

# SPOTLIGHT

By **KARL WILSON** in Sydney  
karl.wilson@chinadailyapac.com

From dinghies and skiffs to oceangoing racing yachts, the Chinese are embracing the sport of sailing in a big way — and what they lack in experience they make up for with enthusiasm, determination, and drive to be among the world's best.

Although still considered a niche sport in China, sailing has captured the imagination of a growing number of men and women alike.

It already has its own local heroes, including Vicky Song and Guo Chuan, who are regarded as trailblazers for ocean racing.

Song, the first Chinese woman to circumnavigate the globe when she took part in the 2013-14 Clipper Round the World Race, has become a role model for what can be achieved, especially for women.

"The Clipper Race has changed me totally," said Song in an interview on the Clipper Round the World website as teams prepared for the 2017-18 race.

"That year on the boat I learned so much, and I think the most important thing is that it made me so much stronger mentally and it gave me so much more understanding with others.

"It really gave me a different perspective on life. It just makes you think you are capable of doing things. That if I try, give the time, the effort, I will be able to do it. So that is the best gift of the race."

Another star was Guo, who was tragically lost at sea in October 2016 when he attempted to break the record for a solo crossing of the Pacific Ocean. In 2013, Guo became the first Chinese sailor to complete a nonstop solo circumnavigation of the globe.

Up and down China's coast, marinas and yacht clubs are being built or expanded to cater for the growth in sailing.

Some sailing clubs like the Qingdao International Yacht Club (QIYC), in East China's Shandong province, are gaining an international reputation for producing highly skilled yachtsmen.

The QIYC is home to Team China, which competed in the 2007 challenge for the coveted America's Cup — said to be the pinnacle of yachting.

First contested in 1851, the America's Cup is the oldest trophy in international sport, predating the modern Olympic Games by 45 years.

Originally named the 100 Pounds Cup, it was part of The Great Exhibition in London, the first world's fair.

At the time, Britain had invited the world to display their latest technological advancements. Six members of the New York Yacht Club built a racing yacht named *America*, and they entered it into the Royal Yacht Squadron's race around the Isle of Wight.

*America* won decisively in an age when *Britannia* ruled the waves. The trophy was decided in trust for international competition and became known as the America's Cup. The New York

Yacht Club held on to the trophy for 132 years before Australia won the competition in 1983. The competition takes place every four years.

Formed in 2005, Team China made its international debut in 2007 when it raced in the Louis Vuitton Cup — the challenger selection trials for the America's Cup.

Although Team China put up a spirited fight in the series, it was unsuccessful. Team China has not challenged for the prestigious cup since, but there is a great deal of speculation in the yachting world it may make another bid in 2021.

Craig Monk, two-time America's Cup winner and New Zealand Olympic medalist, is working with local governments in China that want to develop their cities' waterfronts, offer sailing programs and be represented by competitive sailing teams on the world stage.

Speaking to website Sail-World in late 2017, he said: "It's unbelievable how fast sailing is growing here (in China). It's all about growth of business and waterfront development. They're using the model Auckland used 25 years ago, to develop cities around sailing."

"I have the contacts in the Western world to get China introduced to the best in the sport. My goal is to create an awareness in China and a path and vision for China's sailors, young and old. They can have a serious sailing program and take New Zealand's lead to develop the sport and make it professional."

William Ward, cofounder with Rob-in Knox-Johnston of Clipper Ventures, the British organizer of the Clipper Round the World Race, said interest in the sport is "huge" in China. Ward is also CEO of Clipper Ventures.

Knox-Johnston's name entered the history books in 1969 when he became the first person to sail solo around the world nonstop.

The 2017-18 race started in the English port city of Liverpool on Aug 20, 2017, with 12 70-foot ocean racing yachts, and finished in the same city on July 28 this year. Of the fleet, 11 completed the race as one had to withdraw not long after the start.

"There is tremendous interest in sailing... particularly in ocean racing," Knox-Johnston told *China Daily Asia Weekly* from the modern port city of Dalian on the Liaodong Peninsula, in Northeast China's Liaoning province, where he was looking at sites for possible training schools.

Established in 1996, the Clipper Race is a test of skill and endurance in some of the world's roughest waters. What makes this race different from others is that around 40 percent of Clipper Race crew have no previous sailing experience before signing up.

Normally the domain of seasoned professionals, this supreme challenge is taken on by ordinary, everyday people. Following a rigorous training course, participants are suited and booted in the latest extreme protection gear to commence the race of their lives.

