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Du 19 au 24 septembre 2023

Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération

All to play for, verdict at dawn

Three retirements including one dismasting, four leaders grouped within 5 miles and an almighty battle in the middle of the peloton... This 48H Azimut was billed as a very demanding race and it's certainly living up to expectations on a competitive front. With the leaders expected to make the finish line tomorrow, we review the past 30 hours of top-flight racing.

To note:

- 30 boats still racing after retirements by Corum l'Épargne, STAND AS ONE and Nexans-Arts & Fenêtres.
- Charal still leading the way, but the top four boats are bunched within 5 miles.
- Broken bowsprit on Biotherm as we go to press. Meilhat-Lobato are intending to finish the 48H Azimut to qualify for the Transat Jacques Vabre
- An excellent standard of competition out on the water and some intriguing conferences throughout the day at the Cité de la voile Eric Tabarly.



Photo : Pierre Bouras

A great deal has happened since yesterday start of this 48H Azimut (10:30 UTC), starting with a tough 100-mile beat slaloming between lines of squalls and heavy seas rocked by lighter breeze, conditions which IMOCA's seldom relish. There were various outcomes for the fleet and before even making it to Waypoint Azimut 1, three boats were already showing themselves to be a cut above the rest and had stretched out a first lead as they opened their sails: Charal (Beyou-Cammas), For The Planet (Goodchild-Ruyant) and Macif Santé Prévoyance (Dalin-Bidégorry)...

A highly selective start to the race

Up next, the long reach offered less breeze but the seas were still quite heavy. During this flashy point of sail the pace naturally picked up. About to break into the Top 10, Corum L'Épargne suddenly announced their dismasting to Race Management at 23:30 UTC, fortunately without harming Nicolas Troussel, Benjamin Schwartz or their on-board reporter Tanguy Conq... The news was a real bombshell for this team, which has no spare mast but is already determined to find a solution before the boat returns to port tomorrow to ensure they make the start of the Transat Jacques Vabre...

There have been setbacks and damage on other IMOCA's too – faulty electronics on STAND AS ONE and water ingress for Newrest Art&Fenêtres – leading to two further retirements and a fleet reduced to 30 boats by the early hours of the first morning.

Since then, the supposed formality of the reach actually concealed numerous traps, starting with a lighter breeze for the duos attempting to make westing and an abundance of squalls and light patches to anticipate. This turn of events meant that those who adopted a more straight-line course were able to reap the rewards. Macif Santé Prévoyance was first around Waypoint Azimut 2, Malizia-Seaexplorer (Herrmann-Harris) and Biotherm (Meilhat-Lobato) made it into the Top 10, and Teamwork (Mettraux-Villion) moved up into sixth place just a few miles astern of another mixed pairing who have enjoyed a brilliant start, Initiatives Coeur (Davies-Boutell).

A stellar performance by the female contingent

After an excellent start by L'Occitane en Provence (Crémer-Roberts), there have been a series of other stand-out performances being posted by the female contingent, including those sailing daggerboard boats like youngster Violette Dorange, who is managing to hang onto the leader of the category, Lazare, in what is proving to be a very successful IMOCA debut.

After 20 hours of racing in crash helmet mode, the sailors were finally able to begin savouring the delights of slipping along under gennaker and making the most of the sun's return to the Atlantic. There's no chance of drying out their foulies though as the seas are still heavy in the middle of the Bay of Biscay. However, it's the perfect opportunity to size up the potential of the new foilers designed to maintain a high average speed in the open ocean.

For now though, it's the squalls which are taking up the role of Justice of the Peace in this 48H Azimut. Pinned to the racetrack in the wake of a big cloud, Macif Santé Prévoyance stalled and saw Charal snatch back the lead, with Paprec Arkea also jostling for the top spot by slipping a long way to leeward of the fleet. The top three became the top four and the more the merrier as the saying goes, though that's unlikely to be very amusing for Jérémie Beyou and Franck Cammas (Charal), who have spent the whole day trying to fend off their pursuers in the long downwind section of this 48H Azimut. Indeed, once around Waypoint Azimut 3, they will have to try to control them during a beat of nearly 200 miles back up to Lorient. As we go to press, the black foiler is rounding the virtual mark at the latitude of Arcachon with For The Planet shadowing her every move. Macif Santé Prévoyance and Paprec Arkea are not far behind, the four leaders squeezed within just 5 miles of one another!

