



It's shortly after five o'clock

on a Wednesday in July. The Royal Bermuda Yacht Club is busy with men and women hauling sails and cases of Heineken along the docks, getting their boats ready for the weekly beer can regatta. I've been invited on board *Lix*, an eight meter J/80 owned by my uncle and a consortium of other sailor dads.

Wednesday night races aboard *Lix* are normally a guy thing—a chance for the good ol' boys to drink beers, chat breeze and yell “starboard!” like they used to. Over the years I've filled in from time-to-time as chief beer tactician or when they need some ballast in heavy winds, but today I'm actually needed. The usual sailor dad suspects are all off the island. The lone remainder, Hal Kempe, is in charge. Instead of another day out with the boys, we're sailing with the girls today: local Volvo Ocean Race competitor Emily Nagel and her #1 fan, Amelie Kempe—Hal's 11-year-old daughter.

If you hadn't heard, Nagel competed in this year's Volvo Ocean Race aboard the Dutch team AkzoNobel. The 24-year-old is the first Bermudian to participate in the 45,000-mile race across the world, known as the “Everest of sailing” due to the grueling conditions teams face. But more broadly, and perhaps more importantly, Nagel is part of an inaugural class of women to compete this year in sailing's most prestigious open-water race. For the 13th edition, teams that wanted to seriously compete had to have at least one woman on board. The change wasn't without controversy, of course, but more on that later.

JOURNEY TO THE TOP

Nagel had only graduated from the University of Southampton in 2016. She'd fallen in love with sailing around the age of ten, when, like most young sailors, she was thrown into an Opti. She progressed through to Lasers just two years later, but it wasn't until she went to boarding school in the UK, where she began sailing RS Fevas, that her love for racing really set it.

“I'd raced pretty much straight away as soon as I got into Optis, but it was when I got into the Feva when suddenly I started to do a lot better and started to enjoy myself a lot more,” she said. Her performances didn't go unnoticed, and at 15-years-old she was selected for the UK National Team. By the time that college came around, Nagel knew she wanted to continue sailing—the question was what degree she'd pursue.

Right time.
Right place.
Right attitude.

Emily Nagel returned to Bermuda this summer after achieving her dream of sailing in the Volvo Ocean Race—and became a role model for young women in the process.

WRITTEN BY W. C. STEVENSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES BLAKE/
VOLVO OCEAN RACE

Held every three years, the Volvo Ocean Race is a grueling test of sailing prowess that Bermudian Emily Nagel (pictured right) was thrilled to take part in this past year.



Nagel sailed for nine months with Team AkzoNobel in the 2017/18 Volvo Ocean Race.



“Growing up here most people are just taught about business, insurance, banking... And then in the UK if you're good at maths and physics you're pushed towards engineering—mechanical or aero. That sort of stuff,” she said.

“So I was thinking I was going to be a mechanical engineer. I wanted to do submersible vehicles for ocean exploration. That part of Bermuda always clicked with me. But then after being at university for about five weeks, I discovered this entire branch of engineering that was naval architecture. I thought, ‘Well, I have no interest in cars. Why am I doing this when I could be studying boats?’”

She was already sailing with most of the naval architecture students, so making the switch was hardly a tough choice. “That was probably the best move I made.”

“[Naval architecture is] basically mechanical engineering but for boats,” she explained. “So they do the hydrodynamics, look at boat design, everything from dinghies up to cruise

ships and tankers. It's the marine world of engineering.”

The new focus in her studies would give her a far better understanding of the technical side of sailing when on the water, but more crucially, it set her up for the next big chapter in her life following graduation—working for the America's Cup team SoftBank Team Japan. She just didn't know it yet. For the time being, her goal was to make the cut for Team BDA in the Red Bull Youth America's Cup. She had already competed in the 2015 ISAF Team Racing World Championships, as well as other world and European championships, and would be one of the most experienced sailors gunning for a spot on the team.

“That was my final year goal, which everyone thought was insane,” she laughed. She would have to juggle graduating from university while training day and night in the gym, getting strong enough to crew a high-performance, foiling catamaran and flying between Bermuda and the UK attending team trials and training camps. Three days after her final exams she was back in Bermuda, training with the other Team BDA hopefuls.

But training for Team BDA was only taking up a couple of weeks per month, and Nagel found herself with more free time than she's used to.

“I don't like free time. I like to be busy, and I knew if the Cup was in Bermuda then I had to find a way to work with a team—whether it was sweeping floors, or designing, or being on

a shore team. I didn't care what, I just wanted to be involved. So I started talking to different teams, just pestering them, then eventually managed to get an internship with SoftBank. So I was working full-time but taking a week off every month to do the Team BDA training, and that continued until March when I got an offer from SoftBank asking me to come on full-time.”

Despite her commitment to Team BDA, and with just a few weeks until the final team was announced, Nagel accepted the offer from SoftBank—a chance she said she just couldn't turn down.

