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Sailing Sport

World of possibilities awaits after my swell start

Sam Davies
Vendée Globe diary

What a week. It was clear from the start that the Vendée Globe, the most gruelling ocean race on the planet, was going to have an eventful first few days and how right we were. Having crossed the start line in 15 to 20 knots of breeze and with a messy sea state, plus hundreds of spectator boats, all the skippers braced themselves for what turned out to be boat-breaking conditions.

The weeks leading up to the start had been incredibly emotional. Thousands of people came to the race village in Les Sables d'Olonne to see my boat, *Roxy*, and offer me presents, take pictures or ask me to sign posters. The Vendée Globe is a magical race because of its atmosphere and the public following, which is huge in France. I felt privileged to be there and travelling out to the start line was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Hundreds of thousands of people lined the canal between the dock and the open sea. Even Zinedine Zidane was there. It was a fantastic send-off.

The start was eventful because of the conditions. Even getting my shore crew off *Roxy* and on to our support boat was tricky in the massive swell. I decided very early on that I didn't want to get too involved with the other boats on the start line. A collision can undo the work of years of preparation and the race is 24,000 miles long [45,000km] so there is no point in being too bold at the start and damaging the boat.

After the first few hours I was happily placed in the middle of the pack. Only after the last spectator boat had headed back to Les Sables d'Olonne did I begin to think about what was ahead of me: a world. It is a very odd and emotional experience going from the buzz and excitement

of the race village, with 300,000 people watching your every move, to three months of racing solo. But with the weather deteriorating, there was no time to waste reminiscing.

The first night was gruelling. The wind blew up to about 40 knots, which makes every manoeuvre more draining. Every time you tack and change direction, all the gear inside the boat has to be stacked on the opposite side, which is extremely difficult when you are being thrown around in heavy seas. *Roxy* and I were getting a real hammering in gale-force winds and massive seas. It can be really difficult to live on board these carbon machines when the weather gets rough. I knew sleep and proper food were highly unlikely.

The worst onslaught came during my second night at sea, when the wind reached 55 knots — enough to lift trees out of the ground. In these conditions it is not about racing any more, it is solely about survival. I had set up my strong-wind configuration, and *Roxy* hung in there as I braced myself at the chart table. It was full-on. I went through the storm fairly unscathed, although a bottle of engine oil exploded in the back of the boat. It was like living on a moving ice rink (a rather smelly one). Luckily I didn't get seasick.

A few boats weren't as fortunate and fell victim to the storm. There is a great camaraderie among Vendée Globe skippers and it hurts all of us when a fellow skipper is forced out of the race. I was especially sorry to hear that Alex Thomson, my fellow British skipper, on board *Hugo Boss*, had been forced to retire because of a damaged hull. Ten of the 30 boats that started the race had to return to Les Sables d'Olonne; four were beyond repair and were forced to retire. It proves the adage about this race: it is the Everest of the seas.

With only five hours of sleep in three days, I was exhausted. Luckily the weather relented, which gave me the opportunity to check on the boat, eat and sleep (only for 20 minutes at

a time). I had a close call with a cargo ship off Cape Finisterre, where I was forced to crash-tack the boat to avoid a collision. But I also had a bit of a chat over the VHF [radio] with Dee Caffari, the only other female in the race, which was revitalising.

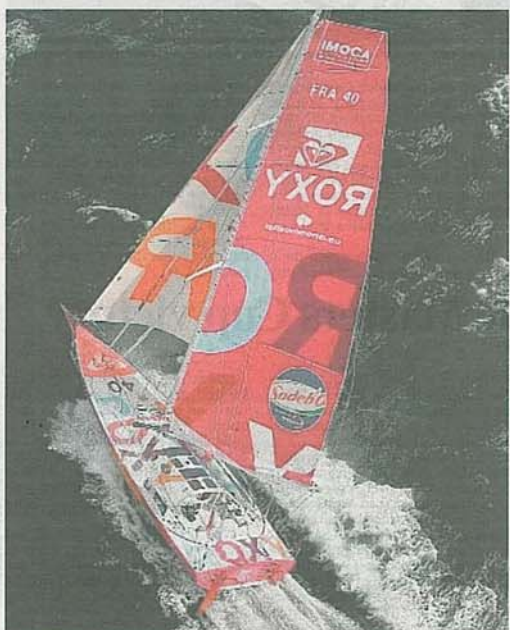
By day four, the weather had become more favourable and I was able to remove my foul-weather gear. After three days in the same clothes, it was a treat to take off my lucky red socks and wear only a T-shirt. For now, the socks are banished to the cockpit until it rains enough for me to wash them. Seeing that I only have three pairs, I need to take care

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of them because I am sure I will need some luck again soon.

A big tactical decision was our positioning as we passed Madeira and the Canaries. As we head for the Doldrums and the Equator, any wrong decision can leave you trailing the fleet in a few hours. Waking up yesterday morning and being close behind Brian Thompson and Mike Golding (two of the race favourites) with my old lady *Roxy*, meant my decision had paid dividends. It has been a good week for me, but it is only week one of a three-month drag race. In an extreme sport like sailing, anything can happen.



Globetrotter: Davies has enjoyed an eventful week of racing on board *Roxy*