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The heritage and the history of the Volvo Ocean Race, formerly The Whitbread Round The World Race

It is unlikely that Colonel Bill Whitbread, of the brewing family and Admiral Otto Steiner, of the Royal Naval Sailing Association, ever envisaged the magnitude of the event they conceived 'over a pint' of beer nearly 30 years ago.

Although a 'round the world yacht race' had been considered throughout the last century, it needed the financial support and organisational expertise which Whitbread and the RNSA were able to put together. The first Whitbread Round the World Race, which got underway in September 1973, featured yachts which were little different from those cruising around the Mediterranean at that time. Since then, the ocean racing yacht has developed into a high-tech state-of-the-art speed machine, with little comfort spared for the crew but with leading-edge technology.

This new technology has also completely altered the concept of ocean racing. In the past, skippers and navigators had little idea of where their rivals might be as they ploughed day in day out through the vast oceans. During the first race, communication between the fleet and organisers was based on a weekly position report to a local coast guard, but from 1993-94, satellite equipment enabled the yachts to file their position every six hours. This meant that although boats were not necessarily in sight of each other, rival skippers were able to follow, and track, every move when necessary. In effect, this vast ocean race, where yachts can race for days on end for thousands of miles and not once see another competitor, has become, in this sense, more like a fiercely fought dinghy race performed on any local stretch of water.

A Corinthian Adventure 1973-74

When the first gun was fired on September 8 1973, 17 boats of sizes ranging from 80' to 32' from seven countries crossed the start line just east of Portsmouth Harbour, but only 14 were to complete the circumnavigation. Sir Alec Rose, who, five years previously, has sailed round the world, single-handed, stopping only twice, fired the first ever starting gun. Only four legs were staged - Portsmouth to Cape Town; Cape Town to Sydney; Sydney to Rio de Janeiro and from Rio the fleet raced back to Portsmouth.

The whole race lasted 144 days with the 77' Ketch, Great Britain II, skippered by Chay Blyth and crewed by paratroopers, first to finish on 9 April 1974. The race was won on handicap by the smaller 65' Mexican entry, Sayula II, skippered by Ramon Carlin but with a multi-national crew, which took 152 days to complete the course (133 days on corrected time).

This first race was not without its tragedies. In the Southern Ocean, where no man had raced yachts before, three yachtsmen were lost. One, Paul Waterhouse, was a British Army Corporal competing on the

Italian Swan 55. On November 19 1973, when the yacht broached during a strong gale in the Roaring Forties, Waterhouse was flung over the side, and in spite of a four-hour search, he was never found. The second fatality occurred just a few days later when Dominique Guillet, on the French entry, 33 Export, went missing during a sail change in heavy weather. Although he had been wearing a harness, he too, was never found. In January 1974, while in the Tasman Sea, Bernie Hosking on Great Britain II, fell overboard during a 'Southerly Buster'. Again, in spite of an intensive search, his body was never recovered.

Safety First 1977-78

Tragedies apart, the race was a huge success, and one of the main lessons learnt for the next race was that survival in these most exacting conditions were just as important as speed. Whitbread renewed their sponsorship and it was decided to repeat the event every four years. The next race ran from August 1977 to March 1978 and again staged four legs, only this time the port of Auckland was used instead of Sydney.

Once again, Portsmouth hosted the start and finish. 15 yachts from six countries embarked on the circumnavigation and all completed the course. Great Britain II, this time skippered by Rob James with 16 fare paying crew, once again took line honours at the finish, after 134 days, but victory on handicap went to a Dutchman, Cornelis van Rietschoten, on the 65' ketch Flyer, which took 136 days to complete the voyage but 119 days on corrected time. This race was notable for the fact that Clare Francis became the first woman to skipper a Whitbread entry, ADC Accutrac.

Flyer's Encore 1981-82

Cornelis van Rietschoten returned on a new Flyer, which was 76' in length, with the specific aim to win the race on both elapsed and corrected time. This he achieved, crossing the finish line 119 days after the fleet had set out from Portsmouth in August 1981. Four legs were once again staged but instead of Rio de Janeiro, the third port of call was Mar de Plata, in Argentina.

