



Wave warriors:

Meet the women tackling the world's toughest sailing race

Words: Yvonne Gordon



Eleven ports, 38,739 nautical miles, extreme temperatures, incredibly challenging weather patterns to negotiate and often horrendous conditions, the Volvo Ocean Race is by any standards one of the toughest races on the planet. Girdling the globe over nine months, the route of the 12th edition of the race started in Alicante, Spain, in October prior to heading to Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Americas and then finishing back in Europe. Yvonne Gordon catches up with the only all-female Team SCA in the event.

Team SCA powering through the water. Below: Yvonne Gordon takes the helm. (Photo: Rick Tomlinson/Team SCA)



“Dog bowls. They eat from dog bowls, because they’re wide and flat at the bottom,” says Marie, who is showing us around the Volvo Ocean racing boat that the all-female sailing crew, Team SCA, used as a training boat. When a racing boat is hurtling along at 20 or 30 knots, usually tilted at an angle and bumping off waves, and you’re at sea for a month, food is precious so you don’t want to spill any. Hence the wide bowls.

It’s October, we’re on the marina in Alicante, Spain and it’s the day before the start of the Volvo Ocean Race. Team SCA, with its all-female sailing team of 11 crew, along with six other boats, are just about to set off on a gruelling 38,739-nautical mile journey around the globe, first stop Cape Town.

They are all racing in one-design – Volvo Ocean 65s. These 65-foot yachts are designed for speed and performance but not for

comfort, in the toughest sailing race – some say the toughest race at all – on the planet.

Because this is a race, weight is important. For that reason, the food they’re eating from the dog bowls is freeze-dried – usually stew or a curry. The kitchen or ‘galley’ on the boat is just a gas burner with a pot above it, to rehydrate and heat the food, and a sink. And the dog bowls. No mod cons here.

This is the 12th edition of the Volvo Ocean Race – formerly the Whitbread Round The World Race. It’s the first time in 12 years that a female team has taken part (the last was Amer Sports Too in 2001/2) and this is only the fifth female team ever.

On the team of 11 women, there are Olympic sailors, record holders and round-the-world solo sailors. Each team also has an



Soakings are just part of the race. (Photo: Corinna Halloran/Team SCA)

onboard reporter, who sends back photos, videos and stories during the race, so people can follow the highs – and lows – day by day. (The male teams have a crew of eight plus reporter).

Facing extremes

The conditions are extreme. During the race, which started on 11 October 2014, the crews face severe temperatures of heat and cold, and extreme weather and wind conditions. They go through the Doldrums, with no wind, and they also face the strong winds of the Roaring Forties and the rollercoaster high winds and waves of the Southern Ocean. They have very little sleep – watches are on a four hours on/four hours off system, and they share bunks.

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When the boat tacks or gybes to change direction, all equipment and crew have to move to the other side of the boat, interrupting sleep.

For up to four weeks at a time, they are at sea, racing non-stop, 24 hours a day. That is weeks without proper meals, a full night's sleep, or a couch to sit on. Weeks without TV, seeing friends, making a call or even reading a newspaper. Weeks sharing a long, narrow space – and bunks – with 11 other people. Weeks without a shower.

And it's not just for the nine months of the race that they put themselves through this. For the 18 months before the race, Team SCA was based in Lanzarote in the Canary

Islands, training and preparing. Their sponsor, the Swedish forestry and personal hygiene company SCA, which makes brands such as Velvet toilet tissue, Plenty kitchen towels, Cushelle, Bodyform and Tena and has 44,000 employees worldwide (including around 40 in Ireland), provided every resource that the team needed to get up to speed for their first race. Including their own gym. Helly Hansen is the team's official clothing and footwear supplier.

Back in July, at 7am on a summer's morning in Lanzarote, the air already starting to heat up for the day, the girls are in the gym pumping weights, with fast music in the background. Santiago, their coach, tells me that the emphasis is on low lifting – during



the Volvo Race, the crews have to move heavy rolled up sails across the boat with each tack or gybe. The girls are working with free-weights, emphasising lower body strength. They are around my build and height (1.67m) but are pumping 42kg, while I just about manage to raise 15kg above my head a few times.

After this, the crew have breakfast together, then it's a full day of on-the-water training, practicing manoeuvres, learning how to get the maximum speed and performance out of both boat and crew. As we sail out into the open sea, I watch the girls go through their paces, grinding the pedestal winches in teams of two to raise the sails up the 100-foot mast. I realise I am in the company of some of the world's top sailors, regardless of their gender.

