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Regatta de Catamarans—Riding the Wind at the Extreme Sailing Series

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This post was published on the now-closed HuffPost Contributor platform.



Oman Air team hydro-foiling - LLOYD IMAGES

When I found myself surrounded by some of the best sailors in the world, I pinched myself in disbelief. As a New Yorker, and a non-sailor, it was a rather strange place to land. But an invitation from a friend introduced me to the Extreme Sailing Series regatta, which I got to experience first-hand during racing events in Madeira, Portugal and Cardiff, Wales. It was love at first sight.

Now in its 11th year, the Extreme Sailing Series is a global circuit spanning 3 continents over 10 months, bringing together Olympic medalists, America's Cup sailors, World and European champions, world record-holders, and around-the-world

sailing legends, who race against each other on identical 32-foot hydro-foiling GC32 catamarans.

Clearly, the sailors are the rock stars getting all the deserved attention, as they should for their Herculean abilities maneuvering these boats. As one, however, who is always drawn to the untold stories, I wanted to know who was behind the scenes making sure the boats work.

The Ocean Version of Bumper Cars & Formula 1 Racing

This is a team sport with 5 sailors per boat, who all must operate a machine, the GC32, in perfect harmony, and that machine must be nursed, nurtured, and triaged to ensure it can do all it was designed to. The only other competitive sports that I can think of that have all these elements are bobsledding and crewing – a team operating a machine and the technicians delivering it in perfect order.

The Extreme Sailing Series is not your ordinary sailing event. Unlike most other sailing competitions where they vanish off into the sunset, this racing course covers a small patch of water close-to-the-shore. The unique Stadium Racing Format allows spectators to experience the action front-and-center. This also means though, that the boats are virtually racing an obstacle course, at great speeds when the wind cooperates. It's no wonder some sailors consider it the Formula 1 of the ocean, while others call it the nautical equivalent of bumper cars.

With no idea of how fast a knot was (the nautical version of miles per hour), let alone what the maximum speed of 39 knots the GC32s can reach felt like, a sailor told me to stick my head out of a car window in the rain doing about 50 mph.

Ouch, and no thanks, I'd rather experience that on a sailboat any day.



Lloyd Images

Now think about 50 mph not driving down a highway in the rain, but doing split second maneuvers near the shore, anticipating the wind shifts and your opponents and teammates moves, while trying to avoid a crash as you race to cross the finish line.

Part of the reason the GC32s can do all this aside from being extremely light and hypersensitive is in the unique design of the J-foils, which work like an airplane wing to lift the hulls out of the water. This rapidly increases the speed and when the wind is just right, the boats actually fly on the water. So, while going fast and trying to avoid accidents, the crew also must perform a challenging balancing act as they trim the sails to keep the boat in the air. Did I mention the boats weigh almost 2,000 lbs.?!

With up to 10 races a day over 4 days -- more than any other professional sailing regatta -- and with each race lasting approximately 10 - 15 minutes, the sailors compete on short and extremely tactical courses that put the boats near each other.

In a fraction of a second, a collision can happen causing slight or massive damage -- from just a scratch, to ripped sails, broken rudders and foils, and all sorts of other technical problems needing immediate attention.



Hamburg, Germany, 2017 - LLOYD IMAGES

The Extreme Sailing Series is a huge production and just the slightest blip in how things are supposed to go could literally make or break a team or an entire event; but given that this is a world-class event, there is always a backup plan in place if things go wrong.

Here's a backstage peek...

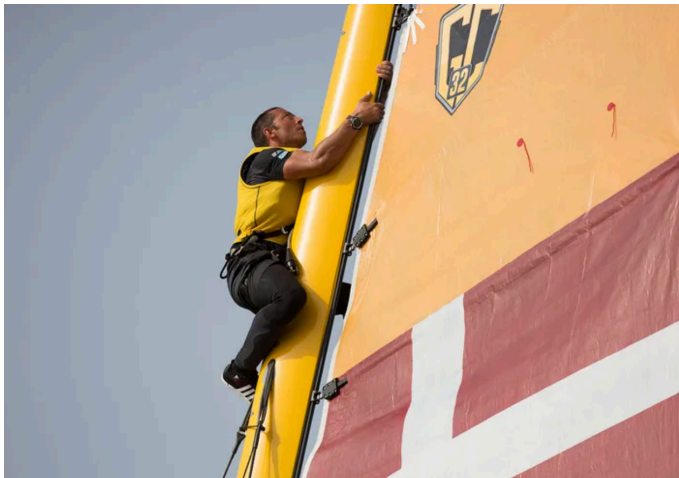
Enter the Shore Crew

The shore crew members are the unsung heroes. To them though, it's just a normal day at work. To me as an outsider, it's mind-blowing – the technical skill and physical strength required, attention to details and intricacies, focus, patience, and calm.

The reality check is that all this production and performance is 100% at the mercy of the wind. "He's having a coffee waiting for the wind," is a frequent description I heard when trying to locate someone.

"Waiting for the wind" could be the mantra of any sailing event.

If Mother Nature is not in the mood, the waiting begins, and there's nothing anyone can do short of bringing in Hollywood wind machines!



SAP Extreme Sailing Team shore crew member Renato Conde - LLOYD IMAGES

For the Extreme Sailing Series, the team is only as good as the boat, which is only as good as the crew that ensures it can perform at its best, which is only as good as the people that make sure the boats arrive at a race. These are the pieces that must work together seamlessly.

