

# Love. Actually.

**It is not so much a comeback as a return to one of his first loves. Alain Gautier, winner of the second Vendée Globe in 1993, started his career on the Solitaire du Figaro as a fresh faced 18 year old in 1980, one of the youngest ever skippers. Nine years later he won overall before stopping in 1990**

In the intervening years he won nine legs, and so this race he is bidding to match the outright record of ten leg wins held by Jean Le Cam. Gautier is back for pleasure. He has nothing to prove at the age of 53. There is not a hint of a mid or later mid life crisis. He missed the cut and thrust, the challenge of boat for boat racing. And in fact there has just not been the time in recent years. He has always held on to his boat – he last raced in 2003 when he finished second, the first year of the Beneteau Figaro II – renting it out. But from 2008 until 2010 he was with Alinghi for the America's Cup.

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So, the same question as he has been asked many times every day, since he decided last September that the time was right, Why?

*“ I love this race. It was the start of my career was eleven years on this race from 1980 to 1990. I always thought I would be back. In 2005 I decided to stop racing offshore races and for me the Figaro is not an offshore race. Offshore races is Transatlantic races on big boats and things like that. I wanted to come back in 2008 but Alinghi wanted me and I accepted.”*

*“ I have always wanted to do it again, when the time is right. Before it was in August and you could decide in February and prepare. But for June you have to prepare earlier. Last year I came to Roscoff and Nico Lunven saw me then. In September I decided 2014 was the time to do it again, maybe in 2015 I would not have the time. Fifteen days later Nico called me and said he wanted to have the year off, I think he is doing some other things, maybe a Volvo. So he had done seven years and it was time for a break and for me it was perfect. My sponsor back then was Generali and they were very happy. The boat Generali is Nico's boat and it is well set up and in great shape. I trained in my boat on the AG2R but this one is very well set up and it is the best solution. I have changed very, very little things.”*

Of course little has changed about the boat since he was last in one, eleven years ago.

*“ The sails have changed a lot. My last Figaro was 2003 when the sails were Dacron and now the sails are Kevlar and it was the first year of the Beneteau Figaro II. I had never been on a Figaro boat since then, never. Each year I rented my boat out. The boat is very simple. It is not exciting and it is 12 years old and it looks it, but it is perfect for the Figaro. It is reliable. Simple. You race and everything is the same for everyone else. So it was good to be back training again. In fact I had two years with no sailing. My last sailing was on the AC45 on Aleph. In 2012 and 2013 we had the Vendée Globe (Gautier is the safety advisor) and I had some projects in Lorient. I only sailed on my trimaran for PR (the ex ORMA Foncia) and that was not competition. Clearly I missed the racing a lot. I missed it all, the circus, coming back afterwards and discussing it all with the guys, everything. My first race was the Solo Maitre Coq and I really enjoyed it. When I sailed on the trimaran or the AC45 it is great pleasure but there is also a lot of stress. When you come back on the Figaro there is no stress. The boat is ready, it is a very good sailing boat, you can sail with 35kts and it is no stress. I am doing this for pleasure and everyone has the same boat. It is great. We don't go so fast, it's not quick but it is not important, you have the same boat as your rivals.”*

Gautier pitched into the training at La Pole Finisterre at the legendary Port La Foret and was always there or thereabouts: *“ Training in Port La Foret was great. There are a lot of young guys. I did not do as many days as I wanted, I injured my rib on the Solo Maitre Coq, and so had to have three weeks off. So I maybe had 30 or 35 days on the boat, from March to May, not as many days as I wanted. The training was hard, my hands were ruined every day! And maybe sometimes my back ....but I was in the match as soon as I went out and in the Solo Maitre Coq I was in the top 5 for the first seven or eight hours in light winds, for sure, but it was good to see that. I made some little mistakes then and you lose 200 metres with them. I did the Solo Concarneau and it was harder, 25 kts upwind, I was in the match, between 10 and 20. But I was in a good group with Xavier Macaire – I followed him last year he is very good and gives nothing away he always sails at full power – and so it was good to sail with him. Alexis Loisin and Damien Guillou. We sailed 300 miles really close and I finished just behind Xavier in the group, it was very close and that was very good training. I finished 12<sup>th</sup>.”*

He feels he has nothing at all to prove, there is pressure from any quarter. He is relaxed, affable and cool and is under no illusions the race can be won by a skipper over 50:

*“ I have no objectives here. None at all. I have no pressure from my sponsor. They say it is good to have one more page in the story, in our book, we had five years at the end of the eighties together. And of course we had four very close days*

*in the Vendée Globe in 2008 when Yann Elies was injured. So there is no pressure from them, and no pressure from me. I don't think that after 50 years old you can win the Figaro. Years after years, it is not just physical strength it is over four legs you have to recover and I don't think you can recover as well. When you are 35 or 40 you are in the perfect range. I am sure the third and fourth leg will be harder for me. My objective is at least one perfect, nice leg, you finish and think 'I made a nice leg'. I know the pleasure of winning a leg, it is about knowing how well you sailed well over the leg."*

Golf has been fundamental to his physical training programme...he jokes, but in fact he cycles a lot but does not like the gym or pushing weights:

*"I have not sailed for the last two years. I have not done enough sport, golf does not get you fit. I stopped squash because it was too hard on the knees. I do some cycling but it is not enough. I don't like swimming. I don't like pushing weights. I have done no gym, just cycling, nothing special."*

And the Vendée Globe will remain an enjoyable desk job for the meantime. Never say never....

*"I would not do the Vendée Globe. Well maybe when I am 65 when my kids are grown up. But the America's Cup might be interesting, not on the sailing team, but maybe on the design time like I did with Alinghi at the start but not for two years in San Francisco, that would be too much. I made that proposal, half time, for the last Cup but it was not accepted. I can't leave my family for that long. I will not do it for any price."*

He favours experience and age, though, when it comes to predicting the overall winner this year:

*"It is really difficult to predict. It is very even. On paper you have Jérémie and Yann who have won twice and for me it is important that they have sailed on big boats, on the IMOCAs, because when you come back it is easy. For me that is an advantage. Gildas, for me, is an enigma. I don't understand why he has never won. His talent is obvious and he has been close. And after that there are ten or twelve guys, like Erwan Tabarly – very strong – Thierry Chabagny and young guys like Corentin Horeau."*

But would he trade with the younger skippers and prefer to be starting out in the modern era?

*"They have it so much easier now. There is no comparison. When I started at 18 it was with a Plastimo wind vane which did not work at all. Downwind you had to steer by hand. And there was no GPS. And we did not have the feedback from the stars was not there. You arrived alone. You could discuss things with them but they did not give the keys away. But at the Port La Foret when you see the tools they are given when you are young then it is easy to progress quickly. They have the working instructions on paper. Compared with 20 years ago you learned it for yourself. Now they have the tools to progress so quickly. I never sailed with Adrena before I was on MaxSea and that has been new this year. On my boat it did not work so well. But at the debriefing you can see how much easier it is for the younger guys. But I would not have it any other way. We had such a different life. It was an adventure with not so much professionalism, the safety was not there. Professionalism came with the 1978 Route du Rhum and maybe before with the Whitbread. I came to the Figaro in 1980 and then there were all the stories. I sailed with Loic on his catamaran in 1983 it was completely different to now, we learned so many things and it was such fun. Now it is a job not an adventure. When I started the first Vendée Globe I was 27. I launched my boat in August and started the race in November. It was an adventure."*