Quality crew

British sailor Annie Lush has competed at the Olympics and was Women's Match Race Champion three times. Dutch sailor Carolijn Brouwer has competed in three Olympic Games and won the 1998 ISAF World Sailor of the Year. British sailor Dee Caffari is the only woman to have sailed solo around the world in both directions

and the only female to sail around the world three times.

Accomplished solo sailor Sam Davies (British) has done two Vendee Globe races and Abby Ehler, also British, has a previous Volvo Ocean Race and wins in the Fastnet and Middle Sea races under her belt. Libby Greenhalgh (British) is a weather forecaster and meteorologist. Also on the squad are American sailors Sara Hastreiter and Sally Barkow, Swiss sisters Justine and Elodie Mettraux and Australians Liz Wardley, Stacey Jackson and Sophie Ciszek.

They face stiff competition. On the other male teams are Olympic medallists, sailing speed record holders and Volvo Ocean Race veterans. Irish sailor Justin Slattery is sailing on Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing, skippered by double Olympic silver medallist Ian Walker. This is Slattery's fifth race, and he was on the winning ABN Amro team in 2005/6. He also sailed with Walker on board the Irish/Chinese entry Green Dragon in 2008/9, the first of two times the race stopped in Galway.

On board Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing during Cowes Week 2014 in August, Walker told

me how important it was for him to have Slattery on his team. "He's the person I don't want to go to sea without. He's a rock on the boat. He can do anything on the boat from the front to the back of the transom. He's hard as nails," says Walker. "This is our third race together. I've promised him we're going to win this time."

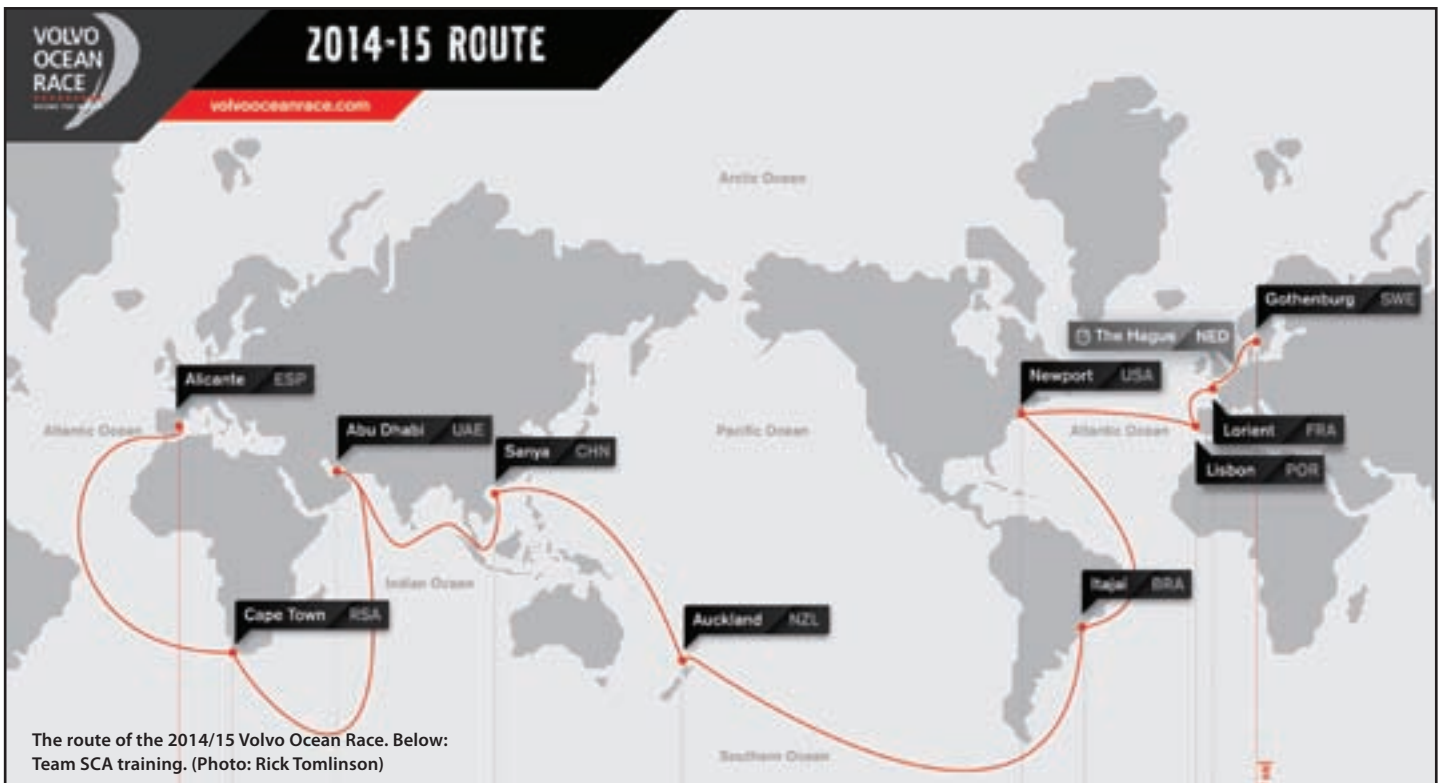
Slattery (40), from Cork, was looking forward to the race. "You always say it's your last race and you'll never do it again. But it's a race that gets under your skin. I would find it hard to be on the sidelines. I am really keen to win again."

