallinn, Estonia, and arrangements were made for its delivery to Nakhodka. This was no small feat, says Yazykov. Preparations for the 1980 Moscow Olympics were underway and security was tight. Someone pulled the right strings though and the yacht was eventually lifted onto an

open rail carriage for the long journey to Far East Russia.

"The yacht was rotten. It was a very big job to repair it," Yazykov remembers. "We had few skills and only basic materials, but we got it back to the water and sailing again. It leaked very badly – 200-litres of water every hour – but we thought this was normal. It had no electronics but it was exciting."

The following year Yazykov trained a crew and sailed the yacht to Japan in the first of a sister-city exchange program. In doing so he became the first Russian sailor to skipper a yacht to Japan.

"It was a very rough trip, but we made it alive and we were treated like kings. After the official ceremony we set out for the Shantar Islands in the Okhotsk Sea – Japan's northernmost islands group – hoping to establish another Russian first.

"We sailed into a huge ice shelf, up to 10m thick in places, but kept pushing through for three days. It was really crazy because I had no fear. The crew was strong and we managed



A young Yazykov learnt his boatbuilding skills building open wooden fishing boats in his home port of Soschi

Know what you're doing

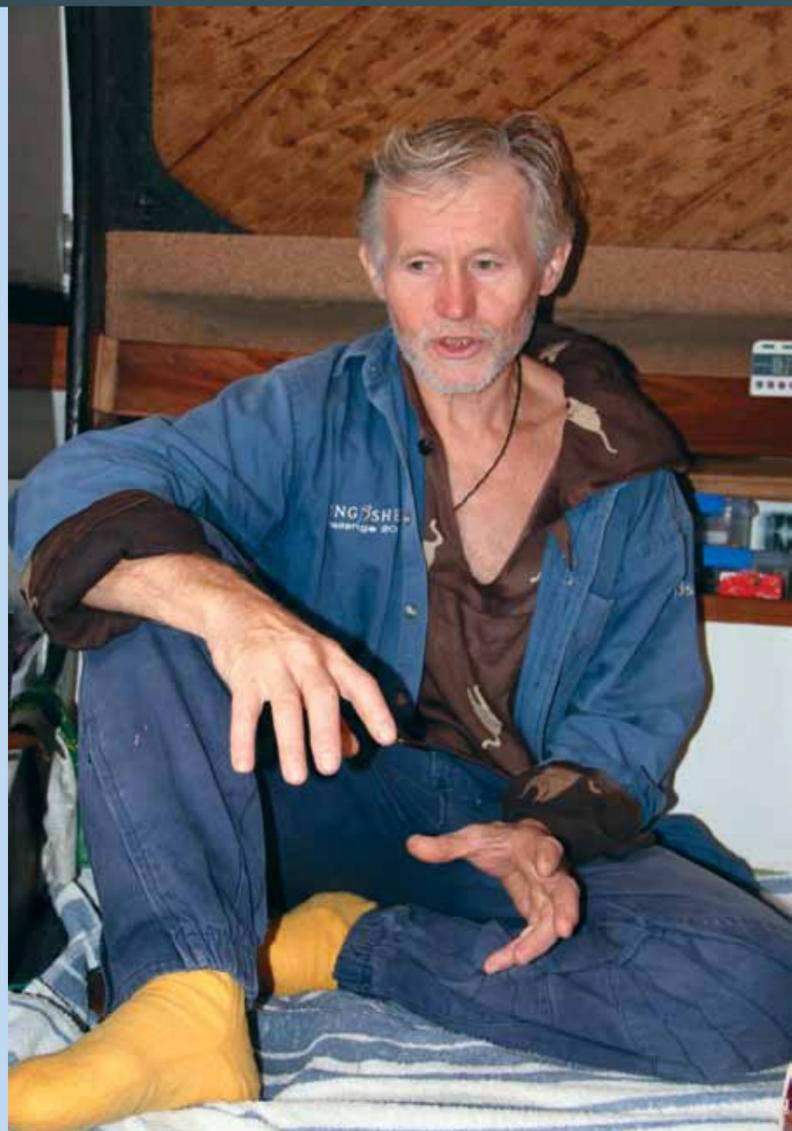
Core courses

- ✓ Day Skipper
- ✓ Marine VHF Radio
- ✓ Boatmaster

Wide range of courses for all types of boating available nationwide



Phone 0800 40 80 90 or visit www.boatingeducation.org.nz



to get out and sail home to Russia," he says.

