



Contact: Mary Sue McCarthy
410-321-9700

Ocean Watch

In the decade or so since the Internet really took off, expectations have become established about what official sporting event sites should deliver. The Volvo Ocean Race site (www.VolvoOceanRace.org), building on its previous race experience, satisfies those expectations easily.

Information is at the top of the agenda. If you want a quick check on the latest positions, the site has them updated every six hours, along with maps showing positions of the fleet, and links to statistics pages for those who like their data in the raw.

As you would expect, there are pages of basic race details, such as the race track and schedules for each leg, with start and finish times. Furthermore, the sailors will be communicating directly with site users with daily e-mails direct from each boat during racing. These act as virtual race diaries for each team.

More in-depth information is available, too. A race guide, features, and news stories by in-house specialists and guest writers will explain and analyse what is happening in the race and offer previews of forthcoming legs, along with likely tactics.

It is not just reports for experts, though. The writing is suitable for newcomers as well as seasoned followers of the sport. If you don't know what canards and dagger boards are, the text will explain – just as it does in the background information about the parameters of Volvo Open 70 regulations that have been online since 2003.

Text, however, is only one form of content. The web is synonymous with multimedia, and there is going to be plenty on site as the race progresses. Stills in photographic galleries will highlight the action with dramatic and evocative imagery, while video and audio clips in Windows Media and RealPlayer formats present insight into exciting incidents.

The site is not just about facts and figures. For light-hearted relief, there is a selection of games, some with prizes, including a fantasy race game based on the real thing. Download fans will find computer desktop wallpaper and screensavers released throughout the race.

Rounding off the site is an e-commerce operation, where you can buy something from the web shop. Its 2005-06 collection encompasses everything from waterproof binoculars and atmospheric data measuring devices through to fleeces and hi-tech weatherproof jackets, commemorative stoneware mugs, neoprene keyrings, or limited-edition, exquisitely detailed, wooden carved miniature replicas of Volvo Open 70 yachts.

Virtual Spectator

One of the defining features of ocean racing is that it presents limited spectator opportunities – handy vantage points are few and far between. So, knowing what is happening thousands of miles away from

land has typically involved race followers building their own mental picture based on media reports and film footage.

It works, but, with the advent of new technologies, there are other ways of keeping up with every bit of the action. Virtual Spectator simulated animation is one of the best of these, and has been chosen by the Volvo Ocean Race to enhance the more traditional race coverage.

Virtual Spectator is a software package with a good pedigree that has also covered sports such as tennis, squash and horse racing, but it is where huge distances separate spectators and participants, such as in the Volvo Race, that it really comes into its own.

The software uses data relayed from the boats to construct an animated model on your PC. Once the data has downloaded, you can play legs from the race, choosing different camera angles to see how tactics and weather conditions are affecting sailing. You can rewind and fast-forward at will, or click on individual boats to see information such as boat speed and wind direction. Every six hours, and more frequently as the fleet approaches port, a new load of data can be downloaded and watched.

Virtual Spectator provided 3D technology in the last Volvo Ocean Race, but the current version is a significant aesthetic improvement, even though the previous version was also a good 3D experience.

Things have changed this time round. Virtual Spectator has undergone a 3D graphical revolution. In look and feel it holds its own compared with the latest generation of console and computer games. The boats are no longer line-drawings, they are colourful and solid objects, and you can zoom in to such an extent that you can easily make out individual items of deck gear.

The water is realistically textured – a trick it took digital designers and graphic artists years to perfect. Reflections from the sun and moon are convincing. The positions of sun, moon and stars in the sky are completely accurate. Landmarks have been picked out and given a virtual makeover. Each port en route, for instance, has had a feature picked out and modelled. So, at the start of the first leg in Vigo, you will see the iconic bronze statue of spiralling horses and, when you reach Cape Town, you will see a representation of the city buildings as well as Table Mountain.

Control is easy. Point and click is the name of the game. A variety of camera angles can be chosen, from aerial views of the entire fleet through to individual boats.

A full set of pull-down menus is available. These allow you to set options such as enabling animated wind speed and direction indicators, switching weather displays on and off (the cloud, lightning, rain and snow effects have the beating of the BBC's latest computer-generated weather graphics on TV and the Internet), displaying the leader line and selecting levels of graphical detail.