His biggest worry isn't weather, it's not being the fastest around the world. "My big fear, from the racing point of view, is that we fall behind for some reason. A technical breakdown. You never know what will happen.

"This is not a lifestyle for everyone," he says. "What we're doing is pretty full on. We will see everything from storms and cyclones. We are going into the Southern Ocean very late in the season. We could face some horrendous conditions. You always keep your wits about you."



Everything under control. (Photo: Yvonne Gordon)



Real and present dangers

The dangers of the race aren't something the crews mention much. In the past, masts have broken, boats have broken, teams have been stranded, whales have been hit, fishing lines entangled. Boats have sunk. Crewmembers have died.

Seeing the crew say goodbye to loved ones on the dock at Alicante on the morning of the race, mums wiping away the tears as their kids give dads goodbye hugs, it's hard not to feel the emotion, especially of those left on shore. Carolijn Brouwer is saying goodbye to her three-year-old son Kyle, as are the two other mums on Team

SCA. Abu Dhabi crew Daryl Wislang is holding his three-month-old baby girl Pearl. "It gets more difficult to leave," says Slattery, referring to his wife and daughter. "It's tough on them. It's a very selfish profession in one way."

If it's any consolation to families, safety concerns were one of the reasons behind a change in the race rules for this edition – where for the first time, all the boats are one design, the same. They are slightly smaller than the Open 70s of the last race and slightly slower, but after the damage to boats in the last race, most of the skippers agreed that they wouldn't be taking

part in the race if it wasn't for the new one-design format.

As we go to press, the seven teams have just said goodbye again and have started into the second leg of the Volvo Race from Cape Town to Abu Dhabi, some 6,125 nautical miles. It will take them until mid-December. After a short break and an in-port race, it's on to Sanya in China, New Zealand, Brazil and finally Gothenburg, Sweden next June for the finish.

On the dock at Alicante, minutes before the boats leave for the start of the race, it's chaos. Families and crewmembers weave



The sailors of Team SCA give themselves fish gut facials. (Photo: Sophie Ciszek/Team SCA)



among film crews and photographers. All along the railings are rows of spectators, lined up to cheer the boats off. The crowds cheer as each boat pulls out of the dock.

The boats stop in 11 countries around the world during the race, for a couple of weeks at a time. It's supposed to be a time of rest, but there's family to catch up on. And supporters – the teams meet fans, pose for photos, sign autographs. They also have commitments with sponsors and media. Plus, there are pro-am races and in-port races, and nights of corporate events.

Shore life

The next stopover, in Abu Dhabi from mid-December to January 3, will coincide

with New Year, and there are big celebrations planned. Last time in Abu Dhabi, Coldplay were the headline act; this year the organisers plan something just as big.

Sara Hastreiter, from Team SCA, says sometimes life on shore gets so crazy, she prefers being out at sea – despite the extreme conditions. “You bond together quite a bit, and it's really quite overwhelming when you come in,” she says. “You appreciate the support and you really want to see everyone, but it's a really strange transition.

“When you're offshore, it's just you on the boat, and you're the only ones that exist to each other. It's also quite strange when we go to the hotel and we're in different

rooms. The first few days you look around and you're like, ‘where are the people I'm around all day?’ You do get a bit of separation anxiety. We've been together for a long time. A lot of the time, some of the girls on the boat say, ‘Let's go back offshore...’”

*Follow the race at
www.volvoceanrace.com*