Back in the USSR, Yazykov resumed life at his yacht club and took up racing Tornado catamarans with considerable success, qualifying for an international regatta in Japan the following year. The KGB, however, had other ideas and refused him a visa to travel.

"It was political. There was a much bigger and wealthier Russian sailing club with Tornado sailors and they prevented me from competing."

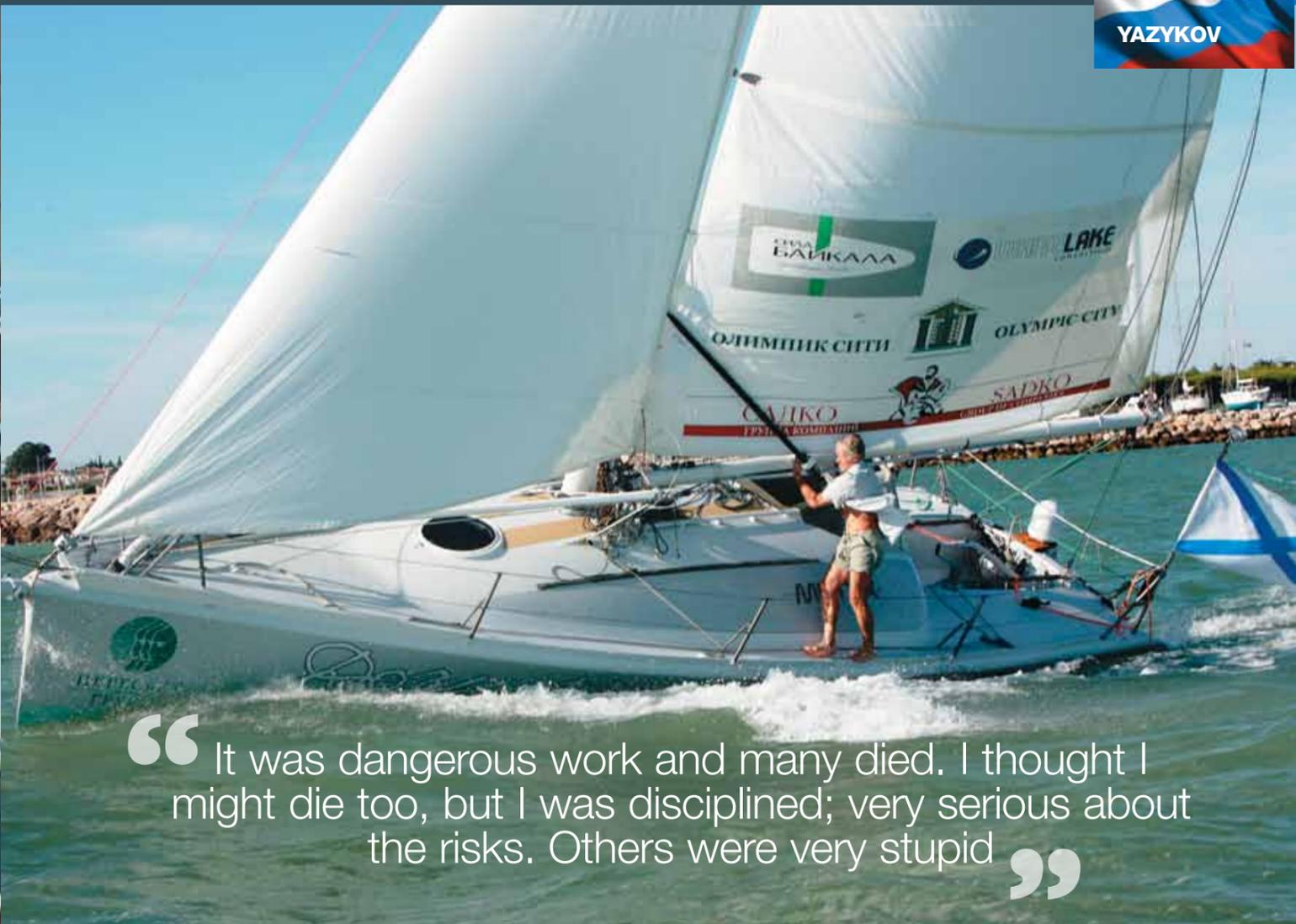
Yazykov says he was similarly denied a visa for a return voyage to Japan in the old One-Ton keeler and had to watch as the yacht sailed over the horizon with a standby skipper.

