VOLVO OCEAN RACE

Sailing on the edge: around the world in 9 months

Words: IVO GOETZ

Waves as high as a house, powerful currents and the wind whipping your face, speeding ahead at thirty knots – the equivalent of more than sixty kilometres an hour. You feel like you are in a blender, into which the elements are being thrown as ingredients. The ship shoots up into the air and then falls, crashing, a few metres down into the trough of the waves, before rising back up again. Your stomach is still hanging somewhere in between, your hands are gripping tightly onto the railings. During the night it feels as if you are leaping from a cliff without knowing when to expect the impact. The ship's hull and every piece of technical equipment that is bolted onto it makes noises as it rides through the waves, as if you were in a steel foundry. With every gust the sails crash like thunder and lightning. The movements of the ship in all directions demand the use of every muscle in your body. You're constantly alert to possible hazards like ropes hitting you in the face and trying to keep your balance when the hull is smashed by the next wave. In situations like these, all hands are required on deck.

The toughest job is that of the bowman at the bow; he is also defenceless against nature and has to change the headsails in heavy seas and ensure that nothing gets tangled up. If he weren't secured with a chest harness the sea would have long since swept him overboard. The job of the helmsman is to steer the ship into the waves so it doesn't get damaged and to ensure that the wind is filling the sails. This is a high-precision job, as any little mistake could injure a crew member and cause irreparable damage. The other sailors are responsible for the perfect positioning of the sails and all other manoeuvres. Or they are busy being seasick below deck.

For one day or even one night, with an experienced crew, and especially with the right equipment, this scenario could somehow be endured. But consider what it's like having to endure this full gamut of mental states on a daily basis: the rush of adventure, basic fear, a lack of orientation when the sea washes over the deck and then, above all, relief when you have survived. An amateur who perhaps charters a boat once a year for a week in the summer with friends or family, however, will probably never experience such conditions.

The professional sailors participating in this year's 'Volvo Ocean Race', which, when it was founded in 1973, was still called the 'Whitbread Round the World Race', don't have any choice in the matter; they know what lies ahead and take the risk of their own free will. There will be injuries and material damages. Not all yachts will make it to the finish. On the course around the globe, which covers a distance of approximately 40,000 nautical miles, the teams will sail in the toughest weather conditions in their hi-tech carbon fibre vessels. Like in the South Pacific, on the leg from New Zealand around Cape Horn, the waves can reach twenty metres in height, icebergs drift around and there are also hurricane-force winds to contend with.

Since last November six teams have been sailing the seas with their high-tech racing boats. Each one of these vessels costs twenty million euros. Large companies like PUMA, Telefonica from Spain, Camper for New Zealand, a consortium from Abu Dhabi, one from Sanya in China and Groupama with a French crew have started the race around the world with their million dollar budgets. The 'Volvo Ocean Race' is held every three years and is a huge advertising event communicated through the elemental, archaic medium of seafaring.

The best sailors have been rounded up by the top skippers from the professional sailing arena. Ken Read is the captain on Puma's 'Mar Mostro' (the 'sea monster'), Franck Cammas is leading the Groupama ship, Ian Walker is in charge of the team from Abu Dhabi, Chris Nicholson is skippering Camper for New Zealand,

Iker Martínez is leading the team on the Telefonica and Mike Sanderson is captain for team Sanya. And of course all of them have regatta experience on the high seas or have participated in the VOR several times. So those who survive the nine long legs of the race are genuinely tough sailors; that much is clear. The conditions for the crew are merciless: they sleep in four-hour shifts, in mesh berths, only 40 centimetres wide, amongst the other sweaty sailors. Nourishment consists of tasteless astronaut food and energy bars. Privacy is non-existent. The navigator continuously sits below deck in front of his screen between the sailing bags and ropes and receives the weather forecasts twice a day from the race organisers in Alicante.

The victory of a team at the end of the nine months, which is how long the race around the world takes, is then primarily a victory for the companies who have sponsored their team. Puma, for example, is marketing its sportswear collections to coincide with the sailing event and the event's sponsoring partner BERG Propulsion is promoting its propellers.

In the ports of each leg the sponsors and clients of the consortia meet up at sophisticated marinas, observe the in-port races of their teams and crank up the PR machinery of the participating companies and yacht harbours.

Since Volvo organises the race and is also owner of the event, we can follow every nautical mile, every broken mast and other incidents that occur during the race in pretty much real time. The new marketing-oriented regulations of the race also specify that the preparation of multimedia material from on board the ships will be provided by a media guy via Twitter, blogs and other media.

