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Tracy Edwards and *Maiden* (E): southern ocean decision

Tracy Edwards, Gerard Seijts, and Ann Frost wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On September 2, 1989, *Maiden* squared up at the start line of the Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race in Southampton, England. The first leg of the race would take the sailors across the Atlantic Ocean to Uruguay—a distance of 10,997 kilometres (5,938 nautical miles). Just minutes after the race started, members of the media were making bets on how far the all-female crew would get before turning back. Many thought the crew would be lucky to get out of British waters, and few, if any, thought the women would finish the first leg. The sailing world held its collective breath, waiting for the team to fail.

To the surprise of many observers, *Maiden* finished third in her class on the first leg. The yachting press was amazed to learn that the crew of 12 women had come this far and was still alive. But the team was disappointed, and Tracy Edwards was, in her own words, “absolutely gutted.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Edwards felt she had made some bad navigational decisions. In retrospect, she realized she had crossed the equator in the wrong place. The result was that *Maiden* spent longer than Edwards wanted in the Intertropical Convergence Zone—the region near the equator where the trade winds of the northern and southern hemispheres came together in monotonous, windless weather. When the wind did fill in, *Maiden* was on the wrong side of the low pressure that provided it. In Edwards’s words, “I will never stop being angry with myself . . . . I just can’t, ever, because we could have won.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, the team spirit was good and became stronger by the day.

The questions from the press were, nonetheless, predictable; for example, how did 12 women get along on a small boat? This question mystified Edwards and her colleagues because men were rarely asked how *they* got along. Instead, men were asked about tactics and the myriad challenges they encountered during the race—all sensible yachting questions. But for many in the press, *Maiden* was more of a human-interest story than a serious competitor in the race.

The lack of respect directed toward *Maiden* did help the crew to focus. More than ever before, the women were ready to take on the challenge, and they were determined to excel. Edwards recalled, “Some were openly laughing at us, and that really hurt. It just proved how much we had to do and how important it was to succeed, because if we didn’t, it would be harder for women the next time.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The second and longest leg of the race started on October 28, 1989, after a three-week stopover. The race took the crews from Uruguay through the treacherous Southern (Antarctic) Ocean, all the way to Australia—a total of 13,520 kilometres (7,300 nautical miles) and about a five-week trip. The 1989 edition of the Whitbread had this extremely long leg because crews bypassed South Africa due to boycotts of the governing apartheid system.

This was going to be not only the longest but also the toughest leg of the race. The boats would encounter icebergs, temperatures of −30 degrees Celsius, frostbite, gale-force winds, and massive waves that could throw yachts around like toys. Stress and sleep deprivation would be the crew’s constant companions, and they would also deal with mental and physical deterioration. Sensory deprivation was also a major issue: there would be no sun and no blue sky. Everything would be grey except the waves, which would be almost black.

Not a single crew would approach this leg without some trepidation. People often said that the Southern Ocean tried to kill you, that there was no time to take a break, and that there was almost no chance of rescue if anything happened. Crews were on their own. Yet while conditions would be horrifying, the sailing would be incredible, especially for thrill-seekers. Winning the leg would be a significant bonus for any crew.

Edwards felt upbeat. Her crew had done many miles together and felt strong as a team. She suggested a bold approach to crossing the Southern Ocean: the crew would go further south than the other boats in their class to make up time that they had lost in the first leg. This route would be the shortest and hence the fastest. Edwards reflected:

Racing along latitudes gives you more options than racing along longitudes. You have the choice of doing great circle routes, which shorten your mileage,[[4]](#footnote-4) but in the Southern Ocean, this comes with risks if you go too far south. You don’t want to be in the iceberg fields, on the wrong side of the low pressures, or over an Antarctic shelf.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is a juggling act between the shortest route and the biggest risks.

I was clear that I wanted to do something vastly different to the other boats on this leg. On *Atlantic Privateer*,[[6]](#footnote-6) we sailed the furthest south on the Southern Ocean leg, and we won. I did, however, remember how dreadful some of the sailing conditions had been—terrifying and miserable. The living conditions had been atrocious.

The southern approach would be the fastest, but it also carried the most risk for *Maiden*. Female defiance was one thing; reckless action with so many things at stake—their lives, reputation, and investment—would be another. Was the team up for it? How should the decision be made? Because not all crew members had deep experience in sailing oceans, should it be an executive decision? Or should there be discussion as to whether it was even a prudent course of action? And most importantly, how could Edwards ensure that she and her crew did not act with overconfidence and hubris?

1. Michael Brown, “‘Tin Full of Smart, Fast Tarts’—How *Maiden*, the First All-Female Ocean Race Crew, Shocked the World,” Stuff, June 6, 2019, https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/other-sports/113257105/tin-full-of-smart-fast-tarts--how-maiden-the-first-allfemale-ocean-race-crew-shocked-the-world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Brown, “‘Tin Full of Smart, Fast Tarts’”. Brown, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Blane Bachelor, “Tracy Edwards on What It Took to Race Around the World,” Outside, June 28, 2019, https://www.outsideonline.com/2398738/tracy-edwards-maiden-documentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The shortest distance between two points on the earth’s surface was a straight line, but because the earth’s surface was curved, the route appeared on a map as though it were curved, which led to the name “great circle route.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ice shelves were extensions of land, which could be covered by water. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Edwards took part in her first Whitbread as cook aboard the *Atlantic Privateer* in 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)