"It was a disaster," he says. "A friend was lost overboard in a storm, which was very hard on everyone. My mother had also fallen ill so I gave up the yacht club and returned to Sochi."

Yazykov's mother passed away in May 1983 and he immersed himself in building the yacht he and his brothers had discussed years before, spending months at a time living and working in the Russian mountains dragging out fallen chestnut trees by hand for milling.

March to Chernobyl

The build process continued until 1986 when the KGB knocked at Yazykov's door with a draft to return to the army for a six month tour of duty at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant helping with the immense radiation clean-up job.



“It was dangerous work and many died. I thought I might die too, but I was disciplined; very serious about the risks. Others were very stupid”

"I was sent to an army camp 30km from the plant and put onto the back of a lorry twice a week for the two-hour round trip to the plant in minus-20 degree temperatures. It was a depressing time. Many on the lorry would die from radiation exposure and they knew it. It was in their eyes."

Yazykov says he could have escaped and has since met men that did, but reasoned that somebody had to do it.

"It was dangerous work and many did die. I thought I might die too, but I was disciplined; I became very serious about the risks. Others though were very stupid."

Yazykov's Chernobyl tour lasted just two months – when doctors said he'd reached his maximum radiation exposure – before he was sent home to Sochi.

"I was very sick and very tired for many months. The Soviet government offered me money, but I saw this as being paid to die. I refused it and focused my energy on getting well, which I did, slowly"

