

Girl's Solo Sailing Plans Stir 'Super Child' Debate

by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, August 25, 2009

Thirteen-year-old Laura Dekker wants to become the youngest person to sail solo around the world, and her parents think that's a great idea.

But the Dutch Council for Child Protection is so concerned about the dangers of the marathon voyage it has asked a court to grant it temporary custody of Laura so it can do what her parents refuse to: Halt the trip.

Judges at Utrecht District Court were to announce Friday whether they will scupper Laura's record-breaking plans. In the meantime, the legal battle has ignited a wide-ranging debate even in this traditionally seafaring nation about the role that parents should play in their children's risky adventures.

The Psychology Of The 'Super Child'

The rat race to become a so-called super child — the youngest to accomplish some grueling feat — can be fueled by ambitious parents, laser-focused children with talent, or youngsters with a deep need to please or be praised, psychologists say.

Dutch social workers fear that could be an issue in Laura's case, for she lives with her Dutch father who is divorced from her German mother.

"Laura has divorced parents, and it is very normal for a child of this age to be very loyal to the parent [he or she] is living with," child protection spokesman Richard Bakker told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "How much does she identify herself with her father, who is a good sailor?"

Laura and her father appeared at a court hearing Monday to discuss the council's request, but the mother did not show up, Bakker said.

Zac Sunderland's Story

Zac Sunderland, a 17-year-old Californian, sailed around the world in a 36-foot boat ... and NPR followed his pursuit of the record.

Record-breaking attempts by children can become memorable personal triumphs, but also run the risk of turning to tragedy — with the inevitable recriminations for having allowed it to happen.

In an editorial Tuesday, the Dutch daily *De Volkskrant* warned that the young sailor was unwittingly putting herself in significant danger.

"She simply does not have the experience to anticipate the problems and possible crises that await her," the paper wrote.

Besides the physical hazards, experts also warn that being alone for so long at such a young age could hinder the child's emotional development.

"A 13-year-old girl is in the middle of her development, and you don't do that alone — you need peers and adults," said Micha de Winter, a professor of child psychology at Utrecht University.

Adults can choose to be alone, he added, "but for children, it is not good."

"Particularly, the absence of parents at such a crucial time of the child's development ... the risks are serious," he told AP.

A Child Of The Sea

Laura was born in New Zealand while her parents were on a round-the-world sailing trip and spent the first four years of her life on the ocean. She was not available for comment Tuesday.

Yet speaking recently to a Dutch children's news show, Laura said she had been sailing solo since she was 6, and began dreaming of sailing around the world when she was 10.

"I asked my parents if I could please start now," she said.

"In the beginning, they asked if I was sure I really wanted to do it," she said. "They have sailed around the world, so they know what could happen and that it's not always fun. But I realize that, too. But I really wanted to do it, so my parents said, 'Good, we'll help you.' "

The trip means Laura would have to drop out of high school and teach herself while at sea or in port.

Dutch authorities have to give permission for such a plan, but say such home schooling must be supervised by an adult.

Laura's lawyer, Peter de Lange, said authorities should just let her chase her dream in her 26-foot boat, Guppy.

"There is no legal debate about her [sailing] skills," he told the AP. He said both of her parents tried to discourage Laura before she won them over.

Laura hopes to set sail in September and plans to take two years, resting in ports to avoid bad weather.

'Do Your Own Thing'

Zac Sunderland, a 17-year-old from Thousand Oaks, Calif., grabbed the youngest solo record last month when he completed a 28,000-mile trip on his 36-foot boat in 13 months.

British sailor Mike Perham, who is a few months younger than Sunderland, is expected to snatch that record away when he completes his own round-the-world voyage in the coming days, docking in the southern English city of Portsmouth.

Sunderland thinks adults should trust more in the abilities of teenagers.

"There's so much more potential to what young people can do. Go out there and do your own thing," he told a crowd of well-wishers as he completed his voyage July 16.

Sunderland also said he was humbled by meeting people around the world who live in such poor conditions.

As for physical dangers, the American teen admitted he was tracked by pirates while sailing from Australia to the Cocos Islands, and had to call in Australian authorities to scare off the hijackers.

"I had this boat following me all over the place and circling," Sunderland said.

Grim Memories Of Past Bids

Laura is the latest in a long line of children seeking to put their name in the record books, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

Guinness World Records would not comment specifically on her case, but said it stayed away from many such records.

"[We have] a standard policy that does not sanction, endorse or encourage attempts by minors [people under the age of 16] on records which are dangerous or potentially life-threatening,"

Guinness spokesman Damian Field said.

In 1996, 7-year-old Jessica Dubroff died along with her father and a flight instructor when her plane crashed in Cheyenne, Wyo., as she attempted to become the youngest person to fly coast-to-coast in the United States.

The National Transportation Safety Board concluded the crash occurred because the girl's flight instructor took off in bad weather in a bid to keep up with "media commitments" about the record-breaking flight.

The child-pilot phenomenon ended with her death, as the U.S. Congress quickly passed a bill banning record-setting attempts by unlicensed pilots.

A Nepalese boy, Temba Tsheri, lost five fingers to frostbite in an aborted attempt to climb Everest in 2000. A year later at 16, he became the youngest climber at the time to reach the summit of the world's highest mountain.

In India, where breaking records is a national obsession, a 4-year-old boy, Budhia Singh, became a national celebrity when he attempted to run a 43-mile race in May 2006.

But his coach was later charged with torturing the child after Singh's mother said she discovered scars on her son's body. The coach was shot dead last year before the case reached court.

Winter, the child psychologist, said parents need to step up and warn their children of risks they are taking.

"As adults, you have a very important responsibility to oversee more aspects than just the [child's] dream," he said. "I'm not saying children shouldn't have dreams, but sometimes dreams are just dreams."

- *Annotate – show evidence of close reading (see “article annotation” handout for expectations)*
- Complete the responses

- ✓ Must have a clear thesis statement.
- ✓ Must contain your own reasons.
- ✓ Must be 150 words
- ✓ You will certainly want to outline this letter before you write it.
- ✓ Must have word count.

[illegible]

