



Upwind with Dee

Ocean Race and Vendée Globe veteran, among her many and diverse other achievements at sea, offshore racer Dee Caffari shares some stories with inshore racer Carol Cronin...

Much has rightly been written about Dee Caffari, the first woman to sail solo around the globe in both directions. 'I did two laps the wrong way before I learned!' she laughs, as we settle in for a coffee after the 2025 Transatlantic Race (west to east).

Dee is currently on standby for her seventh circumnavigation with The Famous Project. How did this almost-always-smiling woman go from a 45-ton wrong-way-round lap to a record attempt on a 100ft trimaran? To find out I ask how she got started – and unexpectedly discover that her first boating was on the dark side.

Dee grew up just north of London. 'We had a 40ft motorboat on the Thames and every weekend and holiday we were out on the boat. My mum was scared stiff of water; how my dad managed to pull that off I've no idea. I loved everything about it, and I was a shadow to my dad. I learned my seamanship and navigation from him.

'We went everywhere at 8kt and I was always fixing things... something that I found I really enjoyed!'

Learning to teach

It was when at university studying sports science that Dee discovered sailing. Apparently it brought out her natural competitiveness; years later one of her lecturers told her he knew sailing was her thing, 'because it was immediately a competition. I still think to this day: if two boats are going in the same direction it's clearly a race; it's just that they maybe don't know about it.'

A certificate of education turned her into a physical education and maths teacher. 'I taught in a state school, a grammar school, and then I went to an international college.' Teaching was enjoyable, but she found herself thinking 'What else am I going to do? I'm quite driven like that; I have to have something to work towards.' When her father passed away his comments took on fresh meaning. 'His big thing was: if you wanna do it, make it happen. And that resonated.'

On a sailing holiday Dee learned that the boat's divemaster (who was 'living the dream') had trained at the UK Sailing Academy in Cowes; she decided to attend. 'My mom was like, you're gonna do what? I could always go back to teaching; that was my caveat.'

A training sail to La Rochelle was 'the best thing: life at sea, that responsibility of checking and fixing things, getting the best out of people and expecting them to deliver. It opened up a world that I didn't know existed.'

Fenders all around

Her first industry job was as captain of Mike Golding's corporate guest boat. 'He was preparing for another Vendée Globe; I

was 27, and he gave me a massive opportunity – taking his guests out to watch him start these big races on his own. I remember thinking, I gotta deliver on this.'

To learn how to handle the large yacht Dee used the marina's empty berths to practise landings, over and over, with all fenders deployed... 'Mike always said how you can make anything up when you're sailing,' she explains, 'but if you mess up docking everyone will know about it.'

'He used to stand at the top of the marina having a coffee, just watching...'

What Dee didn't yet know: her own path would closely follow Golding's. 'He took the Global Challenge boat single-handed the wrong way around the world, he did the Vendée Globe. I probably underestimated the influence Mike had on me at the time.' But after a few seasons she was ready to move on. 'So I went to work with Alex Thomson.'

At the time Alex was running Formula One Sailing, a charter fleet of Farr 65s. 'New guests on every morning, teach them how to sail in half an hour, serve them coffee and then go try and get around the racecourse clean and without hurting anyone. Big, heavy boats. But you have to really understand [sailing] to explain it well. That was really good grounding.'

'Two years with Mike, two years with Alex; talk about having good mentors!'

It was also through Formula One Sailing that she met her life partner, Harry Spedding; he was a fellow charter captain. 'Several people had been working quite hard to set us up.' They succeeded. 'He's been very understanding since... so he deserves some credit, for sure!'

RICK TOMLINSON



Wrong way round #1

Shortly after Dee applied for a skippering job on one of the Global Challenge boats she lost the top of her middle finger to a mainsheet block. 'I was incapacitated; that's the end of that.' But there were no other female applicants so Chay Blyth gave her a second chance. When she turned up for the final selection, 'all the other skippers were like, where did you come from?' It was only after she was chosen as one of the 12 skippers that she thought to wonder, 'What have I taken on?'