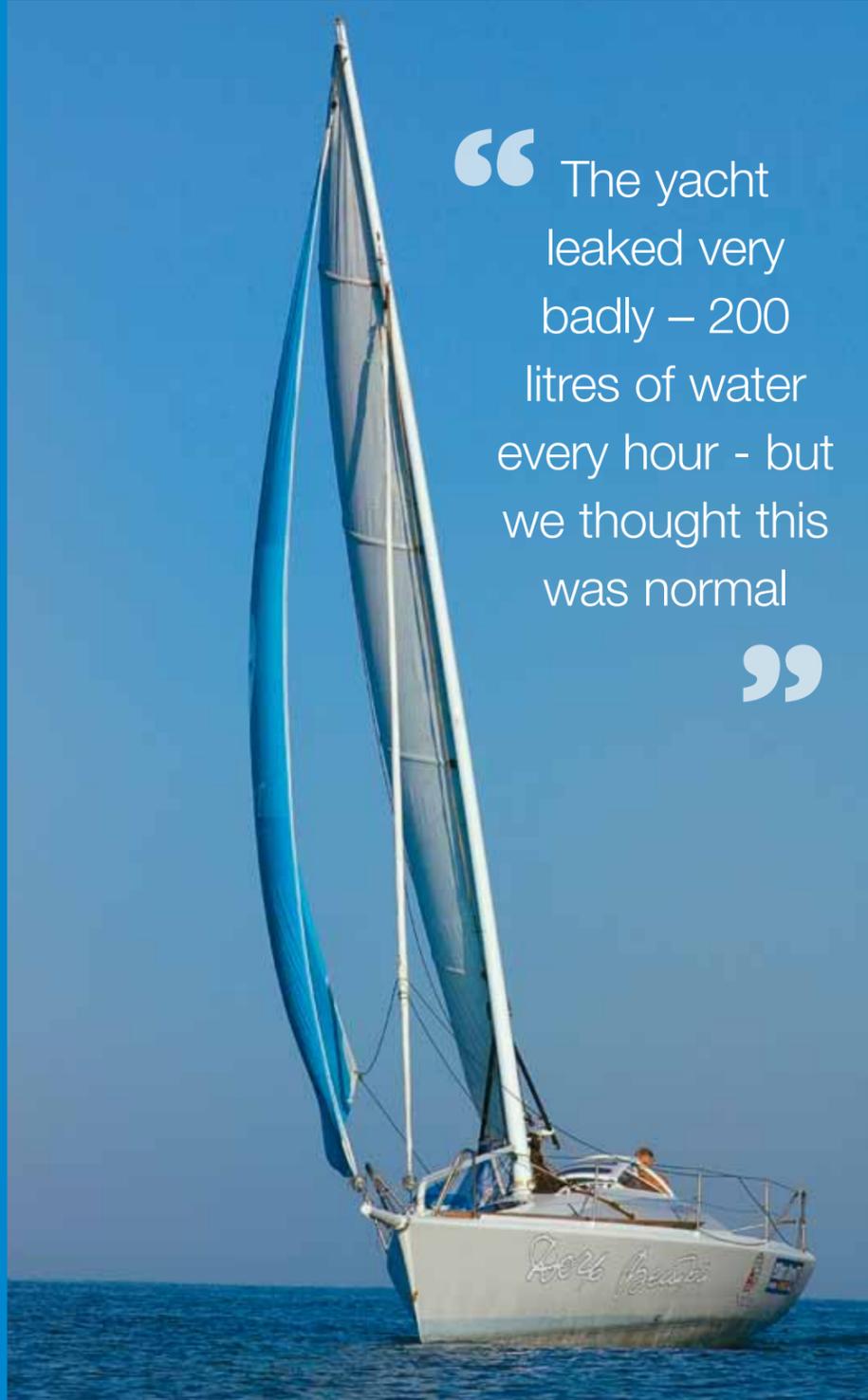
Strong again, Yazykov completed his beautifully-crafted chestnut-on-oak 29-foot yacht *Laguna*. Proving a master of improvisation, he created her mast from an old irrigation pipe and her boom from a disused aerodrome fuel pipe. Purchasing 300kg of lead, Yazykov promptly dug a hole in the ground and poured his own keel. He even made his own batteries from plywood, lead, acid and metal plate.

Next, relying on his old seaman's pass, he obtained a visa and set sail from Sochi with his wife for England and the start of the 1992 single-handed transatlantic yacht race.



Meltdown: Yazykov's sense of duty saw him spend two months cleaning up at the Russian Chernobyl nuclear power plant, surviving where others did not

“ The yacht leaked very badly – 200 litres of water every hour - but we thought this was normal ”



Afloat

Departing in the northern winter, the passage to England was always going to be tough, but it nearly cost Yazykov and his wife their lives when they were caught out in a rare Mediterranean hurricane.

“It was the most frightening time of my life. I didn’t think we would survive. The yacht was very strongly built and made it through the storm, but I spent a long time in the Mediterranean making repairs.”

Now well behind schedule for the transatlantic start in Plymouth, Yazykov accepted a bizarre offer from a Soviet ship captain in Gibraltar to tow the yacht behind his ship, also bound for England. The tow lasted just six hours though, when the tow-line between Yazykov’s yacht and the 100m ship chafed through.

“It was rough weather and the ship could sail no slower than 13 knots. The yacht was surfing, passing the ship on the back of big swells. It was difficult to find a good steering technique, but the rope parted and the ship could not stop. We sailed on,” he remembers.

The Yazykovs arrived safely and in time for the start; making the 28-day crossing to Newport, Rhode Island, finishing fourth and fulfilling a lifelong dream. But little did Yazykov know he’d sailed right into a bureaucratic nightmare.

