

Maiden (12A)

Directed by Alex Holmes



'18 UK 1hr 37mins

Fri 15 March for at least one week

This rousing, feminist adventure documentary chronicles the epic journey of Tracy Edwards – a woman who dared to make waves and become the skipper of the first all-female sailing crew to enter the Whitbread Round the World Race.

In 1989, at the age of 24, Tracy Edwards was a cook on charter boats with a dream of sailing around the world. In a sport that was male dominated at the time, she gathered an international team of incredible yachswomen to enter the longest and most challenging race on Earth: the Whitbread Round the World Race. This ambition was opposed on all sides: her male competitors thought an all-female crew would never make it, the chauvinistic yachting press took bets on her failure, and potential sponsors rejected her, fearing they would die at sea and generate bad publicity. But Tracy refused to give up; she put everything on the line to ensure the team made it to the start line, and with the support of her remarkable crew, went on to shock the world and change the sport's extreme gender bias for good.

Exciting and inspiring, this moving portrait of resilience is a timeless ode to passion and a fascinating account of a historic breakthrough in women's sport.

This article by Katie OMalley featuring an interview with sailor Tracey Edwards MBE originally appeared on independent.co.uk in March 2019.

"I was fighting for a cause but I didn't want to be seen as a troublemaker," Tracy Edwards MBE tells me as we sit in the study of her home in southwest London. On the wall behind her is stuck a colourful map of the world. Across it, thin black arrows drawn in marker pen plot a route that, on first glance, could easily be mistaken for a pirate's treasure map. A curved streak across the Atlantic joins Southampton to Fort Lauderdale, another hugs the South American coastline down to Uruguay's Punta del Este. But the treasure charted in this map is not the pearls and diamonds of fabled children's stories but Edwards' famed path in the Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race.

In 1989, Edwards won international acclaim for being the skipper of the first all-female crew to sail around the world in the competition, now known as the Volvo Ocean Race. For nine months, her crew on board the aptly-named Maiden chartered over 32,000 nautical miles, surviving frostbite, periods of lost satellite signals, icebergs, winning two legs of the course and coming second in class – the best result for a British boat since 1977 and the best result for an all-female crew ever.

Their inspiring voyage is the subject of British director Alex Holmes'

latest documentary, Maiden. It chronicles the team from their two-year wait for sponsorship to participate in the race and Edwards remortgaging her home to buy a second-hand ship to the crew working four-hour rotating shifts 24/7 (sometimes in more than -30C temperatures) and fixing a leak in the ship mid-competition. The film is testament to the resilience and determination of the Maiden crew to confront adversity and prove women not only deserved a place in the race, but that they were serious contenders to win.

It is fitting, then, that the film – which premiered at the 2018 Toronto Film Festival to critical acclaim – is scheduled for release nationwide in the UK on 8 March – International Women's Day.

And yet, despite its appropriately-timed release date and feminist subject matter, it will come as a surprise to learn that during the race Edwards rejected the notion of feminism all together, at one point even telling reporters on camera: "I hate the word feminist."

Reflecting on that statement 30 years later, Edwards firmly clarifies: "I'm actually a big feminist."

The sailor explains that even after the women's liberation movement up until the 1980s (and arguably still today if recent comments by Dolly Parton and Sarah Jessica Parker are anything to go by) the term "feminism" was widely viewed as a "nasty, dirty, horrible word".

As a result, it wasn't until later on in the race that she realised she was not only a feminist but that the Maiden's crew was a powerful statement about women's rights that chipped away at the ever-present, yet slowly eroding, glass ceiling.

"The Duchess of Sussex said it so eloquently the other day when she said that feminism is about equality and fairness, and that's what it's meant to me since [the race]," says Edwards.

"I look at my 19-year-old daughter's generation and they don't have the awful connotations that we remember from that word – they just see it as a positive. Their male friends see it as a positive as well which I think is such a great move in the right direction."

