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Making waves

The Volvo Ocean Race moves ahead, providing lessons in sustainable living, teamwork and gender equality



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Leg four, Melbourne to Hong Kong, day 18. AkzoNobel races through the Philippine islands for the final day to Hong Kong. Photo: Sam Greenfield/Volvo Ocean Race

Imagine being on a 20m-long sailboat crammed with at least 10 other people. Imagine spending 22 days on that boat, crashing through terrifying and treacherous seas in the most remote areas on the planet. You're soaking wet, sleep deprived, eating freeze-dried food with no toilet or shower. Imagine doing that for nine months with a few weeks of rest in between, just to get your name engraved on a single trophy with no prize money.



This is what the Volvo Ocean Race is -- a test of pure strength, agility, determination, and mental resilience riding on an obsession to win.

Starting out as the "Whitbread Round The World Race" in 1973, Volvo assumed sponsorship in 1998, and the relatively enjoyable globe-circling regatta soon turned into one of the longest and most gruelling tests of human endurance and teamwork on the planet.

Racing for 45,000 nautical miles (83,350km) from Spain to the Netherlands (with half of the race in the torrid Southern Ocean), it is a true test on who are the best sailors in the world as teams sail the exact same Volvo Ocean 65 yacht against one another.

Currently in its 13th edition, the fleet are now halfway through the race -- docked in Hong Kong until tomorrow from where they race off to Auckland, New Zealand.

Though year after year the race has been about the skill and sacrifice of the sailors, the 13th edition of the Volvo Ocean Race stands out for some of its new trailblazing changes, like its sustainability programmes and the promotion of female sailors in the racing world.

The clean race

"I've noticed in the ocean there's been more and more pollution," said Sophie Cizek, one of the bowmen from team MAPFRE. Cizek debuted at the Volvo Ocean Race in the 12th edition as part of an all-female crew for team SCA. It was the first time in 12 years that women participated in the Volvo Ocean Race.

"The fourth leg coming up from Australia, and leg two going out of Europe into Cape Town is where I've noticed the most things in the ocean. Plastic bottles, shoes, a lot of fishing debris. I'd say this race I've noticed it the most, and it's not good. But it's nice to be out there first hand then be able to tell other people about it, because it's pretty real."

With sustainability being the new heart of this race, sailors promote the campaign through leading by example and reducing their carbon footprint as much as possible while on board.

"It's quite a simple existence out there," said Cizek smiling. "On board, we make our own water. We try to reduce as much the packaging we use. So for 10 people, the amount of rubbish we end up with is very minimal. It ends up being quite a sustainable way to live on the boat."

In addition, one team named Turn The Tide On Plastic collects meteorological and oceanographic data as they race through remote locations that climate scientists aren't able to access. The crew, led by female skipper Dee Caffari, is backed by the Mirpuri Foundation and the Ocean Family Foundation, promoting UN Environment's Clean Seas: Turn The Tide On Plastic campaign.

All the boats also measure levels of salinity, dissolved carbon dioxide and algae in the sea. And with an on-board reporter on each boat, they can pinpoint a location whenever they find something in the sea.

"Hopefully we can see change," said Cizek.



Sophie Cizek from team MAPFRE in Hong Kong, on Jan 28. Photo: NAKARIN WAHIM

Standing tall

For the first time in history, the Volvo Ocean Race changed its rules to encourage the world's best female sailors to participate in the hope of creating a path for women to compete at the highest level of offshore sailing. Mixed teams are given a numerical advantage of up to 10 sailors, while all-male teams can only have seven sailors.

"There have been women in the race previously. But that was when the race was called Whitbread, and the boats were quite different," said Annie Lush, a trimmer on team Brunel.

Lush, who was also in the last edition's all-female team SCA, suffered a broken back and two broken toes racing in leg three from Cape Town to Melbourne. She spent 10 days inside the yacht with her injuries.

"Since it's become the Volvo Ocean Race, the boats have become technically a lot more difficult and a lot faster. People said this would be too difficult for girls to sail."

But standing tall despite her injuries, Lush is the ultimate proof that women can do just as well as their male counterparts. Doubted by even her coach in the last race, her team proved to the world that women can sail and can win races against men.

"When we got to the podium and won a few races, it was pretty good to put it back to the coach," she smiled.

"It's fantastic to hear from young girls that they watched us last time and it made them realise they can do it," continued Lush. "Now we just have to keep convincing the guys to give us the break. I would love to be part of seeing some younger girls skipping the Volvo Ocean Race boats and in the America's Cup. What we don't want is the same thing that happened last time where there's a 12 year gap where there's no women. So it's really important that it keeps going."

Still in her cast, Lush may have to take it easy for the next leg of the race. "I probably won't be able to do this leg. I'll have to wait. It's probably the sensible thing to do. But I'm not very sensible. That's why I'm doing the Volvo Ocean Race," she said with a laugh.



Annie Lush from team Brunel standing strong despite breaking her back and two toes in December on leg three from Cape Town to Melbourne. Photo: NAKARIN WAHIM

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On board Scallywag for the Around Hong Kong Island Race on Jan 28. Photo: NAKARIN WAHIM



Leg four, Melbourne to Hong Kong, day 14, on board Turn The Tide On Plastic. Photo: Brian Carlin/Volvo Ocean Race

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Six out of seven teams docked in Hong Kong. Photo: NAKARIN WAHIM