“I kinda had to go through the adult conversation in my head. ‘You can sail in the big fast boat or you can be part of a real team and actually be there for the Cup.’ It was an incredibly hard decision because I loved all the guys. It was a team of crazy, crazy brothers...we'd sailed the Gold Cup together and it wasn't long before we were going to get to the 45... but joining SoftBank was what I had to do.”

Though her primary duties were on the engineering side for SoftBank, Nagel made sure her efforts didn't go unnoticed. “Most of the girls on the team were on the logistical side. They didn't get involved in things like the wing lift and stuff like that. But I made that one of my daily jobs—roll the boat out, get everything in place, wash the boat down at the end of the day. Any little task, I wanted to do it.”

While getting a job with an America's Cup

Team would satisfy most aspiring sailors, Nagel isn't one to get complacent. The Cup is only temporary, after all, and the question of what to do once it's over remained. Which brings us back to those rule changes for the 2017–18 Volvo Ocean Race.

BREAKING VOLVO'S GLASS CEILING

For a girl who lists Dame Ellen MacArthur as one of her heroes, the question of what to do after the America's Cup was a simple one.

“I'd always wanted to do the Volvo. It was something I'd always dreamed of, and I was finally meeting so many guys that have done it. A lot of the America's Cup sailors had been involved in Volvo campaigns, whether it was sailors or shore team, so I thought, ‘How am I going to get there? Well, they're allowing girls in the teams now, surely they will continue that in the future.’”

To be precise, the Volvo Ocean Race has always allowed women to compete, but in a sport dominated by men, such instances were few and far between. While the previous edition of the Volvo race had seen an all-women's team participate, organisers doubled down on their desire to have women in the sport for 2017–18. New rule changes limited all-male crews to just seven sailors, while allowing mixed crews to have nine or ten crew members. Essentially, if you wanted to win, you had to include the girls. As a result, all seven teams had at least one woman on board.

Needless to say, some weren't happy with the move.

“A lot of guys said at the beginning, ‘No, not a chance. We're not taking women,’” said Nagel. “Women are too emotional; we're not as strong; we cry about everything, obviously; someone would end up pregnant...everything imaginable was said at some stage...whether it was serious or not, other people can be the judge.”

Ian Walker, winning skipper in the 2014–15 Volvo Ocean Race and Olympic silver medallist, put it bluntly: “If female offshore sailors ever want to compete at the same level as the best in the world then they need to train and race with the best.”

Luckily for Nagel she was already surrounded by the best, and twice a day she was in the SoftBank gym training right alongside them. Sailing a Volvo 65 requires serious grinding work and endurance, and if she ever wanted

to be on board one day, she at least needed to show she could handle the work.

“I was there every day just trying to copy whatever grinding session the Cup sailors had been doing the day before that was still up on the whiteboard. I mean, obviously I couldn't do the same levels they were, but that was my motivation.”

If luck is when preparation meets opportunity, Nagel's opportunity came in the final week of March when AkzoNobel's skipper and former SoftBank grinder Simeon Tienpont was flown in to replace a sailor that had fallen

ill. Making the actual Volvo team never even seemed like an option, she said. “It was more just, ‘What do I have to do to get there in, say, five years' time?’ I wasn't thinking I had any chance in the world of getting in for the next race.”

It seems odd that a person can put so much effort into preparing for something they didn't even consider possible. And yet when Nagel talks about it, she makes it seem like the most obvious thing in the world.

“It's kinda always been my mindset. If you want something you've gotta be ready for it in

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case it comes.”

For now, though, she just wanted some guidance towards her ultimate goal. And Tienpont was the perfect man to give it to her.

“I was asking questions about what kind of skills you need to have, how big are your shore teams, who do you normally hire, just trying to find out how all the teams are set up. I didn’t really have much of an idea.”

He entertained her pestering, and by the time he returned to Holland, he had Nagel’s CV with him.

She didn’t hear from him until a month later when he returned to Bermuda, a month spent opening up her email in the hopes of finding some correspondence. But even with Tienpont back on the island, Nagel still kept her cool. She didn’t want to bother him. The SoftBank sailors on the other hand—the men that had seen her busting ass twice a day in the gym for a month — had no problem bothering him in passing on the dock or at the lunch table—“When are you gonna take Emily for a trial?”

“He thought they were joking for a lot of it, but eventually I think he started to realise that I was actually serious, and Volvo was where I wanted to end up one day.

“And then, randomly after racing one day, after the Cup had started, I was de-rigging

and he said, ‘What are you doing at the end of June?’” She had no idea. “Go to Australia maybe?”

Tienpont offered her a better option—to cross the Atlantic aboard *AkzoNobel* and try out for the team. “Yes,” she told him. “Thank you. That’d be great.”

The second Tienpont was out of sight, she said, Nagel darted around the other side of SoftBank’s wing-sail and “totally lost my mind.”

“I saw one of the grinders, Winnie [MacFarland]—he worked in the design container a lot with us so he knew how obsessed I was with Volvo—and I was just bouncing up and down like a five-year-old.

