

features

Leader2

Round the world on eighty waves

Edwin O'Connor is in the height of it at the moment taking all the world's oceans can throw at him and his crewmates on Delta Lloyd in sailing's greatest test, the Volvo Ocean Race, writes **Kevin Corbett**

YOU'RE clipped to the side of a yacht barrelling through high seas at 25 knots, soaking wet, freezing cold and, oh no, here comes another wave.

There's nothing you can do except submit to the brutal force of nature heading straight for you, catching you and flinging you along the length of the vessel, tumbling blind, hoping you don't land against something sharp, or even blunt. It's passed. Now what do you do?

"You man up," says Loughlin native Edwin O'Connor, crewman on the Delta Lloyd one of seven boats left contesting this year's Volvo Ocean Race. "Get back up there, grab that sail and pull it forward again. It's a fact of life on board. It's like getting a powerhose point blank in the chest and no matter what kind of seals you have on, the water gets in, but you just get on with it."

There is no hint of weakness in those words, no



Edwin, right, and stand-in skipper Chuny fighting to 'put the spinnaker back in the snake' below deck in Delta Lloyd on leg two of the Volvo Ocean Race



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sumed it would be natural their son would like sailing. With parents' natural caution, they waited until he was 11 before sending him back to Tarbert for a week-long sailing course and he got his first taste of life on deck.

A door was opened into his future and he stepped through. His dad purchased a boat and they would sail up and down the estuary and soon Edwin was on board other dinghies with Pat O'Loughlin from Glin. From there it was all go.

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a tidal stream running down the back of Taiwan or if we go between China and Taiwan there's another, stronger, current and the wind is in opposition to that. So we're putting the boat together really, really well, there are no shortcuts at the moment."

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There is no hint of machismo in these words, no chest-puffing male pride, only the team imperative: people are here to work, to race and there can be no shirking.

Watching such scenes on TG4's coverage of the race from the comfort of the living room, we may shudder and wince and be happy it's not us, but it doesn't put across just how demanding this event is.

Even when you're not almost capsizing in huge swells, there is still the business of trying to win a race which means pushing the boat to its limits. That means pushing the crew to its limits too and concepts of day and night recede into a punishing rota.

"There is no morning or night really," says Edwin, "we're running a four hours on, four hours off shift which means you've four hours' sleep then four hours on deck pushing the boat as hard as you can. You're trimming sails, moving the sails, changing their shape, moving the weight fore and aft depending on the weather conditions." Then repeat, whatever the weather.



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Delta Lloyd hits the wild Southern Ocean on its run to Cape Town during leg one of the Volvo Ocean Race which set sail from Alicante in the Mediterranean

It's demanding stuff and the crew are expending more energy in 24 hours than they can put back in, using 5,000 calories, but only managing to consume around 3,500. When you do the sums there is only so much of this sort of sailing that you can keep up before you're physically unable for it.

"They say you can expect to lose between seven and nine kgs per leg, and so far I've lost a total of 11kgs," says Edwin, "when you reach shore then, you eat as much as you can of the right food, maybe a bit of chocolate if you can, and then hit the gym. You're just bulking back up to compensate for what you lose on the water. It's a bit of a vicious circle."

Living conditions are pretty basic on board, "bog standard" according to Edwin and the food looks for all the world like what you give to a baby, packed obviously with all the nutrients needed to keep the guys going, physically at least. The mental challenge of rising above these gruelling conditions is another matter and if you're not psyched up for it, then "you'd be gone after the first leg".

"You've got to keep a light atmosphere on board, or it just gets way too tense," says Edwin. "In the next leg we're looking at seas maybe five, six metres high, winds up to 60 knots and a wind chill factor that will make the air temper-

ature around -2. Couple that with being soaking wet for 24 hours and it's hard to stay positive. But you have to, everyone has to go through it. The mental and physical challenges are tied up together."

As if that wasn't enough to contend with, there are pirates too. No, really.

"Yeah, that was our attitude when we heard it first, we thought it was all fun and games, Pirates of the Caribbean and all that, but we went to a seminar with a professional naval officer and that changed our minds and we saw for ourselves that it is a very real danger."

"After we came through the Straits of Gibraltar on our first



Edwin spends a fair amount of time fixing things: the water maker in this case on leg one of the race

leg we were approached by a pretty big gun boat and it came up beside us. They were looking for money and they asked us to take our sails down. They said they were government officials but they refused to talk to us over the radio, so we didn't stop obviously.

"It's pretty chilling though. I was above deck at the time and had my back to these guys and was working hard to get more and more speed and it was not a nice feeling to be doing that wondering what they were up to. You're pretty vulnerable out there as this boat can only go so fast in certain conditions. We had been told to steer clear of the Moroccan coast, but I guess we weren't as far off as

recommended."

It's part of the game, he says matter-of-factly, a game from which he now makes a full time living. Having quit his job with Modular Automation in Shannon two and a half years ago, he joined up in the Caribbean with Delta Lloyd's skipper, Limerickman Ger O'Rourke, with whom he had been sailing on and off for around seven years. From that association has come this opportunity to sail in the world's greatest yacht race.

He has his parents to thank for this. Living in Loughill, looking out over the estuary where boats would cruise up and down in the summer, Raymond and Nora O'Connor pre-



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sumed it would be natural their son would like sailing. With parents' natural caution, they waited until he was 11 before sending him back to Tarbert for a week-long sailing course and he got his first taste of life on deck.

A door was opened into his future and he stepped through. His dad purchased a boat and they would sail up and down the estuary and soon Edwin was on board other dinghies with Pat O'Loughlin from Glin. From there it was all go.

"I started my cruiser racing career with John Conway, a long time ago now. My first race was in Kilrush I was just given a winch handle and told wind in some sails, which I did very enthusiastically," he recalls cheerfully.

The natural progression was to off-shore sailing where he came under the wing of O'Rourke and it was with him he gained the experience that would allow him to step up to the level he is at now.

"I've done two transatlantic crossings, one with Ger another on an Oyster 72 which is a bit more comfortable, but it's a step up for sure. The level of sailing we are at right now is phenomenal. I'm getting the chance to sail with some of the best in the world and we're sailing against some more of the best in the world. These guys have been on PP circuits, some of them have done between seven and eight Volvo Ocean Races. Sure, it's a challenge but you've got to step up, you've got to be in the right frame of mind."

Certainly so for the next leg: "The conditions are going to be a lot more violent, definitely a hell of a lot colder. We're looking at what we call wind against tide conditions. There's

a tidal stream running down the back of Taiwan or if we go between China and Taiwan there's another, stronger, current and the wind is in opposition to that. So we're putting the boat together really, really well, there are no shortcuts at the moment."

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While Edwin and his teammates are happy to still be in the race, there is determination to move up the leader board and belief in the boat's ability to compete.

"The boat is still quick even though it's first generation and it's still very well equipped. I know on the leg to Cochin we were only one or two miles from the leaders, so the boat definitely has the potential to be competitive, but it's up to us to keep it together and, well, with the grace of God not break what we broke this time, then we can do well for Ger and for Delta Lloyd."

This Saturday they leave Singapore and set sail for Qingdao in China, ahead of them the wildest seas yet, but Edwin is nothing if not focused, secure in the knowledge there is nowhere he'd rather be, come hell or high water.

Follow Team Delta Lloyd's progress on www.volvooceanrace.org or the team's own website www.teamdeltalloyd.com. TG4 is screening weekly programmes each Saturday at 11am, repeated Sunday at 6pm