As 'a professional sailor onboard with 17 people of random abilities, all coming to have the experience of a lifetime, I realised how lonely leadership is – especially when you've got to have buy-in to make anything happen. I wasn't thick-skinned enough, and quite naive; thinking I had to be everyone's friend. And that wasn't the case at all.'

The race (around the world, east to west, with stopovers) took 10 months. 'In Cape Town,' she remembers, 'all the skippers went out for dinner with Chay. He was a really good mentor to all of us. We'd survived the Southern Ocean, cracked the hard bit; it was just a trip home as far as he was concerned.' Meanwhile, the skippers were 'just trying to survive to the end; we hadn't even thought past the next week.'

Blyth had sailed solo around the world, the wrong way, in 1971. 'He took me to one side and said, "It's only a matter of time before a woman follows in my footsteps." That was enough to plant the seed.'

On the next leg to Boston the boats crossed their outgoing track. 'So suddenly the crew are circumnavigators, and they all

become experts overnight. Sitting in the doldrums in a 45-ton steel boat going nowhere, and every decision you make they now question.' Dee started thinking: 'Maybe it is easier without 17 people onboard!'

So during the Boston stopover she asked Blyth, 'How do I make it happen?' He told her to think seriously about modifications to the boat during the last leg of the race. And after the finish he added, 'If you make it happen we'll get the boat for you.'

'It was a strong position to be in... but I had to find the funds, and I didn't have a clue how to do that.' So Blyth mentored her on sponsorship as well. One lesson stuck: 'If you're offered a drink in a meeting accept it because it means you're there for at least 10 minutes.' Winking, she raises her cup of hot chocolate in my direction.

Wrong way round #2

For Aviva the requested budget didn't require a big board decision. 'So I came back from the Global Challenge in July, had a phone call in September, said I'm going... and in November I went. It was good, because it didn't give me time to think about sailing on my own.'

'I had never done that before, but I thought it can't be that hard; I'm sure I'll work it out. The last thing Chay said to me when I set off was don't cry about it, it's all been done before. But I had no idea what I was letting myself in for.'

Over 178 days (but 'who's counting') Dee learned a lot about singlehanded – and about herself. 'I spent 88 days in the Southern Ocean. François Gabart went around the world twice in that time! I think my average wind speed in the south

'I'm just me; I can be quite adaptable...' Dee Caffari brings the heavy steel sloop *Aviva* back into Southampton after 178 days at sea sailing alone the wrong way around the world and (*opposite*) aboard the carbon VO65 *Team SCA* during the 2014-2015 Volvo Ocean Race. Thus far at least Caffari has raced around the world six times. If the Famous Project completes a lap this winter that will be seven, moving her up in the craziness stakes past the King himself, Jean Le Cam, who has now confirmed that he will not be taking part in a 7th Vendée Globe in three years' time

was something like 50kt.' Every time she thought about heading north for a respite another low would come along. 'So I just had to keep going.'

At one point she needed to tack but it was too windy to get the bow through the wind. 'The conditions were horrendous. So I bore away, the boat went flat – and accelerated!' She remembers thinking, 'So this is why everyone goes this way!' She enjoyed it for a few minutes, 'until I realised: I've just gone backwards. So I did the gybe.' Which snapped one of her 18mm jib sheets.

Dee had a spare – but first 'I had to hacksaw the old one off.' Once she started crashing her way upwind again she started thinking, 'I need to go the other way.'

But Dee always finishes what she starts, 'whether I'm enjoying it or not'. She made it back to the UK – where she'd become a celebrity (and awarded an MBE). At breakfast a guy offered her the newspapers – because now she was in all of them...

2008-2009 Vendée Globe

Dee's contract with Aviva had ended so when Cowes Week offered her a commentary job she took it. 'I'm wearing a Skandia jacket on TV, talking about sailing when Aviva ring me up and ask, what's next?' She told them 'I wanna go the right way round; I wanna do the Vendée Globe.'

That negotiation took a bit longer, 'because it was a very different budget. We wanted a new Imoca, so went all in from the get-go.' Yet Aviva signed on again, and Dee trained on a secondhand boat while her new boat was built in New Zealand.

