



# SKIP NOVAK

THE VOLVO OCEAN RACE'S SYSTEM TO ENCOURAGE FEMALE CREW IS CONFUSING. THERE IS ONLY ONE GOOD SOLUTION, SAYS SKIP

**A**nd they're off! Another Volvo Ocean Race is underway – the toughest fully crewed race around the world. And how it has evolved over the years with all sorts of permutations of boats (some weird and wonderful during the Whitbread days) at last culminating in the current one-design.

The idea of a circumnavigation race also has seen major changes through the event's history. Most were marketing-led course detours away from that original simple string pulled tight around Cape Agulhas, Cape Leeuwin and Cape Horn – with the necessary hockle in the block of a stop in Auckland. You can't have a Volvo Ocean Race without that.

The race has had to evolve in various ways to survive, no doubt about it. Yacht racing's impresario Mark Turner, the briefly crowned CEO who resigned almost on the eve of this year's start (having taken over from Knut Frostad, who is credited with saving the event after some tricky moments), breathed yet more life and dynamism into the race, but possibly went too far in his plans for a two-year

cycle for foiling monohulls offshore along with foiling cats for the inshore series. At the time of writing this column, it is not clear what the future holds for the VOR.

Nevertheless, this current edition, sailed in the same boats as it was three years ago,

is noteworthy for its attempts to increase female participation. If you happen to remember my column from June 2015 which caused quite a storm of controversy – and not a few letters to the editor of this magazine – I suggested that a succession of all female crews over the years dating back to Tracy Edwards in *Maiden* in the 1989 Whitbread were, for various reasons, rarely capable of getting past a last place.

I suggested an elegant solution: 50 per cent female and 50 per cent male. It is, I believe, the only way to solve the ongoing problem of gender inequality and increase female participation.

A case has been made that there is a dearth of female sailors of the calibre required for the Volvo Ocean Race.

That argument is specious, judging by the amount of female applicants – that number could have easily supported a 50:50 split.

Then, you have the former Volvo Ocean Race-winning skipper Paul Cayard arguing why, in the world's premier offshore event, there should be any compromises at all with regards crew selection? Good point. But today gender equality often trumps expediency. And we cannot imagine a separate or equivalent race for female sailors only. This is not tennis or golf.

So now we have a confusing system (for everyone, not least the general public) verging on an algorithm for crew combinations to 'even it all out.' To wit, you can have seven men, or seven men and one or two women; or seven women and one or two men; or five men and five women (my suggestion!); or 11 women. This minor absurdity masks the fact that men, like women, come in a variety of shapes, sizes, strengths and weaknesses. It is a contrived invention at best.

## Are we making progress?

Looking at the current crew lists it appears that, save for Dee Caffari's *Turn the Tide on Plastic* with a 50:50 split, all the other campaigns have gone with the two female, seven male option. Of course, this can change leg by leg, but it is an indication that an all-male crew is a non-starter for the obvious reasons that there just isn't enough power seven-up (and maybe more to the point, it's not politically correct). Even with seven superheroes, it would be a brave campaign indeed not to have some female participation.

Thanks to *Turn the Tide on Plastic* bumping up the numbers, this means that roughly 35 per cent of the Volvo crew list is female. This is not as good as the percentage of females in the British parliament, but generally more favourable than the boardroom of a basket of global companies. Sweden, by the way, home of the Volvo Ocean Race, is a frontrunner in this regard.

So are we making progress if gender equality is what we are after in the VOR? Ultimately, the only way to solve this question is to simplify the equation to 50:50. It is the only logical option.

We should all wish Dee Caffari and *Turn the Tide on Plastic* the best of luck with getting a good result to drive that point home. ■

## 'ROUGHLY 35% OF THE VOLVO RACE CREW ARE WOMEN'