



Skip Novak

Pollution in Rio compromising the sailing Olympics? A clean-up is not going to happen. This is Brazil; just enjoy the carnival

I know Rio well enough. We stopped there in the Whitbread Round the World Race in 1978. That was the year many of the competitors – and the security guards, along with the lawn furniture – wound up in the swimming pool in the middle of the awards ceremony at the Rio Yacht Club. It took tear gas to clear the crowd.

The story has been retold so many times it is now Whitbread legend verging on Whitbread myth. You had to be there.

I also remember how filthy Guanabara Bay was – a first hand experience as I dived on the bottom of *King's Legend* before the start to give her a clean. It was not until we were well offshore after the start on the way back home that the sea turned from brown to blue.

It is estimated that 15 million people inhabit Rio's greater metropolitan area, which forms a human and industrial ring around Guanabara Bay, which is basically an enclosed arm of the sea. It is therefore no surprise to

me that it is still a virtual cesspool of human and industrial waste in 2015.

In fact, I drove around the bay last January with a friend as we were extricating ourselves from the traffic on our way out of town on the road to São Paulo. I noticed the changes since 1978 alright: more people, more congestion and more industry.

And let's be frank, this is not America decades after it passed the Clean Water Act in 1972, which is a revelation to one who knew the Great Lakes in the 1960s – it is Brazil, a First World country for a few, but Third World for the majority of the population who have few amenities and lack much of an environmental view.

Worrying about pollution for humankind and the

negative consequences for industry, which uses the bay as a dumping ground, has historically been way down the government's list of priorities, in spite of political posturing to the contrary.

How the International Olympic Committee were led to believe that the powers that be in Rio would miraculously clean up the bay, turning it into a sailing paradise of sorts by removing 80 per cent of the pollution, is beyond the definition of naivety.

The present dilemma of pollution (micro and macro) that will compromise results in the 2016 Olympics, now continually in the sailing news forums, is not the fault of Rio in having sold this promise to be unfulfilled. Rather the reality the sailors will face next summer is clearly the fault of the IOC for believing them in the first place.

We, the public, are led to believe that the members of the IOC who decide these things are global citizens who would immediately recognize that this promise by local and federal government would never be viable.

There's no point in making a meal out of it though, digested or not. Regattas take place there on a regular basis. People swim in it. People scuba dive in it. To my knowledge, no sailors have died because of it – granted the Brazilian crews might have a distinct advantage having built up an immunity to the bacteria.

There will be compromises and complaints. Rudders and boards will catch plastic bags and hulls collide with other debris, unless of course the organisers, along with government, can conjure up a hydro-hoover yet to be invented that can anticipate tidal flow and quickly clear the racecourse before each race of large solid objects. That will be a tall order in itself, but somehow doable.

Sickness brought on by bacterial infection will be more controversial and difficult to assess in view of results compromised. Precautions will have to be taken.

But hey, this is Brazil and if there is one thing the Brazilians can do is create a carnival atmosphere out of a controversial situation. As usual with all things Brazilian, it will somehow be right on the day.

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