João Cabeçadas, Swiss team Alinghi's shore crew member for almost nineteen years said, "We must provide a weapon, a tool that's able to win, and then it's up to the team to do their best. We can make them fail if something doesn't work right or goes wrong -- a board doesn't go up as quick or well as it should, then there is nothing the sailors can do to recover from that."

A top shore crew is critical and without which the teams couldn't function; they're behind-the-scenes, but never forgotten or under appreciated.

How It Works

At the beginning of an event, the shore crew reassembles the boat after it has arrived by container from the previous venue. They rebuild it, put the sails on, and service all the moving parts, making sure every inch is operating in peak condition. The boats are assembled two days before racing starts so the sailors can practice and make sure all is good.

When the racing begins, the shore crew is on the team RIB (a zip-a-dee fast motorboat) with a tool kit and spare parts in case anything happens that can be dealt with quickly in the water. If more serious damage is done, the boat is taken out of the water for repairs in the technical area. If a boat capsizes, the shore crew is the first responder, along with the event's water safety team.

The shore crew are composite engineers, boat repairers, technicians, and sailors, and sometimes just a shoulder to cry on if a race doesn't go well. Most, if not all shore crew continue to be active sailors themselves.

But where they really shine is when there's a big collision and they must make repairs overnight so the boat can be back in the water for the next day's race. They'll work through the night, and sometimes for days with little sleep, depending on the severity of the damage. What seems like just a small scratch to us mere mortals, or an extra layer of paint that didn't get sanded, has an impact on how the boat can perform and hydrofoil. A little scratch could be a 3-hour repair job.

I chatted with a couple of shore crew members for about 30 minutes each on their respective boats that were docked. It took more than a day for me to get my equilibrium back just from the rocking motion. It wasn't dizziness exactly, more like feeling as though wherever I was standing or sitting, was bobbing in the water; I needed to acclimate to the ocean while on land!

Different Strokes for Different Folks

"Like a good or bad dentist that can make your tooth look better or worse, that's what our work is like on the boat, not just in its appearance, but how it functions," said João.

João fell in love with the wind and the sea at a very early age, long before he got into racing, and the love affair has lasted his entire career. "I went from the womb to the ocean at just 6 months of age," he said. "Now, my wife says that I don't dance, but I tell her that every day if the wind and waves want to dance with me, I dance."

All teams have a different configuration of shore crew. Alinghi, which won the Extreme Sailing Series in 2008, 2014, and 2016, has two shore crewmembers.

One of the more serious contenders in both the Extreme Sailing Series and on the world stage of sailing is Oman Air.

In looking to rekindle its country's maritime heritage, the Sultanate of Oman has been doing a big sailing push since 2008. With currently four Oman Sail sailing schools that provide training programs for men, women, and the youth, the country boasts the first Arab to sail non-stop around the world.

On their team of seasoned professional sailors, one of their 3-person shore crew is Hilal Al Zadjali, a graduate of the Oman Sail program. It's the team's goal to mix in the next generation of sailors and technical support crew to these major competitions. Hilal first learned to sail in 2009 and said, "The Oman Sail program gives me real pride in myself and my country. It doesn't matter that they're racing and I'm the shore crew, I feel that I contribute. When we win, we share the pleasure, when we don't we are there for each other."



João Cabeçadas, Swiss team Alinghi shore crew member - LLOYD IMAGES

Danish flagged SAP Extreme Sailing Team shore crew member Renato Conde prefers to fly solo; he does it all by himself. He began sailing at age 2 with his father, who to this day has a successful boatbuilding business in Portugal.

“The boat is complicated and intricate. There are places that you can only access if you take it apart, so you’ve got to be 100% sure nothing is wrong when you put it together,” he said.

The longest he has gone without sleep during a race is 2.5 days and his biggest challenge is the fact that he does everything alone because during races there’s no time to explain or worry about someone else doing the work properly.

“My dad taught me early on that if I wanted to be in the sailing world, I had to be different – not the best, just different. I think I’m an average guy but the way I’m different is that I can do everything on the boat both in and out of the water.”

Fun Facts

The Extreme Sailing Series is the United Nations of the ocean with up to 8 GC32 boats representing up to 8 nations and up to 13 nationalities. Amongst the 40+ participating sailors, there have been 11 Atlantic crossings, 12 Olympic campaigns, 4 Olympic Gold medals, 20 World Championship titles, 21 America’s Cup campaigns, 26 European Championship titles, and 99 National Championship titles.

Up Next... San Diego & Los Cabos

The Extreme Sailing Series is returning to the U.S. for the second time ever, making its West Coast debut, in San Diego from October 19 – 22 in Harbor Island, followed by another first in Los Cabos, Mexico for the final edition and announcement of the 2017 series winners, from November 30 – December 3.

As the Irish blessing says, “May the wind always be at your back.” Happy sailing.

Comments, shares, and likes are welcome!

Susan Jacobs is a writer, storyteller, strategist, and world traveler. She contributed a chapter to the book “Pain, Purpose, Passion: That Was Then, This is Now,” and has a book publishing deal with The Round House Press for whom she is working on her first memoir. She is a contributing blogger for Huffington Post, Yogic Living, Thrive Global, and Identity Magazine, and her writing has appeared in FourTwoNine Magazine, Aquarian Times, Spirituality & Health, PR Week, and IndieWire.