



# SKIP NOVAK

THERE IS LITTLE COMPARISON BETWEEN THE WHITBREAD RACE OF OLD AND THE VOLVO OCEAN RACE OF TODAY. THESE DAYS IT'S FOR EXPERTS ONLY

**T**he last time I did the Whitbread Round the World Race was decades ago, but the Volvo Ocean Race organisers have never failed to resurrect me as a race 'legend' (their word, not mine!) to enhance subsequent editions.

This has been one of the strengths of the Volvo Ocean Race – they have never forgotten the contribution made by the pioneers and adventurers who set the scene for the magnificent spectacle we see today. The Legends Regatta in Alicante in 2011 was an example, followed by an invitation to the veteran yachts (some now almost museum pieces) to compete in a special race from Gothenburg to The Hague to coincide with the Volvo Race finish.

I suppose there is something special about a circumnavigation of the planet under sail that keeps the history alive and this goes right back to Magellan and Drake, through Slocum, Chichester, Knox-Johnston and all those who followed, whether single-handed or fully crewed, racing or cruising.

During the Whitbread era, the race course was a logical route round the world which, in order to survive into the

future (not least in times of economic uncertainties) evolved into a marketing campaign of 'taking flyers' and 'overstanding laylines'

## 'UPWIND, I FELT MY AGE - AND MY KNEES!'

to accommodate entries from somewhat non-traditional locations. This has provided controversy and soul-searching for the organisers and competitors alike.

I am told there is now a strong move, even among the current Volvo commercialistas, to get the race back to approximating the original route and with fewer stopovers. This might be possible as even more onboard media technology allows the race to become an ever more 'virtual' experience, thereby decreasing the leverage of far-flung, off-the-traderoute ports. It will be interesting to see how the recent change of guard (Mark Turner being replaced as CEO by Richard Brisius) consider these options in defining the way forward, whether the next edition is run in 2019 or 2020.

In the 1990s I was often asked to write articles for the pre-race brochures and official race books comparing what

it was like back then to now. This was interesting during that period of transition, but 27 years later the comparisons are arguably irrelevant. Stories of navigating round the world and finding Cape Horn with a sextant and time piece are by and large, I'm afraid, generationally lost. And comparing the yachts – well, there is no useful comparison other than to say the Volvo boats are, in my view, easier to sail as the gear is infinitely lighter and more reliable thanks to modern materials coupled with innovative sail control systems aplenty. The level of risk, though, due to the speeds and the amount of green water routinely coming aboard the Volvo 65s is not to be taken lightly. It is now a very dangerous game, only for expert crews.

During the Cape Town stopover of the last two events, in 2011 and in 2014, I was asked to call the inshore race and the start from hospitality vessels for Volvo guests and the media. Admittedly, I knew very few of the competitors and had to wing my way through the narrative a bit with smoke and mirrors.

For this Volvo Race I was convinced the connection had finally faded, but before the start they invited me as a VIP to participate at one of the stopovers "of my choice." I thought to myself: "Here's a lark!" But where to go?

I figured there were 'Legends' a plenty in Auckland so I put my hand up for China, as I had never been there. Alas, they realised I still lived in Cape Town so no air ticket was forthcoming! I was invited aboard *Turning the Tide on Plastic* for the inshore race in Cape Town, and it was an eye-opener. Upwind on the chine at 25 degrees of heel, I felt my age – and my knees.

This was a unique experience for me. I was told I was not allowed to do anything on board, nor tell anyone else to do anything. That was awkward at first!

Dee Caffari and her crack young crew (including four Olympians, no less) were relaxed and handled the boat with aplomb, including making two out of three 'bang on' gennaker sets at the top mark.

And you know what? The mix of 50:50 guys and girls looked and felt right (organisers take note).

Alas, we came in 5th place. When I watched the fleet after the Sunday restart, beating along the coast into a cold southerly, I momentarily imagined myself out there with them. You never quite lose that round the world race feeling. ■