

Team Skoftig (Derek Desaunois)

Interviewer: Jake Beatty

Q So we'll start this in five, four, three, two.

So this is Jake Beatty, created the Race to

Alaska, and now Race to Alaska podcast Gadfly.

I'm here with Derek. Derek, how do you

pronounce your name?

A Desaunois.

Q Desaunois?

A It's French ancestry.

Q Okay, fantastic. So I'm here with Derek

Desaunois from team -- the other thing I also

can't pronounce is your team name, Derek.

A Okay. Team Skoftig, and that needs a little bit

of explanation.

Q Please, please.

A In my native Dutch, Skoftig in the king's Dutch

basically means pulling a dirty trick on

somebody.

Q I like this. This is good. Can you say it again?

A Skoftig. However, if you bastardize it in the language of the area, the dialect where I come from, Skoftig with a K, it actually means amazing.

Q Amazing. So it's either dirty trick or amazing?

A That's correct.

Q I like this. I like this language a lot. Why did you choose this name?

A Okay. When I was building the boat, I was over in Holland over Christmas and New Years. This is a number of years ago. And I was walking around with my father through the village, late in the evening, just chatting about stuff. And in New Year's Eve, all the Dutch -- you can buy legally fireworks and fire it off. And we're walking around and sort of talking about boat names, and all of a sudden I see this placard hanging on a light post saying "Skoftig

fireworks for sale." Amazing fireworks for sale. That's it. That's the name of the boat. Because in that context, it was of course amazing, so therefore.

Q That's great. I love that. It's also, the thing I identify with, and the minute you said that, I was like that's Race to Alaska. It is either amazing or it's a dirty trick.

A It is true. It is perfect.

Q At some point I'm going to want to talk to you about -- do you have a lot of connections in the Netherlands?

A Big family, a lot of cousins. So yes, we've got a rather large WhatsApp group to keep in touch with. My family and my parents are still there. My brothers, some of my brothers, and a large amount of cousins.

Q So this is not for the podcast, and we will edit this out because it's not relevant at all. But for now, it was five years and then COVID

happened, so it became a seven year plan. I'm going to take a year off with my family, and our plan at the moment -- and it's a conceptual plan that I really need help figuring out if it's actually feasible. I'm in love with Dutch sailing barges.

A Yeah. Yeah, I can relate to that.

Q I want to go -- I want to buy one and then drive it through Europe and then go sailing in the Black and Aegean Sea.

A Yeah. That's perfectly possible. My parents in the younger years used to have a 40-foot canal boat. And they've been from where they live in the northwest corner of Holland they've been parked in the center of Paris, Berlin, you know, through Germany, through Belgium and all that stuff. These canals go everywhere, and there's a canal [indiscernible] which takes you right down to the Mediterranean if you want to.

Q Yeah.

A Even my dad investigated at some stage being the [indiscernible] that he is, that he wanted to take it to Moscow.

Q Yeah, you can do that.

A Yeah, you can. It takes a long time. There's a lot of lochs, canals, rivers, but it's possible. He never actually ended up doing that because he's getting too old for that now, but it's possible.

Q So we just talked about how unpronounceable your team name and your last name are to my mouth.

A That's right, yes.

Q The only thing that might -- do you know that when you Google your name, what comes up is you being rescued off of the coast? It's your interview with your rescuers from some tragic problem you were having off the coast of Australia.

A That's correct. And that happened about three years ago or something. Three years ago now. I

used to have an S&S 34, a 34-foot sailing boat for years and loved it. Sailed it through New Zealand back and forth and stuff. And during COVID I wanted to do that again but couldn't because of, you know --

Q COVID.

A -- border restrictions, yes. So my wife suggested to get it out of your system, sail around Australia. So I did, or at least tried to do that. And off western Australia, so I made it kind of halfway from Brisbane all the way around to western Australia. And in bad seas in the Indian Ocean, the mast snapped, punched a hole in the hull before I could cut it free. To cut a long story short, you know, you always hope for the best but prepare for the worst, and basically I had to abandon the boat and got helicoptered out of a life raft five or six hours later, back on land. So that's what you found. Yes, it's true. That actually

happened.

Q I mean, your adventure resum preceding that is truly remarkable. Like, you were sailing in ways more than just club sailing. Since you were 16, solo sailing around Europe. You've had southern ocean stuff. You've had Pacific Northwest stuff. You went through Cape Horn circumnavigation, Transatlantic, and that's just the sailing stuff. And Ironman races, you biked across Australia. And then, like, in that moment, how -- I've been on both sides of a mayday.