He’d left the UK with a promise from race organisers that a visa would be waiting on his arrival. It wasn’t and US immigration officials threatened Yazykov with deportation. They also initially refused his wife Ludmilla entry while her husband’s status was investigated. Yazykov’s plight became front page news after local Rhode Island sailors learnt of his story and got the media onto the case.

Uncle Sam

As Yazykov recalls, he was invited by George Patton Jnr to speak at a Rhode Island yacht club function and, on learning of Yazykov’s situation, Patton Jnr telephoned an aid to US President George H. W. Bush who relayed Yazykov’s story. Yazykov was granted a temporary reprieve for the US winter and the welcome mat was rolled out for Ludmilla too. Yazykov’s story even made primetime NBC News in New York.

With permission to work in the US, Yazykov landed a job at Hall Composites in Bristol, Rhode Island, where he met influential, free-thinking yachtsmen and designers. It was here that he hatched a plan to compete in the 1988/89 Around Alone race.

Among Yazykov’s closest friends at Hall Composites was spa designer Bob Adams. Like Yazykov, Adams dreamed of competing in the Around Alone race. The pair put their heads together and came up with a plan to build identical 40-footers in Russia, where labour was cheap.

The radical canting keel yachts brought together a collaboration of ideas between Yazykov, Adams and recognised yacht designer Steve Baker. While canting keels were not unheard of, Yazykov and Adams’ decision to move the keel well aft and fit with then-unique dagger boards forward of the mast was revolutionary. The yachts – dubbed the Black Sea 40 – were finished to a professional standard and were very, very fast.

But costs and delays in getting gear from the US to Russia took a heavy toll: the boats were late and ended up being very expensive. This left nothing in the kitty to ship them to Charleston, South Carolina, for the start of the race. Out of options, Yazykov and Adams launched their yachts in Sochi and set sail for Charleston, but their friendship founded under the pressure of time and lack of funds. By the time they reached Gibraltar in the Mediterranean they were no longer speaking to each other.

Midway across the Atlantic, Adams withdrew his entry from the race and sailed home. Yazykov plugged on and arrived in Charleston four days late for the September 26 start. He was penalised 270 hours but not disqualified.

Injured and worn out from the 70-day passage, and without any of the expensive mandatory telecommunications and lifesaving equipment required onboard, Yazykov picked himself up and got to work.

“It was a miracle. I had no money, no food, no life raft... nothing. The people in Charleston were amazing,” he recalls. “Every day a big truck would come by with food, equipment and people to help me prepare the yacht. It was incredible.”

Wind of change

Yazykov crossed the start line in *Wind of Change* almost five days behind the Around Alone fleet and sailed an outstanding first leg to Cape Town, crossing the finish line with an elapsed time of 44 days, 12 hours. Remarkably, this was only four days slower than the fastest time posted by the Class II winner. He had also beaten three boats across the line, including a 60-footer and smashed the leg record for 50-footers in the previous Around Alone race.

“My boat is remarkable,” Yazykov said after the leg. “She’s everything I want. My time

could’ve been better but my autopilot worked only 15 percent of the time.”

That he made it to Cape Town was miraculous. Yazykov should never have started the leg and did so against medical advice, having injured his elbow getting to the start in Charleston.

Soon after starting Yazykov also suffered a crippling bout of depression – a first for the Russian – and he struggled to function. Then, a week into the race, he was forced up his mast to rig a replacement shroud that had parted his mast during a gale. Yazykov says the job took five hours and seven trips aloft during which his injured elbow took a pounding.

“The jury rig was great, maybe twice as strong as before, but that’s when the real trouble with my elbow began.”

This was not Yazykov’s only problem. He was also suffering poisoning which he later discovered was caused by moisture-absorbing sachets in freeze-dried noodles which he mistook as seasoning.

“So stupid... it’s incredible. They should put some big signs on those packets so that doesn’t happen.”

Yazykov’s final straw was a golf-ball-sized abscess that developed on his injured elbow. Unable to bear the pain any longer, he emailed race organisers for medical advice and under doctors’ orders cut into and drained his elbow.

“I lashed the tiller and spent four hours making the boat like a surgery to avoid further infection. But I didn’t eat before my operation and this was a big mistake.”

