

TOP OF HER GAME

FOR DEE CAFFARI, SKIPPING 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 cliquy 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. But 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.



Caffari's family had a motorboat, but she did not grow up sailing

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 nipper 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."

"Whenever she was given a task, with each successive job, she was thrown straight into



'I'M STUBBORN AND WON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER'

Caffari and Turn the Tide on Plastic were late entries in the 2017/18 Volvo Ocean Race



James Blake/Volvo Ocean Race

it in the deep end. And each time she rose to the challenge and did it really well.”

But going straight from the classroom to a top-level campaign meant she had to hold her own.

“I used to be able to get her into tears 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 girl.”

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 are 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 *Imagine it. Done* in the 2004 Global Challenge Caffari not only survived some challenging crew politics, but gained respect for how she handled a potentially life-threatening situation on board when one of her crew developed severe internal injuries.

Golding said he noticed a huge change in her on her return. “I think that emotional side had gone for her, she had a confidence that wasn’t there prior to the Challenge.”

But the ebullient Caffari we are used to wasn’t always so positive. After the Challenge, she rolled straight into a solo west-about round the world record, an experience she describes as ‘an emotional rollercoaster’. So, in preparation for the Vendée Globe two years later she worked with a sports psychologist.

“That was probably the biggest growth in my sailing I ever had, learning how to manage me,” she says.

“I used to easily say what I didn’t want to happen: I didn’t want to let people down, I didn’t want to come last. But I would struggle to say what I did want to happen.

“I learnt that I had to practice positive language, and completely turn that on its head.

“Even now, my default setting when I’m stressed is I can feel myself going back to the negative. I have to have a word with myself and change my language again. And as a result I’m much more positive.”

Timing is everything

That positivity has been thoroughly tested in the Volvo Ocean Race. The *Turn the Tide on Plastic* team was a late entry put together by Volvo, the UN Clean Seas campaign and Minipuri Foundation. It has been stunningly timely – as the race ramped up the plastic oceans issue became a hot topic globally, giving Caffari the kind of platform that commercially backed teams could only dream of.

It was also timely for Caffari, who told me in Alicante how before *Tide* came her way she had been throwing herself – unsuccessfully – at other teams trying to get a trial for this edition of the race.

The opportunity to skipper a campaign was huge, but daunting. The project came with unique challenges – stipulations that six crew should be under-30, at least one Portuguese. The budget and timeframe meant there was little warm up, sailors needed to be fit and ready to go, but many of the youngsters had almost zero ocean racing experience before they set off.

Performance analysis was rudimentary compared to some teams. In Cape Town we chatted about how teams had been analysing the onboard footage during the Atlantic leg and she was intrigued that some had allocated resources purely to that. “We’re still going ‘‘Oh, that’s a nice picture!’ We are just so not on that level,” she joked.

So it has been a surprise to many just how close *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* – so when *Brunel* complained of rudder issues *Turn the Tide* watch captain Liz Wardley forthrightly told me she felt it was patronising, and suggested that *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 clung to the top three until the final 20 miles, when *Mapfre* and *Dongfeng* 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 near-faultlessly, in the front half of the pack for the entire leg and enjoying several 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 been denied it too many times. They were denied it again, as the light winds and fog of Newport rolled *Turn the Tide* back to sixth.

She commented in a post-leg interview. “Yet again I’m stood here saying for the fourth leg running, ‘They didn’t get the result they deserve’. So I’m kind of stuck as a skipper on how to pick them up and get going for the next leg, but that’s what I’ve got to do.”

Rallying the troops is something Caffari is good at, and she’s often praised for her people management skills – even if at the beginning of the race she wasn’t entirely confident in her, abilities. “I [do enjoy it] although I think 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? Do you need any help?”

So good at empowering her team is Caffari, that she revealed in Cape Town she felt almost redundant at times. “I kind of feel like I’m second to [the navigator] and then I go on deck and Martin [Strømberg] is running his watch and Liz is running her watch and I don’t really fit in there, so you end up being quite isolated. And as a leader you generally are. It’s lonely at the top.”

Thompson explained they later restructured so Caffari also ran a watch, a move Caffari said she hoped “might restore my confidence a bit!”

Despite the billboards plastered around Volvo Race villages with her name and face on, Caffari is instinctively modest. She admits that for much of her racing career she compared herself to sailors with entirely different backgrounds. “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 towards 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.

“But I 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 how we’re racing and how this campaign is going is so much better.

“The team deserve it, 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 Caudrelier commented on how cruel 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.”

Caffari has earned great respect from crew and fellow Volvo skippers



James Blake/Volvo Ocean Race

DEE’S TIME LINE...

1999
Caffari was working as a PE teacher

2000
Qualifies as an RYA Yachtmaster and begins working in the marine industry



2004
Just four years later she skipper *Imagine it. Done* in the 2004 Global Challenge

2005-06
Caffari becomes the first woman to sail solo, non-stop around the world westabout



2008-09
Just eight years after changing career, she races the IMOCA 60 *Aviva* in the Vendée Globe



2011
Caffari and Anna Corbella finish the Barcelona World Race in 6th

2014-15
Sails with *Team SCA* in the Volvo Ocean Race



2017-18
Skipper Volvo Ocean Race entry *Turn the Tide on Plastic*