

Special Report **Women in Business**

Women in business

An all-women crew's breakthrough voyage

Finishing the Jules Verne Trophy in January launched a new era for female sailors



The Famous Project crew aboard Idec Sport on completing their voyage on January 26 © Lloyd Images/Jmlot Images/CIC

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On January 26, after a voyage of 57 days, 22 hours and 20 minutes, eight women made professional-sailing history when they crossed the finish line of the Jules Verne Trophy off the coast of France.

Led by French sailor Alexia Barrier and British co-skipper Dee Caffari, their mission went beyond just the sporting challenge. They were the first ever all-female crew to sail nonstop around the world on a maxi trimaran, a modern, high-performance yacht designed to win such contests.

The aim was to prove that an all-women team could complete the tough, prestigious race and help open up opportunities in the male-dominated sport of ocean racing.

“This was about redefining female sailors and pushing the boundaries and perceptions within our sport,” says Caffari, also the first woman to have sailed solo round the world in both directions.

There had only been three female sailors to round Cape Horn on a multihull before, ever

Dee Caffari, The Famous Project

Barrier had already raced single-handed round the world in the solo Vendée Globe in 2020 when she set her sights on the Jules Verne Trophy, which is awarded for setting a record time for circumnavigation of the globe with a crew. Realising how few women had taken part since the race was set up in 1993 — none on a winning boat — she set out

to form a team herself.

Sailing is a mixed gender sport, but there are few opportunities for women to compete at this level. Barrier started her career match-racing — a contest between two boats of identical type — in mixed crews but went solo after struggling to get onboard bigger boats in ocean races. “I was already an athlete at a high level and when I tried to jump on boats with crew they were telling me, ‘oh yeah, you can come and do the sandwiches’,” she says.

The number of professional sailors with round-the-world sailing experience is limited, and teams are less willing to take a chance on women, who have simply had less opportunity to gain experience, says Caffari.



Barrier and Caffari selected an international crew and favoured energy and attitude over experience © Lloyd Images/Jmliot Images/CIC

When Barrier set up her all-women initiative, named The Famous Project, Caffari was first to sign up. They selected an international crew of six women, favouring energy and attitude over experience. No one in the team had raced a maxi trimaran before.

Barrier secured France's CIC Bank as the first sponsor before taking out a €1.4mn loan, buying a small boat for training and setting a funding target of €3mn per year over three years — which was never reached. French sports company Idec Sport agreed a deal to loan a 103ft maxi trimaran for the race, which had broken the previous the Jules Verne record at 40 days, 23 hours, 30 minutes in 2017.

The Famous Project crew

Alexia Barrier, Dee Caffari, Annemieke Bes, Deborah Blair, Molly LaPointe, Támara Echegoyen, Stacey Jackson, and Rebecca Gmür Hornell

fully developed campaign.

Even so, the contrast with other teams that have taken part in the contest was stark, notes Caffari. The trimaran is a 20-year-old design. But Sodebo Ultim 3, which achieved a new Jules Verne record of 40 days, 10 hours, 45 minutes on January 25, is three years old and its team had spent about €25mn over three years, she says, reflecting the scale of a

Financing constraints also limited training time. Crew members were paid about €350-€500 a day, while Barrier did not take a salary. On established male-led campaigns, daily rates can reach €1,200 to €1,500, she says.

The team cast off on November 29, passing the start line at Ushant off western France. Sailing on a trimaran at about 30 knots is like “flying like a bird on the sea”, says Barrier.

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Multihull boats are the vessel of choice for the Jules Verne because they can reach twice the speed of a monohull, but they become more vulnerable to mishap. In strong winds, she explains, “on a multihull, you just capsize . . . if you make a mistake it’s the end.”

Sixteen days into the voyage, the lock holding the mainsail to the mast broke, which meant trimming the sail took much longer. And the boat was on course to enter the treacherous conditions of the Southern Ocean.

“There were big waves and strong wind most of the time. The sky was dark and we had snow . . . It’s completely raw,” says Barrier.

Yet the crew never considered quitting. Beating the speed record — always a long shot — was now even less likely. But they could still achieve a good time, and would still be the first all-women team to finish the Jules Verne.

So on they went, into the Southern Ocean and passing Australia, where a fishing net got stuck around the foil, the technology that lifts the hull off the water and that has transformed modern yacht design. By day 38, on January 6, they started the final leg across the Atlantic.

The final 24 hours were “probably the worst”, says Caffari. In the last 1,000 miles the crew faced two storms and winds that ripped the mainsail in half, but they still made it to the finish — a feat in itself.

Ocean races

Jules Verne Trophy — a crewed, nonstop, absolute speed record for any vessel

Vendée Globe — a solo, nonstop race in monohulls

Ocean Race — a crewed, multi-stage race

Back on dry land a few weeks later and reflecting on the potential wider implications, Caffari and Barrier both mention that they have mixed feelings about race organisers introducing incentives to involve women. Without them, inclusion “would not happen organically”, Caffari says. On the other hand, no one wants to be the token woman, as in any workplace. The test would be how tasks are shared out, says Barrier: “Does the crew give you a chance to trim the sails?” for instance.

Before The Famous Project, only one woman, Dona Bertarelli, had completed the Jules Verne. Barrier says: “Now [the other teams] cannot ignore us.” Caffari adds: “We’ve shown what’s possible . . . there had only been three female sailors to round Cape Horn on a multihull before, ever. And we made that number 11 by the eight of us going round.”

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