Yazykov says the bleeding that followed the incision was uncontrollable and he tied two tourniquets to his arm to stem the flow.

“At that point I was very faint and drifting in and out of consciousness,” he says. “I’d lost all feeling in my fingers and I thought I might just give up. I was at my lowest ebb and I expected that I would be found dead drifting on the Atlantic.”

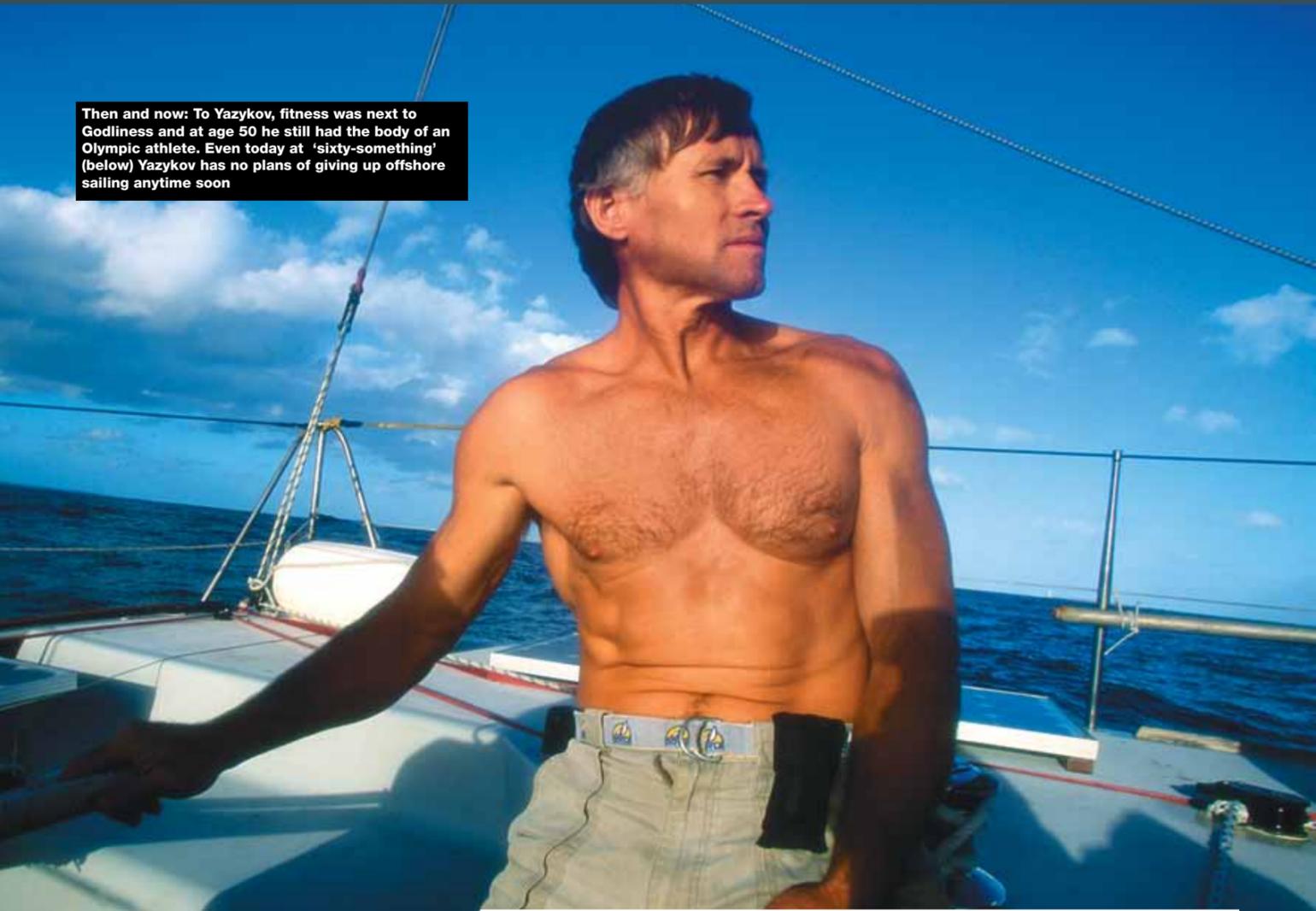
It was then that Yazykov says his military training kicked in and he managed to pull himself together.