A Yeah.

Q How did it feel to be on that side?

A I don't know. I was calmer I think than I thought I would be, because it was obviously a first time for me. So what happened -- and I always had that from my previous adventures. Even before I leave the harbour or as I'm leaving the harbour here, say in Brisbane,

you've got a life raft, you've got a grab bag.

And in your head, especially since you're alone, you're always going in your head, what if? What would I do if the worst case would happen right now? And I mean, for some reason I always have that in the back of my head. Maybe that comes back from the time when I was working on superyachts and when you get new crew on board you got to instruct them on how it all works. You know, what if the boat sinks or what if there's a man overboard. You're practicing that.

And so when push came to shove, initially I thought in this particular case that the mast is overboard. I lost my rig. Well, that's too bad. What am I going to do now? So I sit there for a while and then wander down below decks and notice there's water above the floorboards already. And I realize then that there's more to it. Yeah. It's a bit of -- I don't know.

It's a bit of a hard start. There's no doubt about that. And maybe there was -- I can't remember if there was a slight sense of panic there for a moment.

But apart from that, I've got an EPIRB.

I've got a life raft. It's kind of like what choice do you have? As long as you've got time to set that all off, it's really not that --

it's a drama because you lose your boat. And it's scary for a little while. But I've been in situations before, and you don't know that until it happens. Way back in my military time where we've -- I was in really dicey situations where I sort of recognized, well, that was exciting.

And now life goes on. And that's the only way I can explain it.

Q Yeah.

A Sure, it's scary and all that stuff. But then you move on. And as I mentioned before, I've been in situations where I've been shot at, and

the people I was with were having PTSD after that. And for me it ended up being just a good story at the bar that got me a couple of free beers. You know what I mean? And that's how I approached a lot of things. Just -- yeah.

Q So how long between that rescue -- how long did it take for you to get on the water again?

A Not very long. First of all, I didn't have a boat. But well, no, I do have a boat because I had a little -- I had Skoftig. Right? I was already -- I had that already. So and I'm building a new boat, a small one, 6 metres, just for here, 20 foot.

Q And in your experience, it's clear that you know that you need to have spares.

A Yes, it is true. Well, you know, the ideal amount of boat is whatever you have plus one.

Q Sure.

A So I had two then, and now back to one and a half. One is half built and the other one is

about to go in the crate to Seattle. So yes.

Q Well, so I'm going back to your -- your impressive career on the water. A lot of big stuff, Transatlantic, circumnavigation, superyachts. This is pretty high cotton. And now Race to Alaska. When I was reading your resum , it made me think of -- back when I was in school, I remember being rejected by successively worse looking girls. And I wondered if we were basically your version of Rachel Gebhart [phonetic]. Are we the only one who said yes?

A A couple of things. First of all, I'd like to do things of which I'm not entirely sure whether I can actually do them. You know, a challenge.

Q Has that happened before? Other than --

A I try to sail --

Q You biked across Australia. That's crazy.

A Yeah. Well, that was another one of those things. It's kind of a race/ride. And yeah,

it's in the same vein as the Race to Alaska.

It's unsupported but it has its set course.

There's a Facebook page connected to it and all that stuff. And yeah, it was one of those things that I heard about it and you kind of wonder, could I do that? So I need to find that out because I don't want to be on my death bed and wonder if I could do that. I need to find out. And some things work, you know, like ride across Australia and other things. And sometimes some things don't work like sailing around Australia. But now at least I know.

Q Fair. So why Race to Alaska?

A Oh my god. Okay. So in my superyacht days, the last boat I worked on, we did a round-the-world trip and spent most of the summer and then some based in Vancouver doing trips up and down the inside passage. Needless to say I completely fell in love with the place.

Q Isn't it amazing? It's amazing.

A I cruised on boats in the Mediterranean, in the South Pacific, and in Asia and stuff. There is no comparison. There is just no comparison.

Q It's so wild, yeah.

A I'm going to people that -- I met a lot of people that cruise around the world. Have you been to the Pacific Northwest? No. What's wrong with you? So anyway, fast forward about 11 years ago. Heather and I getting married and we're looking at a honeymoon. And part of that was spent hiking on Vancouver Island, and then for three weeks, we hired this tiny little sailing boat out of Nanaimo and spent three weeks just bumming around Princess Louise Inlet, Desolation Sound, up to Octopus Island. Enough said. It was wonderful.

So then in 2015 or just before that, I see -- it would have been on like the Sailing Anarchy website or Scuttlebutt. Something about this strange little race through the inside

passage from Port Townsend to Ketchikan. Look, to me personally, it was an absolute no-brainer.