Twenty-nine yachts from 20 countries competed in the 1981-82 event, but nine failed to complete the course. With Flyer dominating the event, van Rietschoten became a national hero and members of the Dutch Royal Family greeted the whole crew when they returned to Holland. The Dutchman's intense preparation for this and the previous race, both in the building of the yachts and in the shore work during stopovers, was widely acclaimed, praised and copied in the years ahead. His determination to succeed was so great that not even a heart attack during the second leg could deter his ambition.

Prior to the start it was thought that one of the most serious challengers to Flyer would be Peter Blake's 68' Ceramco New Zealand. Although Ceramco won two of the four legs, including the final leg, Blake's challenge was scuppered shortly after it began when he was dismasted on the first leg. With some inspired seamanship, Ceramco was able to limp into Cape Town only 11 days behind Flyer, but the New Zealand entry was never able to make up for lost time. Blake's day was yet to come.

Strength of Quality 1985-86

A smaller entry of 15 yachts from 10 countries entered the fourth Whitbread, but lack of quantity was more than made up for in strength of quality with all the yachts, including the new 80' maxis, being specifically built for this or an earlier race. Once again four legs were staged but Mar del Plata was replaced by Punta del Este in Uruguay. This was also the last time for some years that a South African port, Cape Town, was used, although it was reinstated as a stopover port in the 1997-98 race.

Of the 15 yachts, seven were maxis but it was to be one of the smallest boats in the race, the 58' French sloop, L'Esprit d'Equipe, skippered by Lionel Pean, which won the Race on handicap, crossing the line on corrected time 111 days after leaving Portsmouth (132 days elapsed time). Pierre Fehlmann, on the 80' maxi, UBS Switzerland, proved to be the fastest boat round on elapsed time, finishing 117 days after the start. This race was to be the last time the Whitbread Trophy was awarded on corrected time.

'Big Red' 1989-90

The 1989-90 race will long be remembered as the time when the event came of age in terms of the massive publicity it achieved for the remarkable feat of seamanship shown by New Zealand's Peter Blake, who on the 84' Bruce Farr designed ketch, Steinlager, claimed line honours on every one of the six legs, and for the fact there was the first all-women entry, skippered by Tracy Edwards, on the 58' sloop, Maiden. It was also the first time six legs were staged.

Twenty-three boats from 13 countries crossed the start line at Southampton and, for the first time, the fleet sailed across the Atlantic on the first leg to the South American port of Punta del Este. From there it went down into the Southern Ocean to Fremantle, from Fremantle to Auckland, then back to Punta del Este, up to Fort Lauderdale and, finally back to Southampton.

This race, which saw the first entry from the Soviet Union, Fazisi, also suffered a fatality on the second leg. In the big Southern Ocean seas the 80' British entry, Creighton's Naturally, skippered by John Chittenden, broached and two members of the crew, Anthony Phillips and Bart Van den Dwey were swept overboard. Both were wearing life jackets and equipped with flares and personal radio beacons and both were found and brought back on board. Van den Dwey was successfully resuscitated, but Phillips never regained consciousness. It is believed that he hit his head as he went overboard and was unconscious when he hit the water. He was buried at sea.

Despite the dramas, nothing could detract from Blake's personal triumph in his fifth successive Whitbread and Southampton Water was awash with spectator boats as the Kiwi boat, known as the 'Big Red', crossed the finish line after 128 days.

Rewriting the record books 1993-94

The 1993-94 Whitbread generated more interest than ever before, with a new class of 'box rule' flat out ocean racers being introduced. Maxi yachts were still permitted and raced as a class, with the new W60 yachts also racing as a separate division. The course remained the same as the previous race and was keenly contested for the much-prized Heineken Trophy awarded to the overall winners in each division. Five Maxis and ten of the new Whitbread 60 class crossed the start line (one of the 60s, Odessa did not actually cross the start line until just over one week after the gun). Two days into the race, however, the maxi Fortuna skippered by Britain's Lawrie Smith had to withdraw after suffering a broken mizzenmast.

For Smith and his crew it was a crushing blow but, by the beginning of the second leg, Smith was on board the W60 Intrum Justitia, replacing skipper Roger Nilson who had to retire with a damaged knee. Smith went on to win that second leg and ended the whole race as second overall in the W60 class.