During the entirety of the Whitbread race, the Maiden crew was relentlessly disregarded, ridiculed and underestimated solely on the basis of its gender. No sooner had the women announced their entry into the race were fellow competitors taking bets on how long they'd last in the competition, with few expecting them to make it out of British waters, let alone successfully circumnavigating the globe.

"I was completely mystified," says Edwards of the misconceptions towards the crew. Having already taken part in her first Whitbread

Round the World Race as a cook and lone female aboard the ship Atlantic Privateer in 1985, she believed she had already proven she was more than capable to compete alongside her male contemporaries.

"I'd already sailed around the world. I was strong enough and smart enough – I'd already learned the skills," she says, still dumbfounded by the resistance to her crew.

"The thing that used to get to me was [the thought that] women don't get on. Where does that come from? Did people make that up so we wouldn't get together in large groups?"

The sexist view that the female sailors were susceptible to bitchy behaviour is a bugbear frequently touched on in interviews with Maiden's crew members in the documentary, with several recalling the misogynistic line of questioning directed towards their team in comparison to their competitors.

Edwards continued: "I had lived and worked in an environment on chartered boats where lots of women worked together and we'd never had a problem. I just couldn't understand it so I thought that if that is the perception, we have to change it. That's what we set about to do."

And change it they did. During the Whitbread race, Maiden won two out of six individual legs of the race, with Edwards ultimately receiving the Yachtsman of the Year Trophy (the first woman to receive the title in its 34-year history), and made a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1990.

Despite their triumphs, the media frequently referred to the Maiden crew as "girls" as opposed to "women", with one male journalist go as far as to scornfully describe the team as a "tin full of tarts".

That said, she says her crew found being referred to as tarts at the time "funny more than anything else".

"We did laugh," she says, recalling the inherent sexist rhetoric.

"It was so far removed to who or what we were. If he'd said 'these girls are inefficient sailors', then we would've gone..." she says, screwing up her face in faux anger.

"To his credit, when we came into New Zealand and won our second leg, [the journalist] wrote 'not just a tin full of tarts, a tin full of smart fast tarts' – the ultimate accolade," she jokes.

During the race, the Maiden crew became minor celebrities to young girls and women around the world, with hundreds of supporters lining the ports to welcome them after each leg of the competition, holding up banners, throwing flowers onto the ship's deck and asking for autographs.

However, it was only after the competition that they realised their trip fulfilled more than a shared dream among female sailors but a feminist vision that transcended borders, both physical and metaphorical.

Over the years, Edwards says countless strangers have expressed their gratitude to her for the Maiden crew's feat, revealing their participation in the race inspired them to change their lives, take up sailing, and even climb Everest.

"It makes me so proud and it's taken me a long time to be able to say that," explains Edwards, adding that "women are the worst in the world" when it comes to accepting praise.

Now working as a motivational speaker, ambassador and fundraiser for girls' education, Edwards' fight for female equality and to empower women around the world is far from over.

In 2017, the original Maiden yacht underwent a full restoration after being found abandoned for over a decade in the Seychelles. A year later and with the support of Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein of Jordan – whose father King Hussein of Jordan originally helped Edwards fundraise to buy Maiden for the Whitbread race – the ship set sail on its next feminist voyage around the world.

Over the next two years as the flagship of Edwards' not-for profit organisation, The Maiden Factor, Maiden will take part in a global campaign to promote girls' education and raise money to fund projects to empower young women.

The project will charter over 54,000 nautical miles and work with several charities and campaigns – including I am Girl, Just a Drop, Girl Up and The Girls' Network – working to educate and mentor young girls who are currently unable to access education and combat gender discrimination.

"I'm so proud of being a woman at this time in history where we're all coming together and making a change. What's very interesting and positive is the difference between 30 years ago and now is that men are part of the same conversation."

Thinking about the next generation of young girls and women hoping to unlock their potential and create a better balance of equality among the sexes, Edwards says: "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something or you can't be someone."

"Stand up and go for it."

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