One year I got to do this. So from the beginning it was pretty simple. I need to do this.

Q So we're like -- we might not be the last person to say -- first person to say yes. But it's safe to say, like, in the priorities we made it before year ten.

A Yeah. Yeah.

Q That's a pretty faint compliment there, Derek.

A To be perfectly honest, I got the plans in 2018, built the boat.

Q We're going to pause because you're referring to the boat that you're building or built?

A Sorry, yes.

Q Which is a RowCruiser from the design of Colin Angus, who was actually one of the first -- I don't know if you know this story, Derek. But he was the first person I talked to after I got

the idea for the Race to Alaska.

A Okay.

Q And I was like Colin, I think this is a thing.

What do you think? He said yeah, I think that's a thing. And I kind of forgot about it and then nine months later he came to give his presentation about his around-the-world trip, and we were having dinner beforehand and he said, so what about the race? Are you going to do it? And he -- in his very Canadian, very polite, get off the dime, buddy. He cajoled me into making it happen. Yeah.

A Yeah. Yeah. So I built the RowCruiser but it took me a little while because I don't like sitting backwards, so I wanted to have a pedal drive and sit forwards. Of course growing up in Holland you cycle everywhere. So it was a bit of a no-brainer for me, but it took me a while to figure out how to make that work.

Q Can we pause there for a second. Because what

is interesting about -- there have been a number of pedal drive inventions and innovations through the Race to Alaska for which I marvel the whole time. Your pedal drive is a face-forward propeller drive as opposed to many of them use the Hobie wave penguin flipper technology. But you're like, not that, it's too easy. Why the propeller versus the flipper? For all the pedal drive nerds out there.

A It's not necessarily too easy. A couple of different reasons. The movement of your feet back and forth instead of going into a circle like normal cycling is a bit awkward to me. Secondly cycling is all I know. But I don't think these flipper drives are powerful enough. And so I was looking for something that actually drove a propeller, and I found that in Paul Gartside -- any boat builder in the US knows who Paul Gartside is. He built a pedal drive boat in early 90s called Blue Skies. And you can get

the plans off Duckworks at the moment. And that had this thing built in, and I saw that, a really vague description on the internet. So I thought, I don't even know if Paul is still alive. So I found an email address, sent him a request, and he just sent me a message back, send me 20 bucks and I'll send you the plans. So I make this [indiscernible] gearbox and it's wonderful. It's comfortable, and combined with a very comfortable recumbent seat and cushion, all that stuff. I can hopefully do this for a very long time in a row.

Q Okay. That's fair. That's good.

A Yeah.

Q One of the things I think is interesting about your progression of boats that mirrors my own largely is that both recreationally and professionally, you've gone from big to small.

A Correct.

Q Like, how long -- your Angus RowCruiser, is it

19?

A It's 18 and a half feet, yeah.

Q I'm rounding up.

A Yeah, sure. Yeah.

Q As we do.

A Yeah.

Q So tell me about that. What led you to smaller boats?

A Well, the one I'm building, the sole reason I built the RowCruiser was for the Race to Alaska. And for me, it was always something that I wanted to do and something that I built myself. I could buy a boat over there, do it up, all that stuff. Your Craigslist is full of little boats for sale that you could convert. And I thought about that for a couple of times. But I always came back to no, I'm building -- I built and designed this thing. So I built Skoftig for the Race to Alaska when shipping it over to Seattle was dirt cheap. We're talking about

preCOVID.

Q PreCOVID, pre Yemeni pirates.

A Enough said really. Exactly. So I talked to a transport company and it was basically very cheap to do it. And I go, I'm going to build this thing and do the race with my own built boat. And then of course COVID hit. I've been sort of waiting for transport costs to come down. They haven't. But now it's kind of like if I don't do it now, I'm never going to get to do it. But it's now basically I don't care. I've got a little sponsorship for it, so that helps me out a little bit in the costs. But also, so Skoftig was always for the Race to Alaska. And to be honest, I can't really afford to ship it back. So any listeners who want to buy a prize-winning, hopefully, Race to Alaska boat after Ketchikan, might be welcome to it.

Q I am going to say, like I regret to inform you,

the market for Angus Row Cruisers in Ketchikan is fairly limited.

A Yeah, I know that. That's okay. The market for anything in Ketchikan is fairly limited. No, I'm going to take it back first. That's okay. But after that, the newer boat I'm building is also about the same length but more of -- it's a John Welsford design.

Q Which one?

A The Long Steps.

Q Very nice.

A Yeah.

