



Secret sauce

The fast guy behind the fastest boats... Carol Cronin talks high-performance planning and execution with Micky Costa

When we sit down to chat on day three of the Snipe World Masters Championship in Frutillar, Chile, Micky Costa's grin is even wider than usual. After winning the fourth race of the regatta he's now one point ahead of me overall, just in time for this interview – which he's doing more as a favour than to increase his own visibility. Micky likes building fast boats more than building name recognition... though not quite as much as he likes beating his friends.

When I first met Micky Costa at the 2015 Snipe Worlds I had no idea that the guy I think of as a poster child for co-operative competitiveness is in real life the project manager of choice for so many high-end raceboats... Although, according to Micky, project management doesn't quite describe the niche he's built for himself.

Then I started noticing how often his name popped up in *Seahorse*, which made me want to learn more about how he developed his business. So before we dive into the nitty-gritty of boat-name-dropping

and how his job actually works, I ask him how an Argentine with Italian roots came to settle in Palma? The short answer, of course, is sailing.

Dinghies to Maxis

Micky was born in Buenos Aires in the early 1960s and grew up sailing Optimists and Penguins. He also mentions the 470, Laser, Lightning and Star before describing his most pivotal teenage moment: teaming up with legendary Snipe sailor Pedro 'Nucho' Sisti. 'I sailed for three years with him, and we won the [1979] South Americans – 100 boats!' That same year they finished sixth at the Pan American Games in Puerto Rico. Nucho taught Micky how to campaign a boat, he says now. 'He was a big mentor on how to do the job I do today; how to see if that rope was turning right on that sheave. All that little detail, how to put things together.'

During his university years the Ondine team – recently crowned Maxi World Champions – invited Micky to sail back to the USA with them. 'I was almost 22, and I took that chance... in roughly a micro-second!' Newport summers, Florida winters and other Maxi jobs followed. He also began working with his brother-in-law, Argentine designer Hector Domato, who's still a close collaborator today.

Though Micky says he's always preferred inshore sailing, his favourite offshore event was the Kenwood Cup. There was no shipping boats in those days; instead, 'You sailed the boats there, 90 days from Europe. We'd leave in March for the Caribbean, go through the Panama

Canal to Los Angeles. Then sail to Hawaii, and then back to San Francisco for the Big Boat Series.'

Between passages he worked on the sails... then one year, 'I went to live at Gary Weisman's house in San Diego. Gary just left me the dog and the car, and he gave me a desk that belonged to Lowell North! That's when I met Bruce Nelson, and other designers I've worked with. It's incredible the people you meet along the way.'

Four America's Cups

In 1989 Paul Cayard and German Frers asked Micky to join Il Moro di Venezia. 'I started out sailing and designing; then quite soon I was doing mainly systems and putting together the boats. And deck layouts, trying to get the input from the sailing teams and put it into the boats. And that made my... I'd be ashamed to call it a career. It's just what I do, my job.'

That campaign took him to Italy, and in the 1990s Micky settled in Milan. His first arrival there 'was a shocker because it was foggy, but it became my home for 17 years'. Even today, 'my [speaking] life is basically divided in thirds: one third Spanish, one third Italian, one third English.'

After Il Moro was defeated in the 1992 America's Cup Micky continued with Frers for the next 11 years. 'We were designing everything; and we did a lot of Maxi boats.' One of his favourites remains *Rose Sélavy*, a 65-footer built in Auckland that's still sailing and racing hard more than 30 years later. 'We did a lot of boats in Italy!'

When Luna Rossa came together for the 2000 Cup Micky joined the team. After



Above: when Micky Costa was putting together the Botín IRC72 Maxi *Cannonball* at Premier Yachts back in 2017 it was without doubt the latest word in technology and design, going on to win the 2019 Maxi Worlds in Porto Cervo as well as plenty of other silverware. Little did Costa know that within a couple of years he would begin work on a new Mark Mills design which would make *Cannonball* look positively pedestrian – *Flying Nikka* (left) redefining what is possible within IRC and ORC... albeit with an extremely fruity rating

that, 'I kept going with Prada, mostly designing... but I always spent a lot of time at the yards, trying to make the design become reality on the boat, especially when juggling the structures.'

His final America's Cup was in 2007, in Valencia, where 'I was lucky to meet my wife, Primi, who saves me every day.'

After Luna Rossa was defeated by Team New Zealand in the Louis Vuitton finals, 'we thought it was all going to happen again, but of course the 2010 Deed of Gift Challenge brought everything to a grinding halt. Suddenly there was no work, so I went to Wally Yachts.'

Taking care of the yachting parts

Working for Wally founder Luca Bassani was great, he says; they were building innovative yachts with 'a very architectural design, but somebody had to actually make it work with the sailing systems'. Bassani asked Micky to take care of what 'they called "the yachting parts of the boat".'