“I cut the tourniquets loose, found some chocolate and punched a hole in the lid of a red wine bottle and drank wine until I passed out. I woke 24 hours later feeling weak but

One Design: Yazykov's *Daughter of the Wind* shows her Open Class lineage with broad full-beam transom and unusual companionway pod from which Yazykov can trim without having to venture into the cockpit



Then and now: To Yazykov, fitness was next to Godliness and at age 50 he still had the body of an Olympic athlete. Even today at 'sixty-something' (below) Yazykov has no plans of giving up offshore sailing anytime soon



Yazykov's Daughter of the Wind shows her stealth prior to launching off the beach at his home port in Sochi

better. I was amazed to see that I had sailed 239 miles without any self-steering."

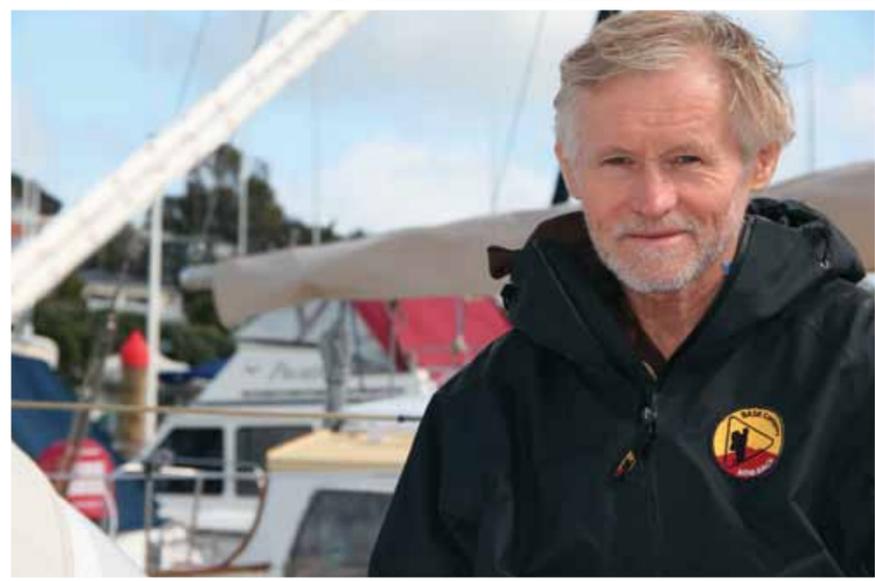
Yazykov's story captured the attention of the yachting world and he was the man of the moment when he berthed in Uruguay. He was even named *Seahorse Magazine's* International Sailor of the Month.

Around Alone

Yazykov's leg-two performance proved his mental toughness and agility and his yacht's design pedigree, sailing into Auckland just five hours after Mike Garside and Brad Van Liew who were both sailing new-generation 50-footers.

"My right arm was useless for that leg of the race. I couldn't write my log or hold a spoon and my auto helm didn't work. I sailed the Southern Ocean with two reefs in the main only. I was only six miles behind two 50-footers when my communications failed. I had no more information until I got to Auckland."

It was a tough leg by any account and is still remembered for the dramatic Southern Ocean rescue of French yachswomen Isabelle Autissier by fellow Around Alone competitor Giovanni Soldini from Italy. The leg was further marked by the grounding off North Cape by



leading UK competitor Mike Golding, sailing *Group 4*.

But it was during the third leg from Auckland to Uruguay that Yazykov ticked off his greatest ambition in becoming the first Russian to sail solo around Cape Horn.

"I saw it from around 30 miles... then we came closer. It was the middle of the night and there was a full moon. I could see it gold in the moonlight. It was great; as long as my life is, that's how long I have been thinking about rounding Cape Horn."

