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How an All-Woman Sailing Crew Proved the Critics Wrong

The documentary 'Maiden' tracks the 1989 journey of Tracy Edwards, who led the first female crew in the grueling Whitbread Round the World Race



Tracy Edwards, far left, and members of Maiden's all-female crew in the 1989 Whitbread Round the World Race. PHOTO: TRACY EDWARDS/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

By *Brenda Cronin*

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Thirty years ago, 23 yachts competed in a global odyssey called the Whitbread Round the World Race. The only women in the competition were a crew of a dozen aboard a rehabbed vessel called Maiden, captained by 26-year-old Tracy Edwards.

During the race, the Maiden crew sailed more than 32,000 nautical miles, persevering through icebergs and 50-foot waves, a journey chronicled in the documentary, "Maiden," opening June 28 in New York and Los Angeles. "I'm not a great sailor," Ms. Edwards says in an interview. "I'm an average sailor. But I'm a great organizer."

The documentary began to take shape in 2015, when director Alex Holmes heard Ms. Edwards speak at his daughter's elementary school in London. "Tracy's story was not only powerful and compelling and very personal and emotional but very important and had a relevance today that really, really struck me," says Mr. Holmes, whose work includes the BBC miniseries "Dunkirk" and the documentary "Stop at Nothing: The Lance Armstrong Story."

Born in England, Ms. Edwards was expelled from school at 15 and left home a year later, finding work as a cook on boats in the Greek islands. She hated cooking but loved being at sea and learned to sail by pestering the navigators who charted the vessels' courses.

She wangled her way into the 1985 Whitbread Round the World Race, finding a captain who finally agreed to take her on as a cook. In the competition, known today as the Ocean Race, yachts circle the globe over several months, sailing in nonstop stages that last for weeks. Ms. Edwards was one of four women in the race. She returned to England determined to assemble an all-female crew—the first—to compete in the 1989 Whitbread.

The reaction from yachting rivals and journalists ranged from skepticism to hostility. Some treated Maiden as a novelty, Ms. Edwards recalls, or predicted they would fail to complete even the first leg of the grueling and dangerous race. "How many times were we told we couldn't do it," Ms. Edwards says in the documentary, recalling people warning: "You're not strong enough."



Ms. Edwards at a 2018 reunion with Maiden's crew from the Whitbread. She says people warned before the race, 'You'll all die.'
PHOTO: MICHAEL CHESTER/THE MAIDEN FACTOR

You're not skilled enough. You'll all die."

With time running out, she gave up on building a boat and looked for one to restore. She flew to Cape Town, where she found the 58-foot racing yacht in dry dock. She bought it for £110,000 (roughly \$370,000 today) and persuaded a captain to transport it back to England atop his ship. The passage up the west coast of Africa left Maiden covered in red sand from the Sahara. "She looked awful," Ms. Edwards says. The crew she had recruited—not all experienced in long-distance ocean racing—weren't impressed.



Ms. Edwards, with binoculars, and crewmember Mikaela Von Koskull aboard Maiden during the Whitbread. PHOTO: TRACY EDWARDS/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

Ms. Edwards hadn't envisioned herself as Maiden's captain. "I thought, I can put this project together and then I'll just find a skipper," she says. "Then I couldn't find a skipper." King Hussein of Jordan, whom Ms. Edwards had met while she was cooking on boats, helped fund Maiden's entry in the Whitbread and encouraged her to take the helm. She ended up being both skipper and navigator. "I was utterly terrified," she says. "But the team was so great."

For the documentary, interviews with the Maiden crew peeled back decades-old memories. The women spoke about tensions among the group and the challenges they faced at sea working with four hours on duty followed by four hours of rest. The first leg, from Southampton, England, to Punta del Este, Uruguay, began in September 1989. The final one, from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., back to Southampton, launched in May 1990. Maiden placed second overall in its division.

From the race, there is footage taken by a fixed camera aboard the boat and videos shot by Ms. Edwards's childhood friend, Joanna Gooding, who had signed on as cook and photographer. "We realized that whatever happened, whether we succeeded or failed, this needed to be on the record," Ms. Edwards says.

The 1989 race "was never really meant to be about all-female crews," she says. "It was meant to show the guys that we're capable of being on the boats with them and that racing around the world is a total level playing field." After the Whitbread, Ms. Edwards broke world records in events sailing with both all-female and mixed crews, before retiring in 2005.

Five years ago, the vessel that changed her life was abandoned in the Seychelles and destined to be scrapped. Ms. Edwards—who returned to school at 47 to earn a university degree and now

advocates for girls' education through her organization, the Maiden Factor Foundation—crowdsourced funds for another rehab job. Today, Maiden is on a two-year world tour, sailing with an all-female crew that visits schools to teach children about sailing and thinking for themselves.

Sailing, Ms. Edwards says, is intertwined with her other passion: history. “The thing I love above anything else about being at sea is I feel that I’m in the past,” she says. “I’m seeing what Columbus would have seen: just a blue saucer.”

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