The first job Micky remembers taking with the title 'project manager' was building the TP52 *Matador* at King Marine. Led by Guillermo Parada, the team won the 2009 TP52 World Championship. (Many of the same team, including Micky, would again win the 2015 Worlds on *Azzurra*.) Even then 'the job was a little different from the standard project management: where you just send an email and somebody else does it'.

The TP52 builds he's managed read like a Who's Who of fleet champions. In addition to six boats for *Azzurra*, 'I did *Phoenix*, *Onda*, *Bronosec*, *Platoon*, *Provezza*...'

And over the years the job has evolved. 'We used to receive a design and you build that; the team will get what they get.' Plus TP52s are pretty similar, he continues. 'It's a box [rule], right? So you have a few more constraints than just, oh, I want to do another big cruising boat.'

These days each boat is minutely customised to fit its team. 'You start with the TP52 Rule, the designer talks to the owner's team and then they decide what boat performance-wise they prefer: depending on the conditions for the next year, as well as all those other interlinked factors.'

Thanks to 3D design and printing and CNC tooling, 'It's very easy right now to go from the computer into the reality. If the guys choose to do something, as long as it's legal, I don't mind.' Of course, the designer 'tries to protect their ideas, and they might get a little bent out by [a special] request, but this is now the game; what the sailing crew believe that they need they get.' A huge change, he repeats.

Some say this new emphasis makes the boats more complicated, but Micky thinks the current process actually saves time. Much more importantly, 'You get a better result by the end.'

After that initial discussion the designer 'polishes the shape'. And then, 'when it comes to structures, I deal with the designer and structural engineer and then we move things along... and we bargain, we trade.' Next Micky makes a global 3D model of the boat. 'I get the shape from the designer, we put the structure inside, we start putting in details of everything.'

He often finds himself working on the

computer at 3am, trying to turn a particular request into working reality ahead of the next day's programme.

Micky works for the owner, but his hands-on approach leads many people to think he works for the yard. 'I'm very much embedded inside the construction. My job is to deliver the object...' And also, 'You gotta make that owner happy!'

To do that he asks for design information as early as possible. 'I'm not claiming to always achieve it, but I'm trying to get the yard to be aware of, for example, all of the penetrations on the structure.' When I ask what that means, he explains that it's the passages necessary for ropes, wiring and hydraulics. Obvious in hindsight, as is his next point: those are 'details that later on will be harder to make or alter'.

The only part of his job Micky doesn't enjoy is the paperwork. Angling his head to one side, he admits, 'I try to escape... and I'm always late.'

How long will it take?

Even after so many successful projects, scheduling is a constant worry. 'Sometimes the yards don't know exactly how to measure the time,' he points out. 'Estimating, it's the best time to become poor. But King Marine have a super database so they know what time it takes to do stuff. But even so it's always risky.'

Typically, he then uses his vast experience to fine-tune the timeline. 'We work with the suppliers, making sure that all those components arrive on schedule.'

'With the TP52 there is only six months or so to get a boat built. When the geometry

is a little different something has to be adjusted. The concept might be the right one, but then there is an easement thread or there is a fitting or there is a hole – and that applies to the whole boat, not only big items like the keel. Teams work in different ways and have different demands, which creates multiple variables.

‘I cannot afford telling an owner that it’s going to sail on 15 March and then have that date slip to 18 March,’ he adds. ‘Because you have sailing teams flying in and there’s a lot of movement around what we do. So that is my stress, just trying to name that day. And so together we deliver the schedule.’

Even so, sometimes, he has to tell the yard that a task will take a bit longer than they’ve allowed. ‘There is a lot of work that comes from grabbing the design from the yacht designer, from the structural engineers, from the yard, and from the team: demands that they want and demands that they need. And some things you know that will probably change...’

Hull-deck joint

The key moment in any build schedule is, as Micky puts it, when ‘you close the lid of the boat’. Once the deck goes on, hardware installation becomes much more difficult. ‘Winch systems, it’s important to have it all pre-installed; drilling it and setting all the brackets and putting the pedestals on when the deck is on its own, so you can work on the upper side and the underside. The same on the hull; you try to make sure that you get all that done before you get into what I call the dark tunnels.’

Working with a new yard, Micky always asks for their scheduled date to seal up the hull deck joint. And then ‘I tell them if they’re right or wrong; you smell it. Either too optimistic or too slow. Because it’s how you’re going to get there, and after that how you’re going to finish the boat.’ Of course, ‘the longer the projects are, the more difficult it is to nail’ that date.

Bigger picture, he says his job is all about teaching and collaborating. ‘When they start sailing the owner doesn’t know what I do,’ so he focuses on ‘the relationship that is created with the owner and the designer. Many times the project manager or the owner’s representative has to be the one enforcing a policy. ‘We try to avoid that’, to work within the group ‘and be there and deliver’. And, I add, you bring skills they don’t have. Nodding, he confirms, ‘That’s what I try to do.’

