



Photo credit: Sander Pluijm

‘The winner is the one who is best at coping with setbacks’

One of the keynote speakers at the ICEC conference is Sander Pluijm, head of content at media agency UM. In 2008, Pluijm participated in the Volvo Ocean Race as a media crew member with Team Delta Lloyd. His lecture is about team building, working together, working under pressure, leadership, performance, achieving success, overcoming setbacks and of course about his extreme experiences during the Race.

Text and interview by Sam Dekkers

The theme of the conference is ‘Predictable projects in a dynamic world’. What can you predict in an Ocean Race? Sander: “To determine the fastest route, you try to predict the legs very accurately. The more accurate the data, the more accurate the predictions and the faster you can sail. The weather is predictable but there are always unexpected outcomes. Sometimes you have to deviate from the route. That requires a great deal of improvisation. Flexibility is extremely important in an unpredictable world.”

“In addition to the weather models, you collect as much data as possible about the boat in the run-up to the race. You want to answer questions such as: under which wind angle does the boat sail, with which sail at which speed? You adapt endlessly and you keep tweaking until you have reached an optimum. In addition to natural phenomena, you also have to deal with two other unpredictable factors: materials and the most important factor, man. The boat can break and people make mistakes despite intensive training. Our boat had suffered considerable damage. What do you do when the mast breaks off? Or when the wind falls? What solutions do you come up with? It is interesting to see that a trained team of professionals is less impressed by very impactful situations.”



Photo credit: Sander Pluijm.

How do you create a winning team?

“Due to circumstances, I fell into a team that was not yet a team. We needed the first half of the race to build up the team and to learn as much as possible about the boat so that we knew exactly how to sail it as fast as possible. Winning the race with our second-hand boat and our team that started late was not realistic. Our goal was therefore not to win the race, but to make sure that we ended up on the podium during the race. In the last leg of the first half of the race we suffered a great deal of damage. We skipped an entire leg because the boat had to be repaired. In Brazil we came back into the race and managed to make it to the podium. We won the In Port Race and later we also finished third and fourth.”

“A lot of training is, of course, important, but above all, as a team you have to have the same goal in mind. That means making sacrifices, putting egos aside, counting yourself out for the benefit of the results, committing yourself and being 100% fit. Performance is paramount. The team’s growth curve was steep. As a result, we created momentum, people started to believe in it and there was mental dominance, which all counted in the team’s performance.”

“A statement you often hear about the Volvo Ocean Race is: ‘The one who wins is the one who is best at coping with setbacks’. The men were not surprised that something broke on the boat, because something breaks anyway. There is no question of giving up, that only happens when all the danger has passed. Everyone has a task and falls back into their automatism. That goes very decisively. The winning team is the team that is best placed to do that.”

One of the topics at the conference is sustainability. What does sustainability have to do with sailing?

“The Volvo Ocean Race is inseparably linked to major climatic issues and climate change. For example, the Race is linked to a lot of research. The media crew members had instructions to take water samples from each ocean to see which organisms were living there. The enormous amount of shipping around the world causes large unnatural movements of water.

Large sea containers pump millions of litres of ballast water from, for example, Rotterdam and that water is discharged again at, for example, Panama. That water doesn’t belong there, and all the organisms that are in the water certainly don’t belong there. As a result of this research, agreements have been made worldwide to limit these movements of water.



Sander Pluijm
Photo credit: Sander Pluijm

The theme for the upcoming race is the plastic soup. We really did see that soup. We sailed right through it twice on the Atlantic Ocean. It is really scary to see. In certain windless places in the world, you can recognise the soup by the grey colour of the water.”

What do you remember most about the Race?

“The tag line of the Volvo Ocean Race is: ‘Life at the Extreme’ and in my experience, that covers the subject quite well. The Race is very dangerous. Many editions have seen people being thrown overboard. Fortunately not with us. Everything about this trip is ‘too’. It is too dangerous, the waves are too high – in the southern ocean the waves were some 15-16 metres high – it can be too cold but also too hot. Everything on the boat is magnified and extreme. I have been extremely lucky and extremely anxious and emotional. You touch all sides of the spectrum.”

About Sander

Sander works as Head of Content at media agency UM. He leads a team that is responsible for developing creative media and content solutions as part of a media strategy. In addition, he is involved in special projects in relation to innovation and new media.

The Ocean Race

The Ocean Race is a sailing competition around the world that is held every three years. The race is made up of legs of about three weeks, the entire race lasts about nine months. The first edition began in 1973. The Ocean Race is considered to be the toughest sailing competition for teams. Three times a Dutch boat won the race, a record.

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