Q Very nice.

A Again a slow process because of at the moment I'm busy with the Race to Alaska.

Q Long Steps is the stretched version of the Welsford Traveller; correct?

A Yes.

Q Pathfinder?

A Navigator. We have one of those too. Correct.

And I love that boat because you can still do multiday trips on it. But for me the defining factor is it's the biggest boat I can have that I don't have to pay registration for. Because you know, you don't have to put it in the marina. You don't have to pay registration. It sits on a trailer. I mean, you got it in the backyard, doesn't cost you anything. You know what I mean?

Q I totally get it.

A I was sick of mooring fees, harbour fees, marina fees and all that stuff. Insurance. You know, I'll have barely insurance on it because guess who is repairing it when I bump it? It's me. I'm a shipwright.

Q It's not me, Derek. I'm not signing up for that.

A You don't have to. I've been repairing other people's boats for the last 40 years.

Q Derek, how long have you lived in Australia?

A Permanently since 2000, Christmas 2000 to be exact.

Q We're going to do some Australian questions.

A Fire away.

Q How long did it take for you to get used to the toilets flushing in that direction?

A They don't.

Q What? What direction do they flush in?

A To be honest, I've never checked.

Q Cool guys don't look at explosions or the way that toilets flush. Fair.

A Something like that.

Q All right. This is a question from Jesse the Race Boss.

A Yeah.

Q So how much time passed between when the documentary was released and when Crocodile Dundee ended up on your money?

A How do you mean? What? Oh, right. It's not. Yeah, no. You mean actually printed on notes?

Q On your notes, yeah.

A No, it hasn't. No.

Q Okay.

A We actually more expected it to be on American bank notes, to be perfectly honest.

Q Fair. I'll pass it on to Jesse.

A Because it was very much made for the Australian market -- for the American market because most Australians find it cringe-worthy.

Q Crease or cringe?

A Cringe.

Q Yeah.

A Cringe-worthy, yes.

Q How many sheep did you walk on to get to your living room this morning?

A Oh, yeah. No.

Q You don't have to answer that question. You are not obligated to answer any sheep-related questions in Australia.

A There's no sheep here.

Q That's a courtesy we extend to our Australian friends.

A Fair enough. I can appreciate that. I can't relate to it, but I can appreciate it.

Q So I now have a multiple choice question. You are an incredibly experienced adventurer and sailor. You've been thinking about the Race to Alaska since 2015 apparently.

A Yeah.

Q What keeps you up at night about your entry into the Race to Alaska? A, Seymour Narrows; B, bears; or that global warming will increase the rate of sea level rise and atmospheric events so that in 20 years' time the earth's surface is an unrecognizable hellscape only able to support a fraction of the humans who are now alive?

A Seymour Narrows.

Q That's such an Australian answer. I love that.

A And that's after I've actually been through there. I mentioned before the trip that Heather

and I did in the boat. We've been through Seymour Narrows. Been through there at slack tide and it was fine. And still I know what it can be like. Seymour Narrows. Bears, not so much. I've got a boat that I can anchor off and sleep in, so I'm pretty safe. And the rest is way too long to answer to.

Q Okay. Great.

A Yeah.

Q Derek, imagine yourself in Ketchikan. You're on the dock. You've just finished. What is the thing that you're so happy that you brought with you because it made the difference?

A Ketchup bottles. You know what that is? There you go. That's it. That makes everything taste good.

Q Okay. You're still on the dock of Ketchikan. You're thinking, thank god I made it. Other than, like, how recently and the number of times that you've been rescued, what are the things

that you are thankful that we didn't know about you when you applied?

A Oh, god. I think -- didn't know about? I'm not sure. Because like I said, I've been there. I've been reading about it long enough. I think the weather comes to mind, but I've been in bad weather in small boats, you know. So I know it's going to scare the living daylights out of me, but I can handle it. I made the boat so that the sails are easily reefable and all that stuff, so that's not it.

Q Have you slept in the little coffin cabin yet?

A I have to admit I have not yet.

Q Will you promise me you won't until the first day?

A That might be your answer to your question.

Q I've got five bucks if you don't do it. Like, I will give you a crisp Abraham Lincoln when you come to Port Townsend.

A Okay. I will not. Because like I said, it goes

in a crate in two weeks' time and I do my last sea trials coming Sunday. Sea trials, more like for a couple of promotion shots and stuff.

Q So for those listeners who are listening, the coffin cabin, the Angus RowCruiser is 18 and a half feet long. The cockpit is in the middle. The cabin of sorts is a sliding hatch thing in the bow that has -- I'm not sure you can have your elbows up and roll over in there. It's like if your nose is too long you're going to need to put a little Easter egg attachment cut out. You're going to need a hole.