Funny requests

Micky’s worked on plenty of boats larger than a TP52. He mentions *Dona Francisca*, a 150-footer built in 2014; also ‘there was a 50m Wally, and then of course *Flying Nikka*... There’s a hint of eye roll when he calls *Nikka* the best example of ‘a funny request’. Not because the boat or the people are funny, he clarifies; ‘It’s just such a completely new thing.’

Nikka’s design brief was to create a



Mentor... 16-year-old Micky Costa with his Snipe skipper Pedro ‘Nucho’ Sisti after winning the Snipe South American title together in 1979. ‘Nucho ran campaigns with the same attention to every detail that I now have the chance to do in my “work-play” putting blocks and gadgets on very nice racing yachts – mostly due to my great luck when sharing a bit of the road with him at the dawn of the 1980s...’

flying (foiling) boat that could cover long distances. And ‘the boat had to measure under ORC; it didn’t matter what the rating was, but it was important that it could enter the race’. It also had to pass a righting moment test, which meant including a keel – a major change on a boat otherwise heavily influenced by the AC75s.

The owner first called up Micky for a feasibility study. ‘I told them to put another million aside,’ he says, with a shrug; he couldn’t say for sure how long the project would take. Thinking he had finished, ‘I went to say goodbye, thank you. And they say, where are you going? I say, you get somebody who knows about this.’ Instead the owner replied that ‘Nobody knows anything about it! So you might as well stay.’ The eventual result, a mini-maxi with foils, launched in 2022.

‘It wasn’t so important how fast it could go,’ Micky continues, ‘it was about how early it would take off.’ They started design following the first foiling America’s Cup in Bermuda, ‘so we didn’t know anything’. But they must have got something right, since the project predated the AC75s and they ‘have a deck that is very similar’.

Nikka was also a chance to work closely with Mark Mills, Pure Engineering, and King Marine; ‘I’m very lucky to be surrounded by competent people that make you look good.’ Even so, there were still so many unknowns that he jokes, ‘We were betting on how many would get killed the first day... but actually the thing flew, so we all threw our hats in the air!’

Micky also managed the build of *Deep Blue*, an innovative 85-footer first launched in 2020. Last year he oversaw the boat’s latest refit, a nine-week sprint that included moving the mast and adding water ballast. Compared to the TP52s, bigger racing boats ‘get into a different world. Lots of systems, many vendors. They’re

not so easy to set out, like we do in a boat that is completely empty.’ And so, relative to those who only work on bigger custom projects, ‘I have an easy life, I would say.’

A rare opportunity

Once each build is completed Micky stays on for sea trials before moving to his next project. ‘I like the sailing, but if you cannot roll the mainsail with two people that mainsail is too large! And the job I do, I cannot be part of a team and be dedicated to sailing all the time. I’m happy to wave goodbye, but be always available. The personal relationship is important; making sure [the owner] is happy.’

When I tell him that a mutual friend says he works too many hours each day he shrugs again. ‘I have to be demanding sometimes,’ he says, before admitting, ‘I’m really kind of demanding on what we have to do. Many people ask me why I didn’t get into designing boats. But I found this vein, this path... a balance between the relationship with the builder and the development, equally together. It’s been fun.

‘And not that many people do that, you know? The opportunity is one millionth in the population – or even less.’

Just for fun

Micky’s lived in Palma since 2015, and even on his off-days he loves messing about with boats. Currently he’s rebuilding the 1970s Snipe he raced with his first mentor. ‘I’m trying to put it into racing mode again. I don’t get my hands too dirty normally, other people get dirty while I walk around with my hands in my pockets. Now I have to demonstrate that I have some kind of ability.’

It’s also a rare chance to work with wood once more. ‘That’s what we did at home when I was young. We had a garage, and everybody would be building Penguins and Optimists.’

I ask for his best regatta memories, and without hesitation he (again) rubs in his most recent race win, at the not-yet-completed Snipe World Masters. As he tells it, all of his accumulated boat wisdom can be traced back to the Snipe, though that might be influenced by our current situation, surrounded by 11 national flags and a mix of Spanish and Portuguese and English Snipe chatter.

Micky is one of the big reasons I am at this regatta, 5,000 miles south of home: not just for this interview, but for the shared laughter and learning, always delivered with a side of snark. We will eventually end up only two points apart in the final results, a great start to our second decade of co-operative competitiveness.

I want to hear more, but it’s time to get ready for racing. So instead I thank him and switch off the recorder, not yet aware that the next issue of *Seahorse* will mention him yet again. Micky might prefer to remain behind the scenes, but his name adds credibility to any project. Sorry, my friend, your secrets are out now! □