“Winnie! Winnie! Winnie! I’m trialling! I’m trialling! And then he told me I needed to act cool and calm down, so I gathered it together a little bit, finished de-rigging the boat, and then four days after SoftBank got knocked out I was on a plane to Europe.”

Her gruelling nine-month-long journey was dutifully covered by the local paper, but there wasn’t much fuss outside of the sailing community—which is understandable, but at the same time it makes you wonder.

On the one hand there aren’t exactly legions of sailing fans. On the other...having a Bermudian compete in the Volvo Ocean Race is a pretty big deal. One wonders if there would’ve

been more hoopla if Ms. Nagel was Mr. Nagel.

Come to think of it, Flora Duffy dominated her sport for nine out of ten years, and then had to win a race here at home before I ever heard her name brought up in conversation, outside of the Olympics.

Regardless, Nagel wasn’t sailing in the Volvo Ocean Race for the acclaim—unlike all those other rock star sailors, of course. The Volvo is a challenge. It’s a chance to test yourself at the extremities of the human experience, in an environment you can’t control. A man died in this year’s race after getting swept overboard in the Southern Ocean. The Volvo is no joke. It makes you wonder why a girl in her early twenties would jump with joy at the mere chance to participate. Once out there, even Nagel began wondering the same.

“I think that first Southern Ocean leg, it really hits you quite hard. It was a three-week leg—22 days from Lisbon to Cape Town.”

The first leg saw some bad conditions, but nothing the team couldn’t handle. Leg 2 was mostly drifting and cruising on a comfortable reach. Leg 3 was the Southern Ocean, the one surrounding Antarctica—the one where a man got swept overboard and was lost immediately. In the Southern Ocean, cold waters from the Antarctic flow north to mix with warmer waters, resulting in the world’s most violent seas.

“It was scary straight away, the Southern Ocean. It’s the one everyone talks about. That was the moment where I went, ‘Wow. I’m really in the deep end here. I’ve never done anything quite like this before.’”

She’d experienced heavy weather on the open ocean before—most recently in 2016 with Jimmy Spithill on board the foiling F4 Team Falcon catamaran in a race from New York to Bermuda. She and the team battled 25-foot waves and 35-knot winds—the biggest waves Spithill said he’d ever faced. But Nagel never even considered that her life was in danger when in the hands of world-class



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sailors. That was different in the Southern Ocean.

“Okay, this is actually quite dangerous now,” she realised. It was then, at the height of peril, that she also realised her journey was not her own.

“I’ll always remember being there and thinking, ‘Okay well I’m in pain, but there’s people watching, there’s people rooting for me out there. I can’t let them down. I’m not just going to give up.’”

The people she was thinking of—friends and family aside of course—were Hal and Amelie Kempe. Kempe was the first stranger to send her his support ahead of the race—“Good luck! Bermuda’s rooting for you!”—but he also mentioned he’d be watching along with his 11-year-old daughter, also a sailor, and now a big, big fan of Emily Nagel and Team AkzoNobel.

“That was when I first noticed, ‘Oh wow, there’s actually, you know, little kids watching.’”

Kempe sent her more messages as the race progressed. He attached photos of Amelie glued to the online race tracker.

“It was just nice to have someone support-

ing you that you have no direct connection with; seeing that there are kids out there inspired by the race and excited about it,” Nagel said.

Eventually Kempe and his wife flew out to watch the start of Stage 9 in Newport, Rhode Island—Amelie couldn’t make it because of school—where they met up with Nagel for the first time.

She handed him a gift for Amelie—a Team AkzoNobel hat signed by all the women in the race—and promised that she’d take his daughter sailing once the Volvo was over.

Nine months, thousands of miles and nine continents later, that’s exactly what she does.

EMILY NAGEL: ROLE MODEL

Walking down the steps onto the dock at the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club on that Wednesday afternoon in July, I spot Nagel looking casually lost. After a brief introduction we find Kempe and Amelie, whose shyness is betrayed by her AkzoNobel rash guard and the signed hat Nagel had given her, fastened firmly atop her head.

It was a casual evening on the water, to say the least. Kempe did most of the talking for

Amelie on the first downwind leg. In between his interview-style questions, Nagel called out orders and observations for the skipper. “We can soak a bit right here,” or “Pressure coming.”

Amelie began opening up as the race progressed, asking questions here and there. She stuck to Nagel like glue, shadowing her on every tack and gybe. After the race they sat next to each other at dinner, and when her dad attempted to call it a night, Amelie politely noticed that some people still had drinks and it would be rude to leave so soon. When it finally did come time to part ways, she invited her new friend to a family barbecue that weekend. Nagel, of course, agreed.

It’s tempting to extrapolate that sort of interaction into something greater. The inclination is to use it as a metaphor of some kind—for something like girl power, but far less cliché. You want to imagine little Amelie hitting the gym in a few years to bulk up for the Volvo. Nagel doesn’t want that for her, though. The Volvo was Emily Nagel’s dream. Amelie Kempe should have her own.

“I just hope whatever she sets her heart on, she goes for that. That’s the biggest thing.”

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