Yazykov further distinguished himself as a true yachtsman completing the Around Alone in fourth place, beating many larger fully-sponsored yachts with seasoned offshore sailors. At the race's conclusion Around Alone race director Mark Schreder said it was evident that Yazykov was not only an excellent sailor but possessed an incredible courage and stamina.

"It is a remarkable event that Viktor Yazykov takes part in this race," Schreder commented at the time. "He worked very hard to do this and deserves congratulations. Russia must be proud of this seafarer."

For his achievements Yazykov was awarded the Global Media Choice prize and named Russia's yachtsman of the year by the Russian Sailing Federation. He was further named 'Person of the Year' in the sport category by the Russian Biographical Institute.

Yazykov wasted little time getting back into ocean racing, competing in the following year's single-handed transatlantic race where he placed second in *Wind of Change* in the Open 40 class.

Daughter of the Wind

Despite having no formal qualification or training in the discipline, yacht design has always been Yazykov's passion: especially single-handed race yachts that are quick, simple, seaworthy and, above all else, capable of steering themselves. It's his pursuit of designing and building the 'perfect yacht' that has brought him back to New Zealand.

Being all but raced out, Yazykov returned to Sochi after his transatlantic race to design and build such a yacht as a prototype for what he

hopes to develop and build here. That yacht is the 33-foot *Daughter of the Wind* which currently lies at Auckland's Pier 21 Marina.

The yacht is a melting pot of ideas and input from recognised designers including Yazykov's good friend Kevin Dibley.

Auckland-based Dibley rates Yazykov's design very highly and says his own computer modelling and analysis of Yazykov's hull lines show the design is on the money.

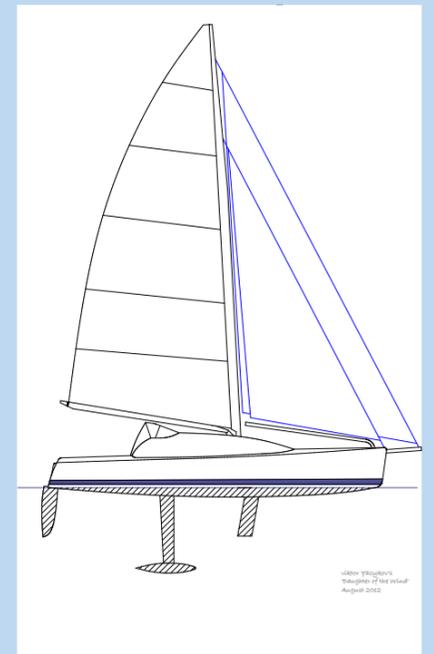
"Yazykov has a natural design talent and he is a free thinker," says Dibley. "He's passionate about what he wants to achieve and it's hard not to share his passion. His ideas for an offshore race yacht are considered and backed by his years of offshore experience. I'm honoured to be involved with Viktor in this project."

Daughter of the Wind's hull construction is similar to Yazykov's Open 40 *Wind of Change*, with a sandwich of carbon skins covering chestnut veneer on each side, and a timber core in the middle.

Having built a 1:5 scale model to ensure that the boat 'looked right', Yazykov launched the prototype in 2007 and has subsequently sailed more than 35,000 miles without the aid of an engine or conventional self-steering.

The yacht draws heavily on the Open 40 Class with a deep draft keel placed well aft and forward dagger boards. It also features a unique rotating un-stayed carbon wing mast stepped at the keel and a push-vang system.

It's of semi-light displacement with three watertight bulkheads and has a maximum vanishing stability of 125 degrees for offshore work. Yazykov says his final design will boast



a canting keel rather than the fixed keel. He is currently back in Russia promoting a new Soviet-based offshore sailing school, but is due back in New Zealand soon, when he hopes to finalise plans to build his new design.

"New Zealand is the right place to build this boat. Kiwis are very good sailors and boat builders. Auckland is the 'city of sails' after all. I like it there." ↓

Editor's note: This is a summary of Viktor's life as discovered from talking to Viktor and others, and researching accounts of his sailing adventures online. Any errors are my own.