Once the new boat arrived, 'I sailed it non-stop.' Four days a week with a coach would be followed by a solo weekend offshore; 'I'd go to Madeira and back on my own while the guys had some time off. They worked evenings so I could sail during the day.' Later there was some two-boat testing with Mike Golding's sistership, which 'speeded up the process'.

Dee had some 15,000 miles on the boat before the Vendée start. 'I knew I could spend the time on my own; I'd practised that enough. So it was about the intensity of the racing; that evolved as I went. I got more and more confident in sailing my boat.' Finishing sixth out of an original 30 starters meant 'I wanted to do it again, because I know I can do a better job.'

Barcelona World Race

Instead, Dee joined Anna Corbella on the Barcelona World Race – and again finished

RICK TOMLINSON/ALAMY



ALAMY

Dee Caffari training for the 2008-2009 Vendée Globe in which she finished 6th, 3rd of a straight flush of British entries with Sam Davies finishing 4th and Brian Thompson 5th. A rough race saw just 11 finishers from a record 30 starters. Sadly the retirements included Caffari's mentor and training partner Mike Golding, racing a sister Owen-Clarke design – one of six boats dismantled during the race. There were also three keel failures, initiating the longterm move towards more robust one-design keels for the Imoca class

sixth. 'She became the first Spanish woman to sail around the world non-stop, which was really cool. We left New Year's Eve of 2010. For me it was about doing it better than in the Vendée,' she continues. Having confidence in 'weather and strategy, recognising patterns; I really wanted to get that right.' Marcel van Triest later told Dee that 'basically, I'd made the right decisions'.

After that 'I desperately wanted to do another Vendée but it wasn't coming together; post 2008 things were really difficult – and I wasn't prepared to mortgage my house to make it happen.'

Team SCA

When a women's team was announced for the 2014-2015 Volvo Ocean Race Dee applied right away. But she wasn't offered a position because 'as a solo sailor I might be a bad influence'. But she kept asking, and 18 months later she finally got a try-out. Coming in that late was nerve-wracking, she says. 'But I really wanted to sail with the people who were there.'

'It was a tough environment,' she adds; 'cut-throat'. Dee told herself that she'd already been around the world 'X number of times, they either want me or they don't, but I need to fit.' So she took on all the 'rubbish' jobs: 'filling water bottles, cleaning, galley; I just got on with it'.

Eventually she was offered a place – with one caveat: 'If you've been pretending who you are, don't change; just carry on.' I was shocked by that! I told them I was far too old and cynical to play games: this is me. You're not going to get anything else.'

But that fifth lap of the planet cost Dee a lot of confidence, she admits. 'It was so competitive, and [each leg] you didn't know if you were on the boat until two days before. So you can't plan your life.'

'You take it personally even though it's not meant to be personal – and you're not told what you're doing well, what you're doing badly... zero feedback.' Soon she began to doubt herself, 'then you can't do your job and it's a downward spiral. It was really, really hard – I really felt for anybody less experienced. I don't think they realised how hard it was for a lot of us.'

Harry told her to leave. Instead Dee (again) finished what she'd started – with another sixth place. 'I made some really good friends and it's gelled us for life. But I struggled afterwards. So we all talked about having a proper support network for women sailors – because turns out that we'd all found it just as hard as each other.'

Incredible legacy

It was those discussions that inspired the Magenta Project, because the sailors agreed that 'we can't let that happen again. We've got to do something to move the sport forward. Now 10 years on, you see the strength it's got: the mentoring, the support. Just to know that you can phone somebody, that's really powerful.'

'The legacy is incredible. I was super frustrated and super upset, but I'm super proud of what came out of it.'

Personally, Dee wondered 'How do I do that again? I'd really like to do a better version. But it's very hard to get yourself into teams, because people are used to sailing with who they're used to sailing with. One girl on each boat is quite isolating, and it's a very tough gig to break through.'

