

Some readers will probably remember the articles we featured in earlier issues on the sailing exploits of Dee Caffari MBE when she was sponsored by Aviva. She recently completed The Famous Project CIC as part of an eight all-female crew. We asked her to bring us up-to-date with her development as a professional sailor.

From the Aviva Challenge to Global Leadership at Sea

My personal journey from school teacher to professional sailor is a compelling story of resilience, adaptability and a relentless pursuit of excellence. Since my early days of sailing in the Aviva Challenge back in 2005/06, my career has evolved far beyond individual achievement, reflecting the development of someone who has mastered their craft and grown into a respected leader shaping the future of offshore sailing.

The Aviva Challenge, where I became the first female sailor to sail solo and non-stop around the world against the prevailing winds and currents, marked the first pivotal chapter in my professional career. Competing around the world exposed me to the realities of extreme offshore racing: relentless schedules, extreme weather, physical fatigue and the need for unwavering teamwork under pressure – albeit that my team for that voyage were thousands of miles away. It was during this campaign that I built the foundations of offshore professionalism – sail handling in heavy weather, maintenance at sea, discipline on watch and the ability to perform consistently in high-stress environments.

Equally significant was the context in which the Aviva Challenge took place. Offshore sailing



Aviva Challenge 2005/6



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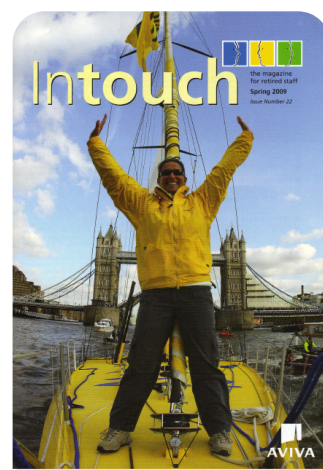
at the highest level had historically seen little female representation. Rather than limiting my ambitions, this environment fuelled my resolve. It reinforced my determination to measure myself not against expectations, but against the highest performance standards the sport demands.

Following this formative experience, I made the bold and defining move: stepping into the professional solo offshore sailing arena by taking part in the Vendée Globe. This transition marked a profound shift in my professional development – moving from adventurer to racer. Sailing alone removes the safety net of shared responsibility and places every decision – strategic, technical and psychological – squarely on the individual. In embracing this challenge. I think I demonstrated a willingness to accept full accountability, a trait that would become a hallmark of my career.

My preparation for this solo race around the world required a significant expansion of my skills. I developed expertise in navigation, weather analysis, boat preparation, systems management and self-reliance at sea. The demands of long solo passages sharpened my decision-making under fatigue, isolation, and uncertainty – conditions that test even the most experienced sailors. Working alongside a sports psychologist enabled me to better understand my responses to pressure and the uncertain



Vendee Globe 2008



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environment I operated in, further strengthening my mental resilience.

This phase of my career with Aviva culminated in one of the most extraordinary achievements in modern sailing. In 2009, I became the first woman to sail single-handed, non-stop, around the world in both directions. This feat has been accomplished by only five sailors - four men and myself. Joining this exclusive group placed me firmly among the sport's elite. This achievement altered how I was perceived within the sailing community, not simply as a participant, but as a benchmark.

Crucially, my solo success did not mark an end point. Instead, it became a platform for further evolution. Returning to the crewed offshore environment, I feel I brought an expanded skill set and a heightened sense of responsibility, risk management and systems thinking. These attributes translated naturally into leadership roles on board.

My participation in multiple editions of the Volvo Ocean Race demonstrated this progression. Moving into a skipper role, I transitioned from individual performance to collective optimisation. Leadership at this level requires far more than sailing ability; it demands emotional intelligence, clarity of communication, strategic foresight and the ability to maintain morale and cohesion across long, physically and mentally demanding campaigns.

Across these races, my development as a pro-

fessional sailor became inseparable from my development as a leader. I learnt to cultivate an inclusive, performance-driven approach, recognising that success offshore is built on trust, preparation and shared purpose. My leadership style reflects lessons learnt from both solo and crewed sailing- knowing when to push hard, when to protect the boat and crew and when restraint is the fastest route to success.

Alongside my racing career, my professional identity expanded into advocacy and governance. I became increasingly involved in promoting safety, diversity and sustainability within the sport. This work was not a departure from my sailing career, but a natural extension of it. Having experienced the realities of offshore risk first-hand, I feel I brought credibility and insight to discussions around safety reporting, welfare and best practice.

My involvement with governing bodies, including World Sailing, reflects a sailor who understands that professionalism extends beyond the racecourse. It includes responsibility to fellow sailors, to the future of the sport and to the marine environment in which it operates. In this respect, my career has mirrored the broader evolution of professional sailing, where performance, safety and sustainability are increasingly interconnected.

In recent years, my role within high-performance teams has continued to evolve. As



The Famous Project CIC maxi trimaran

co-skipper and senior crew on cutting-edge offshore projects- including record attempts and most recently a large multihull campaign - I completed my seventh circumnavigation, where the team became the first all-female team to sail non-stop around the world on a multihull in a time of 57 days.

My contribution to sailing is now measured not only in miles sailed or results achieved, but in the depth of knowledge, stability and leadership I can bring to complex, high-risk endeavours. My involvement in the recent circumnavigation with The Famous Project CIC aboard the maxi trimaran highlights this maturity. These programmes demand elite sailing ability alongside logistical planning, partner engagement, crew development and an understanding of how sport can deliver wider social impact. My professional development has equipped me to operate confidently across all of these domains.

Looking back to the Aviva Challenge, it is clear that my journey has been far from linear. Each phase of my career - crewed racing, solo sailing, leadership roles and advocacy - has built upon the last. My development reflects a continuous process of learning, adaptation and growth, driven by curiosity and an unwavering commitment to improvement.



The all female crew

The Jules Verne Trophy

Considered one of the toughest ocean challenges in the world, no woman has so far been part of any crew to conquer the legendary Jules Verne Trophy, the prestigious prize for the fastest circumnavigation of the planet.

25 years ago, Tracy Edwards MBE and the team of Royal & Sun Alliance first attempted to break one of the last records left standing for an all-female crew. Today, The Famous Project CIC brought together the best female i.e. professional sailors from around the world and with the boat that held the current record, aiming to make history.



Dee Caffari

Today, Dee Caffari is recognised as one of the most respected figures in offshore sailing - not only for what she has achieved, but for how she has evolved: from crew member to solo pioneer, from skipper to mentor and from competitor to changemaker. Her career offers a powerful example of what it truly means to develop as a professional sailor: mastering the sea while understanding one's responsibility within it.