FOR DEE CAFFARI, SKIPPERING A VOLVO TEAM IS THE CULMINATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY CAREER. SO WHY DOESN’T SHE FEEL SHE’S MADE IT YET? BY HELEN FRETTER

Dee Caffari puts most of us to shame. She turned up in the cliquey world of offshore racing in her mid-twenties without a reputation built on years of Figaro or Mini Transat racing, no childhood spent dinghy sailing, no private backer, no technical advantage. No leg-up at all, in fact. And yet she is currently the only skipper in the Volvo Ocean Race who has also completed a Vendée Globe. She has achieved so much.

Dee is a big believer that anybody can do the same. That can be a little confronting, leaving those of us who haven’t realised such dreams feeling a bit like a failure. For the pros who spent a lifetime racing off Brittany or the IJsselmeer it must be disconcerting to have someone who did a fast-track Yachtmaster course line up next to you on the skipper’s rostrum.

Perhaps because of that the armchair critics have not always been kind. Some questioned her lack of podium results, but in offshore racing a huge achievement lies in getting to the start – and an even greater one in getting to the finish. And that is what Caffari does – she gets around (the Volvo Ocean Race is her sixth lap of the planet).

Actually, looking back at her 2008 Vendée Globe what stands out is how she finished just five hours after Brian Thompson (who, with a Jules Verne title, nobody could accuse of not being performance driven).

Currently she is skippering Turn the Tide on Plastic. It is the second time she has led a crew around the world, and it is, in many ways, the perfect job for Caffari. It is also not a role many others would have taken on. This is a woman who set off on her solo round the world record attempt in 2005, against the prevailing winds and currents, having never actually sailed single-handed before. Caffari is not easily daunted.

How did she work her way from being a newbie Yachtmaster to having one of the most complete and accomplished CVs of any offshore sailor?

“I’m stubborn and bloody-minded, and wasn’t going to take no for an answer,” she muses. “It’s about building connections and networks, and taking opportunities as they arise, and I’ve been very fortunate to be in the right place to do that. I’ve also had to be a bit more resilient than most.”

“She makes smart decisions, and she’s prepared to put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into making it happen,” observes Brian Thompson, who also raced with Caffari in the 2009 Transat Jacques Vabre, and now navigates on Turn the Tide on Plastic. “She’s not afraid to have a big goal and work really hard to get to it.”

She may have come into the sport late, but her first job gave her a rich seam of connections. Starting out at Mike Golding Ocean Racing as a nippie on his corporate sailing programme, she joined a team that included Graham ‘Gringo’ Tourell, now boat captain for Dongfeng, Jonny Malbon, as well as Golding himself. For a rookie it was the perfect teaching ground.

Allie Smith, who recruited Caffari straight from her UKSA Yachtmaster course, recalls: “Every step of the way she learnt from the best. So she learnt how to sail a Challenge 67 yacht from Mike [Golding]. And then when she got her Open 60, who did she turn to to tune the boat up and learn from? Mike again.”

Dee’s approach was to learn, and work, and then learn some more. “Dee would always ask questions,” says Smith. “Why are you doing that? Why are you doing it that way?”

Golding recalls: “When she was made skipper of the 67 she literally spent three days just parking the boat in Ocean Village, going into all the horrible difficult spaces.”

“Wherever she was given a task, with each successive job, she was thrown straight into...”
It was also timely for Caffari, who told me in Alicante how before she threw herself—unsuccessfully—at other teams she had told her own: “I used to be able to get her into teams pretty easily,” recalls Golding. “I think she was quite highly strung then. Not intentionally, but neither was I going to let things go by just because she was a gift.”

**Emotions run high**
When Caffari later announced she was going to skipper a team in the Global Challenge (the pay-to-sail, westbound round the world race sailed by crews of 18 amateur sailors with a professional skipper), Golding was concerned that Caffari was too sensitive. “My fear was that Challenge crew can wither you—they’re very intelligent people who’ve made money and time to do the race, they’re used to being the boss, and they can cut you to ribbons.”

“So I said, ‘I fear you’re going to have to harden up.’ And she obviously did, because she had to.”

When she skippered Brunel, she reflected on issues she had experienced. “When I went to skipper Brunel I complained of rudder issues. Turn the Tide has run some of their competitors. For much of the first Lisbon to Alicante leg they were neck and neck with Brunel—Turn the Tide skipper captain Liz Wardley forthrightly told me she felt it was patronising, and suggested that Turn the Tide’s performance out of the blocks had rattled some of the Volvo stalwarts.”

**YOU END UP BEING QUITE ISOLATED. IT’S LONELY AT THE TOP**

The team continued improving, on the final approach into Auckland Turn the Tide on Plastic was in front. “They still were until the final 20 miles, when Magpie and Xinhai relentlessly hunted them down the North Island’s coast. Turn the Tide eventually finished 5th and even Dee seemed lost for words.”

On the northward Atlantic leg Turn the Tide sailed -fauxtiously, in front of the half of the pack for the entire leg and was only isolated a couple of days in pole position. Two days away from the finish they again seemed set for a podium finish, but it would be a three-way fight.

An onboard video shows Caffari explaining the situation on deck; she’s met with nervous silence. “Come on, yes Dee” she rallies them. Clearly the crew wanted to believe the podium is still in grasp, but had denied it too many times. They were denied it again; as the light winds and fog of Newport reveal Turn the Tide in 5th back in sixth.

She commented in a post-leg interview. “Yet again I’m not very good at it,” she told me before the start in Alicante. “I get stressed by it. I don’t want to get it wrong.”

She talks about her crew with more of a sense of responsibility than the other Volvo skippers, part mother hen, part enthusiastic school sports coach. Her management style is based on nurturing strengths. “I’m not very much a dictator,” she observes. “I don’t tell them all what to do. I go OK, this area is yours. Are you OK?”

**Rallying the troops is something Caffari is good at, and she’s often praised for her people management skills—**

“Even now, when you’re in an environment where you have Olympians or America’s Cup sailors, you’re like ‘Oh, what have I done?’ And actually, there’s a bit of a reality check, that in fact I’ve done quite a lot.”

But as the race draws to a close, Caffari is taking stock. “I think if I was honest with this campaign, there isn’t another skipper that could do what I’ve done with the team I’ve had and the timescale and budget I’ve got.”

“Do you want to show how close the racing’s been with a result as well. I do believe what we’re doing is right, but my concern is if you look at the scoreboard we look no different to Team SCA yet we’re racing and how this campaign is going is so much better.”

**Do you need any help?”**

“Turn the Tide and I think we’re probably the one team where every other team would be happy if we got that result.”

She’s right—after the Auckland and Newport finishes, rival skippers like Charles Caudalier commented on how crucial the result had been for Turn the Tide. It says a lot about the respect and goodwill Dee and her team have earned. With three legs to go, Caffari remained as determined as ever. “I don’t want the sympathy vote, I want to justify it on the water.”

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