



The Ocean Race Europe



Q&A with SA's Matt Whitehead

Cape Town-based sailor Matt Whitehead recently took part in The Ocean Race Europe as part of Team Childhood 1. We caught up with the 27-year-old to find out about the experience.

1. How did you get involved with Team Childhood 1?

Funnily enough, because of the pandemic and a lot of sailing being cancelled I was doing some short-term contract work next door for a local Dutch boat builder and I bumped into the boat

captain in the marina. A real example of "right place, right time". We stayed in contact and they eventually needed some help with boat prep and that immediately opened the door for some trials and training sailing.

2. Can you tell us a bit about the team, the experience and your results?

Childhood 1 is a Dutch/Swedish team based out of Holland who has a large focus on a young (under-30) and mixed crew (male/female). Given the younger sailors, there isn't a lot of major "Round the World" experience, however the boat is filled with some really talented sailors, coming from Olympic 49er & Laser programmes, match racing and other big boat offshore sailing experience.

To sum up the last two months, we finished a brief few weeks of training in the Hague to make final core team selections and from there the boat was delivered to Lithuania for the start of the Ocean Race Europe Prologue (a three-leg race in the Baltic Sea). Leg 1 saw us race from Klaipėda, Lithuania to Gdynia, Poland, a short 24hr sprint westwards in varying conditions. We managed a third place on this leg which wasn't what we were hoping for but was only the first real offshore race we had done as a new team.

Leg 2 was from Gdynia to Stockholm, Sweden, again a quick 24hr sprint in mainly reaching to downwind conditions and very flat water (Champagne sailing). This leg we took first place, which was a great feeling after all the hard prep work.

Leg 3 saw the four teams race to a virtual finish off the southern tip of Sweden from outside the archipelago of Stockholm, where we finished second behind team Ambersail. This, however, taking into account the inshore races at each stopover, meant we had taken the overall win, pipping team Poland with the previous leg win being the tie breaker.

It was for sure smiles all round and exactly the result we were aiming for. Then we moved onto the Main event, The Ocean Race Europe:

Leg 1: Lorient to Cascais

This leg was pretty brutal. Very rough downwind and power reaching conditions in some pretty decent swell at some stages. Our top speeds were around 28/29knts, not quite breaking 30 but still a fantastic feeling being that powered up. For a period of around 12 hours we averaged about 22 knots and were SOAKING wet!

We tussled for third with the Polish team of Bouwe Bekking until the finish where we both ended up leapfrogging the bunch, during one of the craziest park-ups I have ever experienced. We led to the line and unfortunately had a total disaster with a last-minute sail change allowing Team Austria and Ambersail to snatch it away by just a few seconds. That one will hurt for a while.

Leg 2: Cascais to Alicante

Again, a total mix of conditions from upwind to downwind, and everything in between. We had beautiful conditions down the Portuguese coast to Gib and then got greeted by 40knts on the nose and negative current (BAD WAVES!)

We bashed our way through Gibraltar still within reach of third place with Akzo and Mirpuri fighting up front.

Coming into the line, yet again we had a park-up, passing Poland putting us third, but now also Viva Mexico sneaking up from behind. The final lightwind tacking duel up the beach between us and Mexico saw us blow up a furler on the big Masthead Zero (which we use upwind in less than 12 knots or so). This gave Mexico the lead on us, all the while Poland had stayed offshore sailing their own route to the line. The wind eventually filled in for the Polish leaving us in fifth and the Mexicans in fourth. A real emotional rollercoaster, especially after four days of not much sleep.

Leg3: Alicante to Genoa

Initially we decided to stay with the pack and play the short-term game with the others close by, however due to a very early split in the fleet and a different weather forecast we ended up splitting and being the only 65 to go north of the Balearic Islands. A bold strategy according to some. This worked for us though and we came back into second when we converged again south of France. We played the coast again all the way to the Italian towns of San Remo and the likes and then made a call to continue inshore. This was again a split with Akzo and Mirpuri who ended up getting the south-easterly breeze first and rocketing to the line, finishing around 6hrs ahead of us. Devastating for Poland who had led for a majority of the leg.

Overall, we ended up fourth behind Poland. We were, of course, aiming for a podium finish, but this was still a great result for such a new and young team.

3. How has it been different to other racing you've done?

The offshore sprint racing is quite different as you need good control of your "on/off" switch. Of course you need to be fully switched on and focused for these sprint legs and sometimes it can be harder pushing for 24 to 48hrs straight with no sleep, than a 10 to 15 day leg where you get into a routine and usually sleep better. At Least I feel that way, of course it depends on the conditions too.

It also, of course, differs completely to normal "daily" course racing, where you finish up for the day and head back to shore for a nice meal and a proper bed. Here you're locked in until the finish, usually followed by a bit of a chill for a day.

4. What have been some of the highlights?

The First place in the Stockholm leg during Prologue was a great one and, of course, being able to sail past some great areas like the Bay of Biscay and Gibraltar.

5. Going right back to the beginning, how did you first get involved in sailing?

I started on what I think most sailors start and that was the Optimist. This however only lasted a few months as my family were massive multihull fans, and of course as a youngster, I just wanted to go fast. The adrenaline side of it hooked me!

I started racing first with my dad Colin who taught me all the ropes and basics of strategy and tactics, as well as when to take risks and when not to. Along with my mom, Tracy, who was also a dinghy sailor growing up, sailing Dabbies and eventually sailing World Championships around the world crewing for my dad. I owe everything to these two role models!

6. What do you love about sailing?

Definitely the team aspect of it. Working together with a group to make a boat go as fast as possible. Whether the group is just two of you or 12 of you, the goal is always to go fast, in the right direction.

7. How do you think South African sailors compare to others around the world that you've competed with in terms of skill and experience?

I think South Africa has such an awesome, mixed pool of talented sailors from young and old(er). Of course, we have all the big names from the Shosholozza days and past Volvo Ocean Race sailors, so the experience is there! And by any of my experiences, these sailors are more than happy to share knowledge.

I think geographically it is difficult growing up as an RSA sailor, just because we are so far from any of the major international events, whether it is a Europeans for a Laser sailor or some 40ft sailing in the Solent. This however does not mean we don't have the talent, and it shows in our local events, such as in the exciting Cape 31 circuit, where we have some of the best one design sailing happening in the world right now.

8. Can you tell us a bit about your experience with Team Phoenix in the 52 Super Series?

I joined Team Phoenix in the beginning of 2019 in a Strategist/Float position. Of course, being a fully professional team, it was a steep learning curve but one I was ready to dive head first into. It has been my goal to race at this level, for as long as I can remember.

It has been an amazing team to be involved with from how organised the logistics and shore crew are, to how efficient and detailed our daily de-briefs are. It has taught me a great deal how teams need to be run in order to achieve results. This I believe can be applied to any level of sailing when you're eventually at a national or international event and racing seriously for results, and in any size boat or class.

9. How has the Covid pandemic affected you in the last year and a half?

It seriously hit the pause button on the sailing world for the last 18 months and only now it is starting to feel like the industry is getting going again.

10. What's next for you now?

I have some events lined up with other programmes in between the 52 Super Series, otherwise I still have my eyes set on The Ocean Race next year. There is still a lot to happen between now and then, but this is the big-ticket item.