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Pierre Fehlmann – Master of the oceans

To the people in the antipodes, Switzerland seems a far-off little corner of the world: a dreamland of mountains, watches and chocolate. But suffering from one handicap: it has no direct contact with either sea or ocean.

First of all there was the Swiss merchant navy which came into being in the 1930's. And today twenty-one cargo ships proudly show the Federal flag at every latitude. Then came a new generation of deep sea navigators, including many fond of sports. Among these, the most prominent is Pierre Fehlmann, from Morges, who with the good ship "Merit" took part in the latest prestigious Whitbread round-the-world sailing contest. He came in as number 3, just behind the two New Zealand two-master ketches "Steinlager 2" and "Fisher & Paykel", but was first among the sloops (one-masted).

A sailor's biography

"I was sailing before I was born" he likes to say. The Fehlmann family has long been associated with sailing, in a tradition handed down from fathers to sons, and its members have often taken part in racing contests and regattas. Born in 1942, Pierre was sailing in a six-and-a-half metre boat from the age of 14. By 18, he owned a Vaurien (becoming Swiss champion on two occasions and European champion in 1962). Soon afterwards came his adventure with his 505 jolly-boat (three times Swiss champion, and vice-champion of the world in 1967).

A dramatic turn of events characterised his first Transatlantic contest: in a terrible storm, with Force 10-12 winds, his yacht the "Gauloises" sank! Says Fehlmann: "At the very last moment, I was saved by Brian O'Brien, commander of the British container ship "Atlantic Convoyer". At first, Brian held only contempt for the "amateur sailors" risking their lives on the North Atlantic. "We had long talks with one another, and at last I was able to convince him of the good aspects of yacht racing. After that he was to be seen at the start of every major race, right up to the day when he himself perished at sea when his ship sank in the Bay of Biscay." About O'Brien: Fehlmann will never forget him. Is it because of his friend that Pierre himself continues ever since to scour the oceans?

New projects

Well, the 1989/90 Whitbread contest is finished. But the man from Morges has other

projects running through his head. "Thus there will be a sailing yacht of the SORC (Swiss Ocean Racing Club) ready to take part in the 1993/94 "edition" of the contest".



"Merit": Only the New Zealand ketches (two-masters) could beat her. (Photo: D. Forster)

But alongside of this project Pierre Fehlmann is preparing the ground for taking up an even more, fantastic challenge: a Swiss yacht at the American Cup contest to be held at San Diego in 1992. That could be the crowning achievement in a career that is far from humdrum, but an achievement that would need to involve an enormous expenditure (some 31 million francs).

To succeed in the international world of sailing, one needs more than just being "tall, dark and handsome": and coming from a well-known and highly respected family, with his diploma as a hydraulic engineer in his pocket, Pierre Fehlmann could easily have opted for a comfortable bourgeois life. Far from it: at 48 years of age he still prefers



Pierre Fehlmann: As tough with the sea as it is with him. (Photo: ASL)

to sail the seven seas. "It's a fantastic feeling to let a 35 ton sailing ship skim along at 30 knots in the Indian Ocean or the South Pacific". Racing on the high seas has become a drug for him – but the tough business-man dozing below the surface does not forget his rights. Apart from running his business in composite materials, of which he is still a director, he manages to find time to hop into an aeroplane for dealing with his property interests in London, Palma de Mallorca and the Dominican Republic!

Is he a hero? By no means. Is he a charmer? Not that either – but a sturdy character who knows what he is looking for. As he enjoys giving orders, he became a commissioned officer in the Swiss army. He is a disciplinarian – a quality that makes him unbearable at times. But at the same time, he has a great feeling of responsibility, and can be seen as the Swiss perfectionist, who leaves nothing to chance. That is how he has made a name for himself on all the seas.

What else can one say about him? He is warm-blooded, faithful to his friends, but difficult to get to know. Nevertheless, his face lights up as soon as one asks him about the sort of welcome that he gets from the local Swiss community at every port of call. Everywhere the Swiss colony assembled to welcome "their" yacht, with "Guggenmusik", alphorns and splendid receptions, in spite of having to wait on the quay sides for hours for the vessel to arrive. All this kindness is something Pierre Fehlmann will not forget, above all because these happy occasions came after weeks of solitude or of struggles to survive when beset by hostile seas. "Why shouldn't a Swiss sail on the oceans of our world?"

Claude Provost