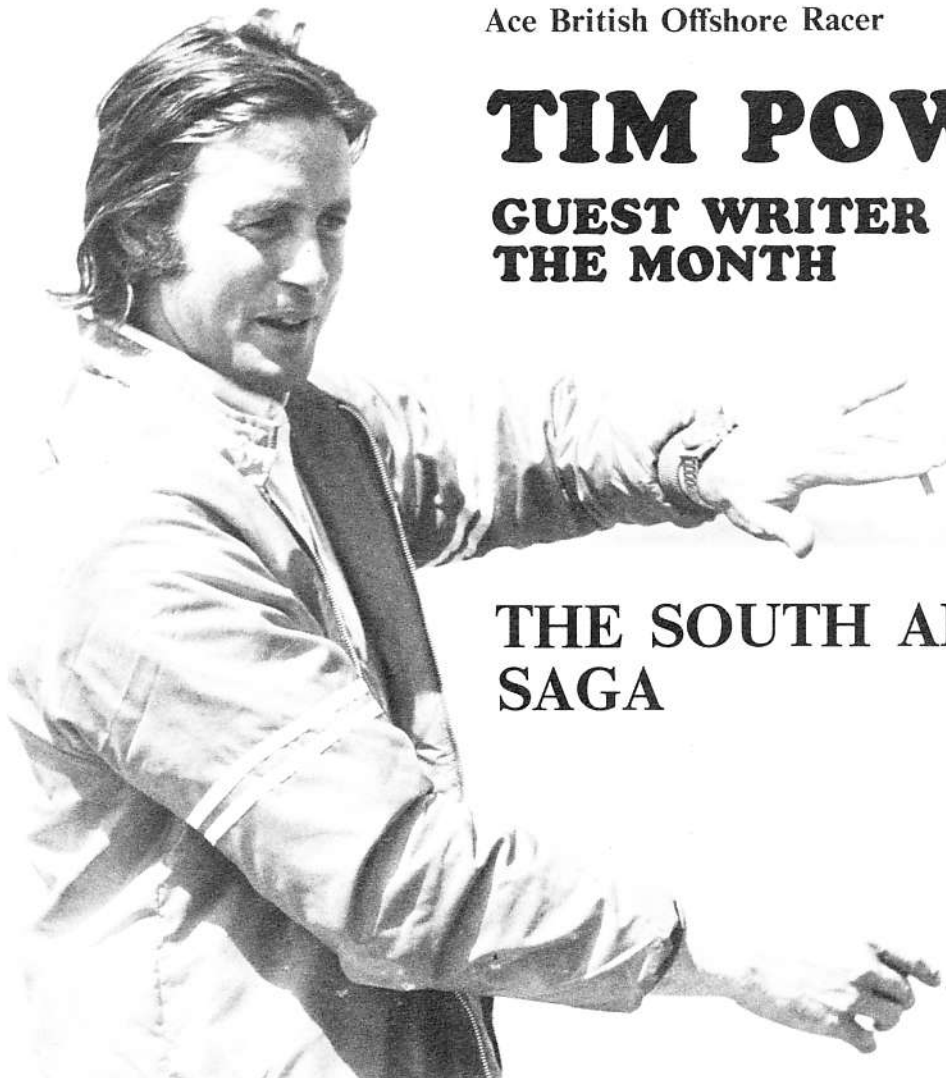


Ace British Offshore Racer

# TIM POWELL

## GUEST WRITER OF THE MONTH



## THE SOUTH AMERICAN SAGA

**S**OUTH AMERICA is a vast and wealthy continent; and even though it is relatively new as a venue to three world offshore championship powerboat races, this recently given status is one more symbol to its emergence into world class sport.

To the best of my knowledge, no Briton had ever raced a powerboat in Latin American waters before. Bobby Buchanan-Michaelson and myself, driving the new 40ft Shead design 'A.B.O.' were the first to exhibit the Union Jack out there, in the first of the 1974 U.I.M. offshore series.

To compete on the global circuit these days — and to remain up front — takes a lot of money, just as much luck, and twice the time one can really afford. If one is to do it properly, one starts with this Latin American batch held every January. It gives the advantage of accumulating perhaps 27 points before the American and European sections of the season even start. As yet, South American competition is not of a very high standard, so maybe one is just *buying* points.

But if buying is what we tried to do, we surely paid the price. Not just when actually racing, but before we even went out there. For one thing, with the fuel crisis international shipping dates were constantly being altered, as was the Port of departure. This resulted in 'A.B.O.' getting only two days testing — in sub-zero conditions on the Solent before leaving the country — complete with a 60ft truck/trailer, spare motors and outdrives.

Time, Tide, and Freighters wait for no man, so we got the whole outfit loaded up in Rotterdam at pretty short notice, in transit for Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Fortunately, the three S.A. events had been put back a week. We were very relieved because the freighter's skipper was ordered to reduce speed whilst in Mid-Atlantic to conserve fuel; which could have meant missing the first race.

We took three mechanics (George Swann, Chris Ades, and Ralph Searey) who flew out immediately after Christmas. I arrived with a week in hand to supervise the final preparations.

