

What Price Victory? Cheating in a High Risk Sport

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This essay focused on a high risk sporting event—the world’s first nonstop around-the-globe singlehanded yacht race. The efforts of one competitor to win this prestigious but dangerous contest were tracked. His changing perceptions of the event were examined using Gregory Bateson’s notions of “play frames” and “paradigmatic shifts.” (Gregory Bateson. “Play and Paradigm,” in, *Play: Anthropological Perspectives*, Michael A. Salter, editor (West Point, New York: Leisure Press, 1978), pp. 7-16.)

Donald Crowhurst set sail from Teignmouth, England, on October 31, 1968, in an untested ketch-rigged trimaran, the *Teignmouth Electron*. Although a novice solo sailor, Crowhurst’s objective was to win the most difficult contest on the competitive sailing calendar. This was the *Sunday Times* sponsored *Golden Globe*, a solo nonstop circumnavigation of the world.

Crowhurst’s initial task was straight forward—he simply had to outsail his competitors by mastering his equipment and the elements. But, when he became aware of his opponents’ progress and began to question the seaworthiness of his vessel, Donald Crowhurst embarked on a different course. He elected to cheat! This was not a snap decision or an easy one, but once the decision was made it completely changed his perspective and his *modus operandi*. What had been a sporting event became his whole world—his reality—his *raison d’être*. The original objective became an all-consuming obsession—to achieve victory at any cost!

Crowhurst abandoned the race’s west-to-east route and, instead of rounding the Cape of Good Hope, bided his time in the green wastes of the southern Atlantic. There he circled, zigzagged, backtracked and even touched ashore in Argentina. During this time he began to fake his logs, and issue false radio reports that were designed to dupe the Race Committee, potential sponsors and the interested public into believing that he was consistently among the leaders.

Six months after the start Crowhurst rejoined the race. As they sped toward the finish he became aware of the heightened public interest in the contest. He quickly realized that the victor’s logs would be subjected to intense scrutiny by both the Race Committee and the press. Accordingly he decided to capture second place—in a photo finish—and prepared to accept humbly the associated kudos and rewards. However, when his nearest competitor sank and it became obvious that he would win the prize for the fastest elapsed time, he recognized his dilemma and abandoned the contest. He penned thousands of philosophical words justifying his actions before succumbing to despair, remorse, and finally, madness. On July 1, 1969, he stepped off his yacht into the quiet depths of the Sargasso Sea. Crowhurst’s suicide ended the deception—along with his struggle against the elements, his competitors, and with his conscience.