



Skip Novak

Taking a deep breath and donning a hard hat, Skip launches into the Volvo gender question: why do all-female crews do so badly?

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ever one to avoid a topic that will inevitably put people's noses out of joint, I'm going to comment on *Team SCA's* less than impressive performance in the Volvo Ocean Race.

We know that the organisers had decided to grant the female team three extra crew, which I would assume was a concession to strength and endurance issues. So this is a clear acknowledgement of a disparity between the genders.

Then we know for a fact that *Team SCA's* boat was the first off the blocks and the team has had the most

time on the water training. We must also assume that this team has the best female sailors money can buy. Indeed, their inshore sailing skills are beyond question, as seen from stellar results in the in-port races.

On the Volvo PR material it is stated: 'The entry of the all-female team is no coincidence given that the new boat design puts less of a premium on physical strength and means an all-female team can be just as competitive as any other professional team.'

If all three of these facts hold water, then there is no harm in asking the question: what is happening? If a level playing field was created by the organisers and no expense spared in the crew selection and the training, I wonder if there is more at play here.

Dare I offer the conclusion that women are inferior to men offshore? How can this be when we have seen the likes of Ellen MacArthur and Florence Arthaud?, you say. Indeed there have been many female single-handers, mainly French and British, that have impressed.

Is single-handing as intense as a fully crewed race where there is no respite from your shipmates? It is no secret that peer pressure on board can be dramatic. It

must also be accepted that going 100 per cent all the time while single-handing is impossible and throttling back at times to recoup is all part of that equation.

Catching your breath is not the case in today's Volvo. If you are female and feeling indignant by this stage, note that there is not one female crewmember in any of the other entries. Does that tell you something?

Well, carrying on in this discussion will only land me in hotter water than I am already in for bringing up the subject in the first place. So I will let the reader ponder these things while they cool down.

In the meantime, I will offer a solution that can possibly eliminate any further discussion, and one that I am sure many people have contemplated and even suggested to the organisers if they haven't thought of it themselves. Why not have crews comprising 50 per cent guys and 50 per cent girls, which is a good ratio when you consider world population demographics and a lot else, including procreation for that matter. It takes two to tango, right?

This simple and elegant solution will once and for all quench these awkward comparisons between the genders in fully crewed offshore racing. It's a 'we're all in it together' concept. There is another benefit here in that having more female sailors involved by a simple rule requirement will bring more female sailors up to speed in offshore sailing. And, from the human point of view, imagine the great stories that would unfold both on and off the water!

It has been a long passage for women making their mark offshore. I am thinking of Clare Francis skippering *ADC Accutrac* in the 1977/78 Whitbread, Tracy Edwards's ground-breaking all-female crew on *Maiden* in the Whitbread of 1989/90, but then we see the all-female team of *Heineken* in 1993/94 coming 9th out of a ten-boat fleet, *EF Education* in 1997/98 last and in 2001/02 *Amer Sports Too* also last.

Might persisting in the all-female crew concept for this pre-eminent event be a step backwards?

If you see me on the dock at the finish I will be the one wearing a hard hat and body armour.

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