The Whitbread 60 class was won by Yamaha, skippered by Kiwi, Ross Field, but only after a terrific tussle with Tokio, Intrum Justitia and Galicia 93. The 60's provided exhilarating and dramatic racing, with no less than four different yachts winning a leg and the world 24hr monohull distance record being smashed by Intrum Justitia with 428.7 nautical miles to win the coveted Omega Trophy on leg four (Auckland - Punta

del Este). Also among the W60 class was the second all-female boat to compete in a Whitbread - Heineken, skippered by Dawn Riley.

New Zealand Endeavour, skippered by Grant Dalton (NZ), a veteran of the three previous races, won the Maxi class. The 84ft New Zealand Endeavour also proved to be the fastest yacht around the world, finishing in 120 days, five hours, only nine hours ahead of the smaller Whitbread 60, Yamaha. In second position in the maxi class was Pierre Fehlmann's Merit Cup, completing the circumnavigation in 121 days, one hour.

The 1993-94 race is notable for many reasons. Not least for the battle between the Maxis and the new Whitbread 60s; for the professionalism shown by the crews, and for the high tech equipment on board which so altered the face of ocean racing. With the Whitbread 60 being the only class of yacht for the next race and with certain sail restrictions being lifted, there was every expectation that 1997-98 would see even more records broken as the crews drove their boats to ever higher achievements.

The Volvo Trophy 1997-98

The seventh and final race under the Whitbread banner changed the public face of ocean racing forever. The sheer excellence of the on board video footage and the quality and quantity of the daily emails from the crews ensured a huge media interest worldwide. This, in turn, provided entertainment for the millions of sailing fans around the world and a whole new audience was introduced to the thrills of ocean water racing via the Internet.

Aside from the 35 weekly half hour television programmes produced by Trans World International, the race had its own web site, produced by Quokka Sports. On busy days, such as restarts, this web site recorded around 13 million hits, surpassing even the New York Stock Exchange.

For the first time, the fleet was made up of one class only, the Whitbread 60, and a fleet of 10 set off from Southampton on the morning of Sunday 21st September 1997, vying for the Volvo Trophy. A complicated points scoring system replaced elapsed time. Each leg carried more or less points depending on how hard it was deemed to be to win. With nine legs to endure and visiting eight stopovers in six countries in the space of just over eight months, one of the biggest features of the race was the inclusion of many high profile short course sailors. All the smart pre-race betting showed the favourite to be Toshiba, Dennis Conner's entry with Kiwi Chris Dickson at the helm. In the event, however, Dickson jumped ship in Cape Town at the end of the first leg, by which time America's Cup skipper, Paul Cayard, on his first round the world ocean race, had put EF Language's bow in front. Another loss in Cape Town was the demise of 1993-94 W60 winner Ross Field's W60, America's Challenge - scuppered by financial problems.

While the first, and longest, leg had demonstrated the levels of achievement that these high tech yachts and professional crews were able to attain, it was not until a third of the race had gone by that a definite pecking order had been established. By this time, EF Language had won two legs and Swedish Match (Gunnar Krantz) had taken the third. Records, too, had been set. Silk Cut (Lawrie Smith), set the 24 hour world record for a monohull during leg two of 449.1 nautical miles but her challenge for overall glory fell apart on the southern ocean leg five when her mast came down.

As predicted pre-race, these Whitbread 60s provided some thrilling and close racing but, due to the similarities of the class, once a boat managed to break away from the pack, she proved to be hard to catch. In the end, Paul Cayard and the crew of EF Language demonstrated that lack of experience in ocean racing was no handicap in terms of boat driving and crew. By the end of the seventh leg they had opened up a virtually unassailable lead on the points table and interest lay with the battle for second place.

This was won, at the final hurdle, by Merit Cup (Grant Dalton) with Swedish Match (Gunnar Krantz) taking third place.

In all, six of the 10 starters won at least one leg and only 85 points separated the second to sixth W60 on the final points table. The Dutch entry, Brunel Sunergy (Roy Heiner), proved that a little ingenuity never goes amiss and the girls on EF Education (Christine Guillou) bounced back from a broken mast on leg five and showed that they were often the equal of their physically stronger male rivals. The Norwegian entry, Innovation Kvaerner (Knut Frostad) and the semi-privately funded Chessie Racing (George Collins), demonstrated consistency throughout but, without doubt, the 1997-98 Whitbread belonged to Paul Cayard and the crew of EF Language.