Turning the tide

For The Ocean Race 2017-18 race director Mark Turner asked Dee if she'd like to lead a new venture. 'He says, "Look, we've got this team, it's last minute, it's got

a few caveats – but I think you're the right person for it.'" And in hindsight, 'Turn the Tide on Plastic put everything I've done in my career into one project.' An under-30, fully mixed crew sailing around the world for the United Nations, to support their clean seas initiative: 'When you put that all together, who else would skipper?'

With a limited budget (and that under-30 clause), she couldn't buy in experience. So Dee used her teaching skills to develop and nurture new talent.

'Along with the Vendée Globe, that's probably my most proud project,' Dee says. 'To see the transformation of 12 other people through the course of 10 months... We entered the first Southern Ocean leg with fear in their eyes, wiping out and having all sorts of goings on...' By the second Southern Ocean leg 'they were like, yeah, come on, let's go. I told them, "You are literally keeping up with guys who have been doing this for the last 20 years!" It was powerful. Now I see them in their careers, and I'm super proud – a proud mom moment.'

Dee says their results – yet another sixth – 'don't reflect how well we sailed. On Team SCA we were days behind. On Turn the Tide we were minutes behind. So some frustrations, but really good sailing with lovely people who've all gone on to do amazing things. I literally message them all at Christmas and birthdays.'

The sustainability piece was exciting too. 'Sometimes when you've got to deliver a sponsor message it's a bit forced. But having a young crew with an environmental message was the most natural thing ever, because it was what they believed. We were usually the focus at stopovers, because we were the "beach-clean" people. And we cleaned a lot of beaches!!'

Testing togetherness

When the pandemic hit, all racing ceased. 'Harry and I have been together 23 years now,' Dee says, 'but we had never spent a full year together until lockdown. Suddenly we were both at home – luckily we found we still quite like each other! But the dog got really confused because suddenly he had two parents. Then of course you have to start building up again what you can do, and that's when I started double-handed sailing; we were the first ones allowed out.'

Sailing with James Harayda on his Sun Fast 3300 'was really good fun', Dee says. 'Short-course racing, distance and coastal races, round the buoys in the Solent – which took me home to grassroots. It brought my racing skills forward; I loved the nav and doing everything on the boat. It was like all my singlehanded sailing but adding the joy of somebody there.'

James and Dee sailed together for two years and were National Champions twice. 'He gained from my experience of how to manage a campaign,' she says, adding quickly that 'I hope he doesn't hold me responsible that he ended up with an Imoca, and aspirations for a Vendée Globe... But it was really good to see him grow, and we had a lot of fun.'

Round Britain and Ireland, again

When Dee was invited to do another 3300 campaign she asked Shirley Robertson to join her. 'I didn't want to do the same thing again, so we have to do Round Britain and Ireland – a massive undertaking for an Olympic racer like Shirley. A tough course – and you often feel like you're doing it singlehanded because the other person isn't always awake.' It's a race close to her heart, Dee adds. Sam Davies set the first female record on *Roxy*, then broken by Dee, Sam and two others in 2009 on *Aviva*. Five years later they set another new record on *Team SCA*.

'The Round Britain Race, which sounds like a nice tour of our coastline, is often wildly underestimated. It only comes around every four years and every time it's more difficult,' she says now. 'It's typically a rough race, a complex course and now made worse because of all the congestion in the North Sea; oil rigs, wind farms, sandbanks and shipping. It's getting harder and harder to find a way through.'

Inevitably sailing with Shirley revealed vast differences in skillsets. 'The transition from Olympic sailing to offshore is massive... While that's where I'm comfortable. It was quite nice for me to have an Olympic perspective,' learning about 'focus and attention to detail, not leaving any stone unturned; bringing in the experts. Plus she's used to having a team: I'm thinking, we have to do all this ourselves! The intensity was really interesting.'

As for their race, 'It's like any other offshore campaign; you never feel ready when you go to the start, you do the best you can. We had literally everything in the two weeks we were out there. But it's really nice to have that relationship and that shared experience.'