The ships are completely wired up and equipped with up to five cameras. Every crashing wave that jolts the boat and every gruelling lull are documented. Not quite without gaps, as in this 2011/2012 version of the VOR a 'stealth zone' to the east of Africa has been set up. The ships sailed into it during the second leg from Cape Town to Abu Dhabi and promptly disappeared off all radars, Twitter streams and live cams. The increasingly unscrupulous pirates, who have been operating in this area for many years, were the reason. Nobody was allowed to know where the expensive super racers and their crews were sailing. In the middle of this oceanic grey zone the boats were then loaded onto freighters and brought to Abu Dhabi under armed escort. The pirate-patrolled area could indeed have been taken out of the general route planning of the VOR – but then the sponsors of the team from Abu Dhabi certainly wouldn't have got involved.

Beyond the commercial and marketing-controlled complexity surrounding the 'Volvo Ocean Race' we should not forget, however, that it is still an extremely exciting sailing race around the globe. After all, once the boats have set off, it is of little matter what logo they are sporting or what vibrant colourful designs their sails have; they won't help to protect against the elements anyway. It's all down to the team and the technology. Breakdowns have already been reported on heavy seas during the first leg from Alicante in Spain to Cape Town. The over thirty-metre high carbon fibre mast on the Abu Dhabi vessel cracked, shattered and broke off. The crew had to give up the leg and motor back to southern Spain. After another starting attempt they were shipped directly to Cape Town by freighter with a new mast. Essential points for this leg of the race were forfeited. The Chinese Sanya team didn't get off to a very good start either. After a loud crash, a two-metre-long gaping crack suddenly appeared in the bow of the yacht, through which water flooded into the boat; and during a manoeuvre in harsh conditions, bowman Andy Meikeljohn broke his ankle. The Chinese team also had to turn around and were shipped off. And then, right in the middle of the South Atlantic, the mast of the 'Mar Mostro' from Puma broke into three pieces. The sea monster was therefore not able to sail normally into the destination harbour of the first leg in Cape Town.

Although the boats are designed for these extreme conditions, they are also built to the limits, so breakages will occur. This is of course extremely dangerous on the high seas, but in order to be able to sail maximum speeds of up to forty knots – which is more than seventy kilometres per hour with the yachts measuring 21 metres in length – these VO70 class boats of the third generation have been optimised in their design in terms of speed and weight. And since even stronger materials are being used this year for the sails, they can withstand even harder sailing. The sails are more stable but thereby have less give than before and, in combination with the extremely stiff hull and rig made from carbon fibres, the force of the metre-high waves and the strong gusts of wind hit the whole ship with even more force. The materials and fittings have to withstand higher pressure; overall, the ship yields less and is more torsion-resistant in intermediate conditions but also more susceptible to breakages.

The boats were actually supposed to be made safer with the new regulations for their construction. Budgets were limited to prevent a competitive race for speed that could turn out to be dangerous. Demands were made for more solidity in the overall construction. We will have to wait until July to see how the material will withstand the forthcoming stages and whether there will be any more breakdowns, and then hopefully all ships will arrive at the destination harbour of Galway in Ireland for the thrilling finish.

At the time of going to press, the sixth leg of the race was commencing from Itajai in Brazil to Miami. Severe tropical winds and storms are forecast. After scoring points in the overall ranking, the Spanish Telefonica team is leading the way. The longest and hardest stage from Auckland to Itajai, around Cape Horn, was won by the PUMA Ocean Racing team, ahead of Telefonica and Groupama. On their way through the stormy South Pacific the Sanya and Abu Dhabi teams were forced to give up early due to serious damage and the Groupama team, which was leading the way shortly before the finish, had to contend with a broken mast just off the coast of Uruguay. Despite a delay following an emergency repair, Groupama still managed to come in third and secure crucial points. New Zealand's Camper team was fourth and last to arrive in Itajai.

Any sailors out there wanting to move up one level from the 'Volvo Ocean Race' team challenge can look into participating in what is perhaps the toughest round-the-world regatta, the Vendée Globe, in October 2012. The circumnavigation race is for solo sailors, and those who go ashore for repairs or receive assistance are automatically disqualified. The fastest sailors need almost three months for this demanding tour.

All information, photos, videos etc.:
www.volvooceanrace.com

THE BOAT CATEGORY OF THE VO70 THIRD GENERATION:
Length: 21.5 m *Width:* up to 5.7 m *Depth:* maximum 4.5 m *Total weight:* up to 14.5 t *Keel weight:* 7.4 t
Mast height: approx. 30 m *Sails:* Large sail 175 m²; Genua 200 m²; Gennaker up to 500m²;
Crew: 10 men plus one media man *Shipbuilders:* Farr Yacht Design for team Abu Dhabi and team Sanya, Marcelino Botín for Camper and Juan Kouyoumdjian for Groupama, Puma and Telefónica.