The Volvo Ocean Race 2001-2002

Eight teams, including an all female team, were on the Royal Yacht Squadron starting line on September 23 2001 for the 2001-2002 edition of the race. The Whitbread had successfully been transformed into the Volvo Ocean Race and the 32,250-mile race around the world that started from Southampton on the south coast of England finished in style in Kiel Germany. Leg one, the longest leg, took the fleet from Southampton to Cape Town in a long and tiring leg. John Kostecki's well-practised team took the lead from Amer Sports One (Grant Dalton), whilst one of the favoured boats, Assa Abloy, posted a fifth place finish which was enough for Roy Heiner, the skipper, to be replaced by watch captain Neal McDonald.

After Cape Town, the honeymoon was over and the fleet sailed straight out into the worst sort of weather the Southern Ocean can serve up. The first night at sea saw many of the crews stricken badly by seasickness. Illbruck, almost sank as an inspection hatch worked loose and she shipped gallons of water, and Tyco (Kevin Shoebridge), suffered severe rudder failure and had to head to Port Elizabeth on the South African Coast. The boat finally arrived in Sydney by ship. A couple of days of heavy reaching and running followed as the fleet steadily broke first the 400 mile day barrier and pushed further when SEB (Gunnar Krantz) set a new 24-hour monohull record covering 460.4 miles. As the fleet approached the Kerguelen Islands, Keith Kilpatrick, onboard Amer Sports One, was confined to his bunk with what was thought to be a severely blocked intestine. The Royal Australian Air Force came to the rescue with an airdrop of medical supplies as soon as the yacht was within reach. Kilpatrick was later transferred to a waiting fishing boat off the island of Albany. He was never to sail again on Amer Sports One, which in the closing hours of the leg suffered a spectacular broach, pinning the boat on her side for five minutes off the entrance to Sydney Harbour. Dalton was lying injured in his bunk due to an earlier accident and was powerless to help as the boat flailed hopelessly on her side. Illbruck was again the victor, with Neal McDonald at the helm of Assa Abloy posting an even worse result of sixth.

After a rest for the crews and a hectic time for the shore teams preparing the boats again for the rigours of the Southern Ocean, Christmas Day was spent languishing by the sea in Sydney before setting sail again on Boxing Day and taking part in the legendary Sydney to Hobart Race, but with a difference! When the fleet reached Hobart it made a brief, three-hour pit stop, before returning back down the Derwent River and racing on to Auckland, the city of sails. Hours out of Sydney a huge waterspout headed towards the fleet, causing alarm throughout the fleet. Everyone got away unscathed, although just hours after escaping the waterspout, SEB was plagued with rudder failure and returned to Eden on the Australian coast for repairs before cruising straight to Auckland. Lisa McDonald's crew broke their forestay on the way to Hobart and also hit something suspicious, later delaying their restart on to Auckland. In spite of having two crew unable to work due to illness, Assa Abloy showed what she was capable of and won the leg in fine style, followed by Kiwis Grant Dalton (Amer Sports One) and Kevin Shoebridge (Tyco). Illbruck struggled in to finish a disappointing fourth.

On leg four, from Auckland it was back into the Southern Ocean, and the fleet encountered the worst ice ever seen in the history of the race. SEB was dismasted and limped in to Ushuaia under jury rig. After rounding the infamous Cape Horn, the fleet compacted as they approached the Brazilian port of Rio de Janeiro, not visited by the race since the 1977-78 edition. Illbruck regained their form and finished first, followed by Norway's Knut Frostad and his team of 'pink dragon's' posting their best result so far with djuice. Dalton was bitterly disappointed with his fifth place. Great things had been expected as Dalton had invited Paul Cayard, winner of the 1997-98 race, onboard. Tyco was a consistent third whilst Assa Abloy slipped through the pack to finish fourth.

Leg five took the fleet through the searing heat and windless Doldrums to Miami, a new port of call for the race. Hours into the race, SEB collided with illbruck and arrived in Miami with a jagged look to her bow. A protest was filed but not upheld. illbruck lost out to Assa Abloy, whilst Tyco finished again in third place. The girls onboard Amer Sports Too struggled to fix their electrics and broken water maker and were just beaten by djuice who finished seventh.

