

# A sailor to head the Race

The new chief executive of the Volvo Ocean Race, Knut Frostad, talks to Fiona McLelland about the excitement and dangers of competing in the world's greatest sailing event.



► "The global nature of the event is one of the reasons why Volvo makes the perfect sponsor partner for the event."

Knut Frostad

As a sporty young boy growing up in Norway, Knut Frostad would have been forgiven for being bitter about the hay fever that prevented him from playing football in the summer months with his friends. But instead of sulking, Knut headed to the water to avoid the pollen.

From the age of 10, he was taking part in windsurfing competitions and by the time he was 20, he was representing Norway at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Not satisfied with one Olympics and one discipline, Knut went on to represent his country in dinghy racing at the Barcelona games four years later.

But the best experience was yet to come. In 1993, Knut was a helmsman in The Whitbread Round the World Race in the second-placed Intrum Justitia boat.

"As soon as the race started, I knew this was my type of sailing. It was the best year of my life," says Knut.

The race is one of the world's longest sporting events and the toughest test for the world's best yachtsmen. The advanced technology used to build the 70 ft long sailing boats enables competitors to achieve some of the fastest speeds on water as they circumnavigate the globe.

"This is the Mount Everest of sailing and competition is intense," says Knut. "Everything that matters on that boat is whether you win or lose. When you're winning, every day is fantastic; the water is clearer, the

sky is bluer and the dolphins swimming alongside the boat are that much more special. But when you're losing, food tastes bad and you sleep worse."

For most people, sharing a single bedroom-sized space with nine other members of a team, 24 hours a day, for almost an entire year would mean no sleep at all. But sailors are a hardy breed, and in shift patterns of four to six hours, a group of five crew members take turn on deck to steer the boat on its nine month-long course around the world.

"You're so far away from land, newspapers and television that all you know is what is going on in the boat. It really is very uncomfortable, but you just don't care," says Knut.

"It's a real human relations experience as well as you need to forge a very strong team spirit – most people can relate to that aspect of the race. In such close living quarters, you are forced to make it work with your crew – the only alternative is to jump overboard. It's a really good lesson for the wider society as I think people today tend to run away too easily when things are not working."

Team work is so crucial to success in the Volvo Ocean Race as the crews have to tackle some of the roughest waters in the world, not only competing against the other boats, but against nature herself.

"It's about getting the balance right between risk and safety – if you take no risk you will come last, but then if you take too much risk you will also lose. The ultimate penalty of too much risk is loss of life."



Five sailors have died since the race began 35 years ago. The high winds on open waters powers the yachts to speeds of up to 35 knots – that’s about 55mph. *“There are times when you feel out of control in the middle of an ocean. The most scared I’ve been was when we lost one of our crew overboard in 1997 off the south coast of Australia, but thankfully we managed to find him. Another time during the same race, the boat collided with a whale at very high speeds – that was also very, very scary.”*

Knut has competed in the race four times, skippering a crew twice, and after an illustrious sailing career he decided to hang up his souwester last year in favour of developing his business career. He officially took up the role of CEO of the Volvo Ocean Boat Race in March.

*“This was the perfect opportunity to roll everything I know from my sailing career into the business world.”*

He believes that the 2008-09 race has the potential to be the best round the world race in the event’s 35 year history. When it started out in 1973, the race was sponsored by the brewing and leisure group Whitbread. Volvo bought the race outright in 1998 and renamed it the Volvo Ocean Race.

This year the race is bigger than ever be-

fore and will showcase the magnificent yachts to new parts of the world, such as India, China and Russia. The race will start in Alicante, Spain in October 2008 and the boats will head down to South Africa, across the Indian Ocean to Kochi in India, followed by stops in Singapore and Qingdao in China before leaving for the longest leg of the course, 12,300 nautical miles to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The sailors will then head up to Boston in the US and across the Atlantic to reach Ireland by June. The final legs will take in Marstrand (50 km northwest of Gothenburg) and Stockholm, Sweden and then in the port of the spectacular Russian city of St Petersburg for the grand finale.

*“The global nature of the event is one of the reasons why Volvo makes the perfect sponsor partner for the event,”* says Knut.

*“Volvo’s involvement in the race reflects what it wants to do as a company – it has the desire to give new value to the Volvo brand and wants to push towards the extreme and be known as innovators in its field – that is what the Ocean Race is all about.”*

*“There is also a constant evolution to make our boats better through technology, just as Volvo drives to improve its portfolio of machines. The boats are now going faster*

*and faster and the competition is harder. But we are working in a very risky environment, which is why the Ocean Race, like Volvo, is so safety conscious.”*

The constant need to develop the best technology means entering a competitive team into the Volvo Ocean Race. It takes a lot of time, effort and commitment, as well as the best part of US\$20 million.

*“But this is one of the few sports left that there is no prize money,”* says Knut. *“These sailors are not doing it for the money. They are doing it the love of the sport and for the prestige – that makes this race even more special.”* ■

# LIFE AT THE EXTREME