The Clipper Race is said to be an endurance test like no other, cover-



## WIND IN ITS SAILS

Sailing as a sport is taking off in China as marinas, clubs spring up to develop the next generation of skilled yachtsmen

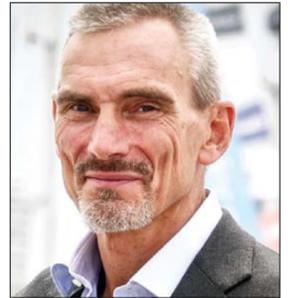


**Clockwise from top:** The Sanya Serenity Coast team was the overall winner of the 2017-18 Clipper Round the World Race, marking the first time a Chinese-sponsored team won the event; The Sanya Serenity Coast team encountered hurricane force winds during the North Pacific leg of the 2017-18 Clipper Race, from Qingdao in East China's Shandong province to Seattle in the United States; Yachts compete in the 2017-18 Clipper Race in the waters off Sanya in South China's Hainan province.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



**Vicky Song**, the first Chinese woman to circumnavigate the globe, having participated in the 2013-14 Clipper Round the World Race.



**William Ward**, cofounder and CEO, Clipper Ventures.

ing 40,000 nautical miles around the world in a 70-foot ocean racing yacht.

Divided into eight legs, participants can choose to complete the full circumnavigation or select individual legs. It is the world's only race where the organizers supply a fleet of 11 identical racing yachts, each with a fully qualified skipper to safely guide the crew.

"We first went to China with the 2005-06 race and have been there ever since," Clipper Ventures' Ward said, adding that the Clipper Race has captured the imagination of many Chinese. "I guess it is the challenge," he said.

China is now neck and neck with Australia in terms of the number of sailors taking part in the race. With over 40 nationalities taking part, the biggest number of participants still comes from the United Kingdom, followed by the United States, then China and Australia.

"The sort of people who sign up for the race, whether it is for one leg or the whole race, tend to be achievers," Ward said. "They seek the adventure and the challenge of the sea."

In November, Clipper Ventures announced its biggest expansion yet with the opening of a new China-based division to meet demand.

Named Clipper China, it aims to become the industry leader in the development of offshore sail training and sailing events across China.

In addition to running its own academies, Clipper China is building its own one-design keelboats and offshore racing yacht fleets to be used in the new training academies and to compete in regattas.

Ward said Clipper Ventures is the biggest single provider of offshore sail training in the world.

"We have trained over 5,000 sailors to participate in the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race over the past two decades. However, the potential for sailing in China means it could take us just a couple of years to train the same number here," he said.

"Interest in sailing in China has never been higher. China has featured on the Clipper Race route for the past 14 years and we have signed two additional teams here in the past two years."

Ward added that the future for sailing in China looks "exciting". Clipper China will work closely with

the China Yachting Association (CYA) — the national governing body for the sport of sailing.

Zhang Xiaodong, president of the CYA, in an interview with Sail-World in November, said: "The Clipper Race is the most well-known offshore sailing brand in China, with the UK respected for its long-standing sailing heritage. We are in a strong position to help attract and develop our next generation of sailors."

Sailing has become more popular in recent years and the local public has participated in and supported more watersport activities than ever before, according to the CYA.

In comparison to the few regattas held a decade ago, there are now more than 100 regattas in the country each year.

The CYA expects to see over 400 yacht clubs with more than 150,000 sailing participants by 2021, an increase of 150 percent on the current level, Zhang said in a statement.

Clipper Ventures' Ward said: "We want to do something meaningful for sailing in China."

He noted that while sailing standards are low, enthusiasm is high. "The Clipper Race actually makes a bigger noise in China than in Britain," he said.

Ward pointed out that sailing in China also has the potential to help cityscapes: "There is a connection between sailing and the regeneration of waterfronts."

Zhuhai, near Hong Kong, is the third Chinese host port and team partner in the Clipper Round the World Race, joining the northern city of Qingdao, and Sanya in South China's Hainan province.

"Yachting is a growing sport in China," said John Qu, manager of *Noah's II*, the only Chinese mainland entry in this year's Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race, which starts in Sydney Harbour on Dec 26. The boat and crew come from Noah's Yacht Club on the Huangpu River, Shanghai.

Qu said the Chinese government is encouraging the growth of "sport on the sea".

"For ocean races like the Sydney to Hobart you really have to train outside of China as we still lack the skill sets for ocean racing. Although that is starting to change."