The short sprint to Baltimore saw Britain's Jez Fanstone and News Corp claim her first victory, with Amer Sports One finishing in second place. Dalton remarked that his 'flat bottomed girl' liked the flat water and would be very suited to sailing on Lake Garda. Assa Abloy was third which put them into second place overall, seven points behind overall leader, illbruck who finished out of the money in fourth place, causing some real soul searching in the illbruck camp during the Baltimore stopover.

The dash across the Atlantic to La Rochelle in France gave the fleet some 'champagne sailing'. Kostecki's team gave an emphatic response to any doubters by turning in a near faultless leg and led, virtually all the way, to the finish to take first place. Clocking up 484 nautical miles, they beat SEB's 24-hour record from the Southern Ocean. Disaster struck Lisa McDonald's Amer Sports Too, when her mast broke below the second spreaders and ended her team's involvement in the leg in an instant. They limped to Nova Scotia to be put on a ship bound for Europe and there started a mad rush for the all girl team to make it to the start line in La Rochelle. Lisa's husband, Neal, posted a solid second place with Assa Abloy, putting the pressure on illbruck for the final two legs.

Desperately close, all the way to the wire, leg eight to Gothenburg in Sweden was an enthralling battle and resulted in the closest finish in the history of the race. In a nail-biting final day, any one of six boats could have won. The nerve-racking day ended with five boats finishing within seven minutes after 1,075 miles of racing. Victorious into their homeport, the reception for Sweden's Assa Abloy was one of joyful jubilation. Starting last, after getting entangled in the start line buoy in La Rochelle, Assa Abloy sailed a fabulous leg to move to the front and hold onto their lead in a gripping and tense final 24 hours. Tyco by finishing second and News Corp finishing third brought their points level with Amer Sports One and all three started the final leg to Kiel in equal third position. SEB and djuice never saw any form and languished in sixth and seventh place overall, also their finishing positions for this leg.

The day of the start from Gothenburg had both sailors and commentators shaking their heads in disbelief. The spectator fleet on the water and the crowds lining the shore outdid anything seen on the America's Cup courses or Sydney to Hobart starts. It may even have outdone the end of the final race of the America's Cup in Fremantle. If Gothenburg had been a phenomenon, the entry into Kiel had to be seen to be believed, with fairy tales piling one on top of another and a huge crowd, which had braved a long wait, and earlier rain, were there to applaud them all. It started with the pink and black hull of djuice allowing some formerly rather gummy dragons to breathe fire at the end by winning the final leg and was followed later by Lisa McDonald bringing home her all-woman crew just behind her husband, Neal, on Assa Abloy, and just ahead of her boss, Grant Dalton, on Amer Sports One.

In between, the winner's enclosure belonged to Kostecki and his German boat illbruck. Take away the two really poor legs by Assa Abloy at the beginning, and they outscored illbruck for the remaining seven. Any one of three boats could have been third overall at the start of the last leg, and it was Amer Sports One who finally claimed the third position overall, behind Assa Abloy in second and illbruck winning the magnificent Waterford Crystal sculpture aptly entitled '*Fighting Finish*'. Only four boats won first place trophies during the race, and one of those was the outsider, djuice, winning the last leg sailing with as much as possible left ashore, including three crew. A second went to News Corp and illbruck and Assa Abloy shared the remainder.

Kostecki and his team were meticulous in their preparation and Kostecki's approach to the Volvo Ocean race was no different from what happens in the Olympics and the America's Cup, both of which Kostecki was familiar with. Even at club level, sailing pays benefits to those who put in the hours on the water before the race, just as rewards seem to come to people in other sports who put in the hours training. Their boat handling was the result of many hours of careful practice and having complete confidence in the helming skills of the likes of two Kiwis, Mark Christensen and Stuart Bannatyne.

The Volvo Ocean Race simply could not have been a better sporting event, but, just as importantly, it also became an even greater media event. The payback in terms of media coverage was hugely successful for all the teams and their sponsors, which, for the future of the race, was imperative. Based on this overwhelming success, the management of Volvo Car Corporation and AB Volvo confirmed during the Gothenburg stopover that they would retain ownership of the event, which would be run again in 2005.