

SET A WORLD SPEED RECORD

There are plenty of ways to become the fastest sailor on earth

Sailors love to go fast and the more adventurous the sailor, the greater their need for speed. Some take this desire to the extreme and focus all their energies on becoming the fastest on the planet. Speed sailing is a surprisingly dynamic and diverse area of the sport where three very different approaches result in very similar speeds.

The first speed sailing record noted by the World Sailing Speed Record Council was set at 26.3 knots in 1972 by Tim Colman aboard his catamaran, Crossbow, on the waters off Portland, UK. Colman then spent a decade pushing his average speed over 500 metres, the official distance, up to 36 knots. That record stood until 1986 when a windsurfer reached 38.86 knots. The era of windsurfing record breakers continued and speeds slowly climbed until Frenchman Thierry Bielak reached 44.66 knots in 1991.

In 1993, an Australian boat named Yellow Pages Endeavour (YPE) became world famous when it set a new record of 46.52 knots. What earned YPE all this attention was not so much the speed as the boat's extraordinary design. This remarkable craft was built purely to sail fast over 500 metres and needed perfect conditions with flat water and not too much, not too little wind. A solid sail rested on a Y-shaped hull that could skim across the water but would virtually self-destruct if anything went wrong.

YPE's record did not last for long and windsurfers ruled supreme from 2004 until 2008, nudging the record to 49.09 knots, tantalizingly close to the Holy Grail of 50 knots. In fact it was a kitesurfer, Sebastien Cattelan, who beat the 50-knot barrier in the waters of Luderitz, Namibia, in 2008. Luderitz is the venue for regular international speed sailing events because it offers strong, steady winds and flat, shallow waters.

While the kitesurfers and windsurfers were blasting up and down the shore of Luderitz, another team of would-be record breakers were busy at work a few hundred kilometres north at Walvis Bay. The Vesta Sailrocket is an L-shaped craft with a 9-metre hull and a solid sail. It is designed so that the harder the wind blows, the faster the boat sails, with none of the problems of being overpowered and capsizing that limit normal sailing boats. Speeds of over 47 knots show that the theory works in practice but several highly dramatic and equally destructive crashes also demonstrate that tiny problems become disasters at high speed.

On the other side of the world in Australia, another purpose-built record breaker is also hovering around the 50-knot mark. Macquarie Innovation is the creation of the YPE designers and is built for winds of around 17 knots.

An entirely different approach is taken by l'Hydroptère, an 18.3-metre ocean-going trimaran that lifts out of the sea on foils. This remarkable vessel is skippered by Alain Thébault and has reached speeds of over 50 knots but not been able to sustain them over the 500-metre record course.

At the time of writing, both l'Hydroptère and Vesta Sailrocket are lying in pieces after high-speed capsizes while Macquarie Innovation's claim of a 50.7 knot measured-run is still to be confirmed. Meanwhile the 100 kilometres per hour record (54 knots) still beckons the bravest and fastest sailors in the world.



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time
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