Buckingham Palace 2007 and it is now Dee Caffari MBE primarily in recognition of her wrong-way circumnavigation. 'More important (adds the sainted editor), since then nobody has worked more tirelessly to advance the cause of women in the sport'

Learning to sail again

In the summer of 2023 'I had a phone call from Alexia [Barrier]. Alexia explained 'an ambition to do a Jules Verne attempt', and asked if Dee was interested. 'I was like, yes!' At the same time Dee wasn't sure it would ever happen; 'Everyone's got aspirations, but until there's a boat and some fundamentals in place it's just a dream.'

But the next time their paths crossed 'Alexia said, "I've got a MOD 70, and I've got a 100ft trimaran". Whoa! In just a few months she's got these two boats and it is all happening.' They sailed the MOD70 in the Middle Sea Race, RORC Transat and Caribbean 600 before delivering it back to Europe, since when the focus has shifted to the big boat – and securing the funding to complete the Jules Verne. 'But she never stopped believing – and I was like, if it's happening I'm right there with you.'

Learning to sail a big multihull was also like learning to sail again, Dee says. 'It's such an alien environment. Everything's on the edge the whole time. Suddenly I'm getting used to doing this stuff at 30kt!'

Wall-to-wall boys' club

But without a guarantee at the beginning of 2025 Dee said yes to other invites too – including the Maxi circuit, which she calls a 'wall-to-wall boys' club'. She sails in an international co-ed team put together by Pascale Decaux, who is 'struggling just as much in the owners' environment, where it's also all guys.

'Out of 25 crew there are nine females onboard, and we stick out. Pascale's like, what's the big deal? Thankfully she wants to drive it forwards... so another thing that it is great to be part of.'

'So we're learning a whole new boat, and I'm sailing alongside people I've sailed with or against on The Ocean Race. I said, "Oh, this is where all you guys are! Finally I got here." Why has it taken so long?'

Outside the box

Despite her fame, 'It's taken me 20 years to finally get invites on boats that I actually want to be on. Even if you do some great things or crazy things there's still a lot to get people even to consider you. For Team SCA I was considered a solo sailor and they didn't want that. Yet when I go back to the shorthanded stuff I'm considered a team sailor because I've done the Volvo!'

'Look at The Ocean Race and there's a closer link now with the shorthanded sailors.' But people still struggle with her flexibility, 'I'm just me! Though, for sure, I haven't conformed to the usual boxes! But the stigma around women sailors is slowly improving. More male sailors are now used to sailing mixed, there's a bit less prejudice. It still comes as a surprise in some environments, but it's more acceptable.'

'The younger generation don't bat an eyelid; sailing mixed is what they do. It was the older generation that were set in their ways and sailed with their mates asking, oh can we do this? And then when they try it they realise that a mixed team can bring a nice dynamic to the crew.'

Moving forwards

Remarkably, Dee says that 2025 is the first year most of her salary has come from sailing rather than public speaking. 'If you're a professional sailor you should earn your living from sailing by definition. But I haven't really done that before.'

Yet even as a 'real' pro she continues to seek out education. 'Quite often I'm the one that people are learning from, so how do I get better? Who do I learn from? You learn by mistakes and you learn from getting feedback and input on performance.'

Sailing with different people is the answer, she says, and 'what I really enjoy. This year there's a lot of that going on, which is good; it keeps me progressing, making me a better sailor, a better team player. I feel like I'm moving forwards.'

In between projects Harry is a much needed sounding board. 'It helps, when you're doing crazy things; he understands what I'm talking about and knows when to comment – and when not to. He survived six round-the-worlds, and he's about to go through another one, bless him.'

You are what you are

Dee says many teammates still tease her about those first two wrong-way roundings. 'Whenever it's upwind, it's like, Oh I guess you'll be driving then because this is your fault. Even now – and that was 20 years ago!' Laughing, she adds, 'I'm the reason everyone goes the other way.'

We've long since finished our drinks, and I have more than enough for yet another magazine story about Dee, so I thank her for the open conversation.

'The industry is remarkably small,' she replies. 'And the more you do the smaller it gets. If you have stuff to hide it comes out, so it's just not worth it. It's much easier if you are what you are, and then everyone knows where they stand...' □