Keeping the hoards at bay for 200 miles

It's hard to imagine victory not going to one of these four boats now. This is especially true given that, in line with the Sailing Instructions, the competitors were informed early this afternoon, prior to the passage of Waypoint 3, that Waypoint 4 has been removed... As a result, in a NNW'ly wind set to slowly ease, the fleet will be heading straight back to Lorient from Waypoint 3 with an ETA in Lorient La Base of the early hours of tomorrow morning for the front runners.

Astern, the match is wide open between ten or so boats, which are closing on Waypoint 3 from a variety of routes. Having gone on ahead to the south on starboard tack this morning, La Mie Câline (Boissières-Véniard) and MACSF (Joschke-Gautier) have made up a little of their deficit so it's game on for the chasing pack some twelve hours or so from the finish...

Sea foam and grey matter

Meantime, Lorient La Base has been attracting a big crowd keen to attend this Friday's conferences about Artificial Intelligence applied to offshore routing, the progress of non-fossil fuel sources aboard IMOCAs and foil development. Tapping into the rich seam of contributors from Sailing Valley, a wealth of technical subjects have been brought to light throughout the day. Still warm from this whirring of grey matter, at 18:00 UTC tonight the auditorium within the Cité de la Voile Eric Tabarly will play host to a debate between Romain Troublé, director of Tara and skipper Thomas Coville on the theme: "We all have something from the ocean

within us.” After that, it’ll be important to get to bed early as the first IMOCAs could well appear over the horizon and cross the finish line off the Pointe du Talud from 03:00 UTC tomorrow according to the latest ETAs.



Maxime Mergalet

DÉCLARATIONS

Tanguy Le Turquais (Lazare), in a voice message received at 09:15 UTC

“We arrived at Azimut 2 like a pack of wild boars. It was fantastic powering along at night beneath the stars. We were sailing under J2 and full mainsail at an average of 20 knots. That may seem ridiculous compared with the foilers, but for our little daggerboard boats it was very quick. It was a profitable night. We made up good ground on our mate Benjamin Ferré and on Oliver Heer, who’d sailed well upwind and had overtaken us at Azimut 1. We were the first daggerboard boat around Azimut 2, with Violette (Dorange) and Benjamin hot on our heels. The gameplan now is to favour the south to make Azimut 3 with the aim of hooking onto a little more pressure as we have a large gennaker rather than a spinnaker. The wind shifts are enabling us to do that so we hope to stay in contact with our fellow daggerboard teams. The climb home will be another story but we’re focusing on one section at a time. We’re zooming along, making 17 knots at the moment. We have good weather, even though there are some big squalls making the wind very shifty. It’s not unpleasant though, we’re just trimming the sails. We have some very heavy seas so we’re doing some great surfing. We’re really having a ball!”

Gérald Veniard (La Mie Câline), in a voice message received at 10:00 UTC:

“Between Azimut 1 and Azimut 2, we were on a trajectory fairly close to the direct route, maybe even a bit lower. It’s borne fruit as we’ve had the welcome surprise of crossing tacks with L’Occitane, V&B - MAYENNE, passing in front of Maître CoQ and getting back in contact with the group that had seemed a long way in front of us. Clearly the group luffed up and had to sail a little further. Last night though, shortly after the Azimut 1 mark, we almost smashed into Corum, which had dismasted. She was no longer visible on AIS (Automatic

Identification System). I really wasn't expecting a boat to dismast. There was 20 knots of breeze but it was packing quite a punch at times with gusts up to 30 knots. I was under the cuddy trimming the boat in the surf with no visibility up forward. All of a sudden, I sensed a spotlight shining on me from outside. Just a few boat lengths away, there was a boat at a standstill. I grasped the fact that it might be Corum. I called them up with the VHF but didn't speak for long... I was upset for them, but above all I wanted to warn MACSF, which was coming up behind.

Right now, we're sailing downwind. There are a few rays of sunshine, but it's clouding over again. We'll make Azimut 3 this evening and then we'll have light airs. It's going to be a very long slog up to Lorient."

Charlie Dalin (MACIF Santé Prévoyance), in a voice message received at 12:15 UTC:

"We snatched the lead during the reach as we had good speed and maybe because we had a bit more breeze. It'll be interesting to see what sail configuration the others have on the downwind section. One thing for sure is that we've slowed right down. We got caught in a squall. We were just in the wake of it, making headway along with it. We lost a fair amount of ground at that point and the wind has hacked around at the race zone quite a bit."

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