The flight to Buenos Aires takes a full 17½ hours including stops; gradually the passengers dwindled until there were only a dozen or so of the 'hard core' left. One of them was a familiar face — a freelance T.V. cameraman called Bill McDonald who is well familiar with the boating scene over many years. He's spent many hours hanging out of helicopters shooting powerboat racing film. However, on this occasion he was on his way to Cape Horn to join an R.N. icebreaker, to film the Whitbread Round-the-World yacht racers. He did a great job too.

In most foreign venues, security of racing craft is a problem. It wasn't here. Dick Krieger (the race organiser) and his staff could not have been more helpful in this and every other respect. Security in fact, was of military standards.

Our daytime 'office' was the B.A. Yacht Club — a really superb place — and it was here that we witnessed a rather strange thing — sides of Prime Argentinian beef being sawn up in the 'Chippies' Shop, and then devoured by the dozen or more shipwrights attached to the club!

The hotel I chose to stay in, also had the President of Panama as a guest, and he was constantly surrounded by

a cavalcade of highly armed individuals who moved in and out of the forecourt like they were preparing for the unpleasant sort of military operation.

It reminded me of a second rate film set.

With the usual tension-building towards race day, came the usual inaccurate estimates of the entry size. Some people said twenty, I reckoned on ten, and in fact it was eleven — including the current world champion, Carlo Bonomi from Italy, driving his 36ft Cigarette/Aeromarine, 'Dry Martini'. That's the main thing about these S.A. events at present. In their 'teething stages' the fields are made up of two or three really hot boats — and the 'Also Rans'.

Incidentally, shortly before the first race, I spent a most enjoyable evening with the crew of 'Burton Cutter', which had just arrived in B.A. She was one of the British entries in the Whitbread yacht race, and put up a very fine performance.

The race itself started in the great Argentinian summer resort of Mar Del Plata, 250 miles away. We decided to take 'advantage' of the official Police motorcycle escort on the journey from Buenos Aires. It is often said that powerboating is a dangerous sport — but in comparison to the techniques employed by the local police *en route*, believe me, it is *childs play*. They literally ride straight at oncoming vehicles until one or the other — and in some cases neither — gives way!

But basically, it had the desired effect, and we arrived at Mar del Plata in one piece. The boats were immediately put into a naval compound and looked after round-the-clock by guards armed with shooters.

We stayed in a French-style chateau, which was totally out of keeping, with the surrounding architecture. Here we discovered that beef can only be obtained for two weeks in every four, so that there is enough for export. In some places, charity does not begin at home.

Each foreign competitor was generously allocated an interpreter, without whom we would have been in a bad way. Even so, we nearly missed the vital drivers' briefing which we thought was just an ordinary cocktail party. As it happened, it rolled into a briefing, cum booze-up, cum shambles; it reminded me of Red Crise's briefings (the Florida based powerboat promoter) in Miami — lots of foreign soundtracks without sub-titles! Also, the room they chose for the briefing had the acoustics of a modified dustbin, with a clattering canteen at one end of the room serving up tea into the bargain. But to be fair, we had our own English-speaking, and very much quieter briefing afterwards.

Various dramas surrounded the launching of the boats, including the crane and its bare hawsers, minus the standard nylon straps! We lent out our own straps — something that I think was greatly appreciated by the other competitors.

With a grand — almost unbelievable-total of 29 turning points in the course, Bobby and I went out on a pre-race

check up to find their exact whereabouts. It was an easy pre-race task insomuch as no part of the course was more than 14 miles offshore, but difficult insomuch as not one of them was in the correct position! But at least we established 'their' idea of where they were.

We returned to the start area within the harbour. The start was to be indicated by a flare, a chequered flag, and the most enormous hand of a clock — the latter being the deciding factor!

With our newly acquired knowledge (?) we got off to an excellent start, shooting off in a direction which must have led our fellow competitors to think that we'd gone absolutely mad.

But for once we were right and in no time built up a substantial lead. The others meantime were zooming around in bewilderment.

Weather conditions were ideal for our new boat: force 3-4, heavy with a long, long swell, and bright sunlight. And the course, apart from numerous turns and one tricky reef, presented no problems. I had 29 pieces of sticky tape on the dash panel, ripping one off as we made each turn.

But, as is so often the way in racing, our efforts were to be of no avail. Suddenly and without warning, the entire bottom gelcoat delaminated due to some strange structural problem, and made the boat completely uncontrollable at speed. Had we continued, we stood a very good chance of losing the boat, not to mention ourselves. Even then, we were not fully aware just how serious our problem was.

With the retirement flag up, we cruised back into port — where irony took over. Since we had been billed as odds-on favourites, we were literally drowned in champagne. It took some time, some bottles and some embarrassment to explain that we had retired! These bottles were quickly replaced for Carlo Bonomi who emerged as overall winner after yet another trouble free race.

Once 'A.B.O.' was craned out, we realized that our South American attempt was well and truly over. All of us were extremely distressed but this is the name of the game, and you can't win them all.

However, the social activities and general goodwill lifted our spirits, and before long we gave the well meaning pledge of "We'll be back next year — just you wait and see".

I think that the South American race trilogy is here to stay, although like most new events, they need organisational improvement. In some cases, these really must be made. But for those who are considering an onslaught on the world drivers' championship — and there aren't many — this series is a must.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Bobby Buchanan-Michaelson (A.B.O.'s owner), Don Shead (her designer) and to those three never-tiring, always willing, mechanics, Chris, George and Ralph.

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