A Correct. However, I've got a little custom made mattress in there and it is super comfortable.

Q Sure.

A Yeah. And it's all sort of water resistant, for want of a better word.

Q Sure.

A So I mean, I have to come back maybe to an earlier question. What I wasn't fully aware of,

I'm not fully aware of how wet things are going to be.

Q They're going to get so wet, Derek, oh my gosh. They're going to get so wet?

A I know. And how wet and miserable at times. That's something that will be a whole different experience.

Q The water is cold up here. It never dries out.

A I've never worn a drysuit in my life before until now.

Q That your plan, to wear a drysuit?

A Oh, yeah. I've got Zhik, an Australian sailing gear company. I found the thickest gloves they have. They're ridiculous. But that with -- I've got a scuba hood on top of the drysuit and a rain jacket over top of that. I refuse to get cold. But all will be revealed no doubt.

Q Okay. Derek, we have one more section here which is -- I called it totally unfair either/or questions.

A Okay.

Q Where you have to answer either one or the other. Would you rather have the current with you or the wind with you?

A Oh, god. Current.

Q Nice.

A Yeah. Weird. Current, yes, definitely.

Q In a small boat that makes sense because if you have if the current against you and wind with you, the bed is wet?

A Exactly. Everything is wet.

Q Not because you were nervous but because it's wet.

A That's right. I've actually tried that here, Morgan Bay sometimes we can have strong currents in some places. Yes, current, for sure.

Q Would you rather finish the race or have a good time?

A Oh, tricky one. I need to finish this. I'd still like to think I can combine the two

somewhere in the middle. Oh, god. No, I would finish the race.

Q Okay.

A Yeah.

Q Would you rather not have quite enough food during the race or have to eat rehydrated food for two weeks after you get home?

A Eat rehydrated food for two weeks after I get home.

Q God, that's a hard one.

A I've actually done that.

Q Really?

A Where I oversupplied for a trip and then I got back and now I've got to eat that stuff because it's kind of a waste.

Q I did that in my 20s because I worked for Outward Bound because I was dead-ass broke. When is the last time you did that?

A You say you did it in your 20s. My body is 62 years old but the mind is --

Q You're emotionally a 12-year-old?

A Exactly. The fact that I'm sitting here talking to you tells the whole story.

Q We can smell our own, sir.

A Yeah.

Q All right. Would you rather have blisters on your hands or blisters on your ass?

A Well, I've had blisters on my ass when I cycled across the Nullarbor Desert in Australia, so I've had that.

Q I don't need to pry into your personal life, Derek. Just need an answer.

A I have no secrets. Let's see. Blisters on my hands because I'm not rowing anyway, so I can deal with that.

Q Sure. Last one. \$10,000 or steak knives?

A Well, \$10,000 obviously because this is costing me an arm and a leg.

Q I love it. Mercenary, practical. Fantastic.

A Yeah.

Q Derek, we're at the end of our time and probably more so because I just have enjoyed talking to you so much, sir.

A Yeah.

Q Thanks for signing up for the race. Thanks for being part of this community from the beginning, like from -- following along. How great for you to show up with your newly minted boat with that new boat smell. I feel like I want you to put one of those -- you know when you go to a cheap hotel, on the toilet they're like sanitized for your protection. I want that on the hatch under your cabin just so I know that it hasn't been tampered with.

A Listen, at the end of this I just want to mention a couple of names of people that have been really helpful for me so far.

Q Please do.

A Shane Baker, import orchard. The guy has been patiently listening to me trying for the last

five, six years trying to get there. And he's been helping me with everything and being supportive and stuff and he's going to help me when I get there. Shane is an awesome bloke. And then couple of people that on this side of the Pacific that jumped in as a sponsor, Carter Marine Services in Cairns, Rivergate Shipyard, and especially my boss Sam Bowman from Gateway Marine Shipwrights. They all jumped on the bandwagon with a bit of help here and there.

Q That's good.

A There's still space on my boat for stickers if anybody is interested.

Q What does a sticker cost? What does the sponsorship run?

A Depends on the size of the sticker, but on average, about a thousand bucks.

Q Okay.

A You know, which is still a fraction of what I've been spending so far. But any little bit helps.

Q Derek, thanks so much for hanging out tonight,
or this morning for you. I very much look
forward to speaking with you and meeting you in
person.

A I'll see you there.

Q Best of luck with your preparations. We'll see
you soon.