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Meet the woman who has sailed non-stop around the world (thrice!)

Chandni Sehgal | April 2, 2018

Racing legend Dee Caffari sets goals as the only female captain at the Volvo Ocean Race 2017-2018



Image: James Blake/Volvo Ocean Race

Have you tried getting on a world-class yacht? It isn't what you would call an easy experience. For me, it involved uncomfortable stretches for my little legs, and intense huffing and puffing, until I not so gracefully crawled off the makeshift stairs and practically fell on to the floor of the not-very-large boat. Now, imagine a crew of 8-10 people, living on this boat for weeks on end, in waters as rough as the Southern Ocean, witnessing temperatures that range from -5°C to +40°C, living off freeze-dried fare and virtually making their own drinking water. All this, while trying to reach their destination before six other teams. The tour through Turn the Tide on Plastic's race yacht (The Volvo Ocean 65), a couple of hours in the water, and in-depth chats with the competing teams reminded us why The Volvo Ocean Race is pegged as the world's premier offshore race—and what makes it such an exceptional test of sailing prowess and human endeavour.

The captain is always right

Perseverance, endurance and fortitude are key factors in the life of a sailor participating in The Volvo Ocean Race. This round-the-world yacht race is held every three years, has about 9-10 legs, and has seen a few fatalities due to harsh sea conditions in its long history. The 13th edition (2017-2018) of the Volvo Ocean Race kicked off in Alicante, Spain in October 2017, and I was lucky enough to meet the teams on their Auckland stopover in March 2018. At the Viaduct Harbour, which became a buzzing race village, I had the pleasure of meeting Dee Caffari, the only woman skipper in this edition, who is also heading the Turn the Tide on Plastic team.

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Ladies first

British sailor Caffari is no stranger to challenges—she is the only woman to have sailed solo around the world in both directions (east about and west about) as well as being the only female to have sailed around the world three times, non-stop. We're living in a day and age where women live as equals amongst men, and there is no greater inspiration than a woman leading a team of five men and five women in her second Volvo Ocean Race around the world—all while representing a great cause.

Ride the wave

In an embarrassing moment at one of the race events, we were watching a slideshow on the deteriorating state of the oceans because of human garbage—and it was a beach in Mumbai that showed up front and centre. It's no surprise then that the Olympic athletes and professional sailors that love the waters are banding together to improve the state of the ocean. Caffari's team, Turn the Tide on Plastic, is on a mission to amplify UN Environment's Clean Seas campaign through the eight months of the race, in partnership with the Mirpuri Foundation and the Ocean Family Foundation. The team has been carrying instruments to test salinity, dissolved CO2 and algae and to collect data for Volvo's sustainability programme—an initiative close to the veteran sailor's heart.

Perhaps, in the environment of #TimesUp and other women empowerment movements, it was the girl power that one couldn't help but feel for when thinking about this team. Or perhaps, it was the real, time-sensitive cause it stands for that gave this team the loudest, largest send-off, as the seven teams took off from Auckland, across the Southern Ocean, to their next leg in Itajai, Brazil. The Volvo Ocean Race draws towards its end in June, and we're still rooting for the girl leading the team with a green cause.

1/5



Image: James Blake/Volvo Ocean Race

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