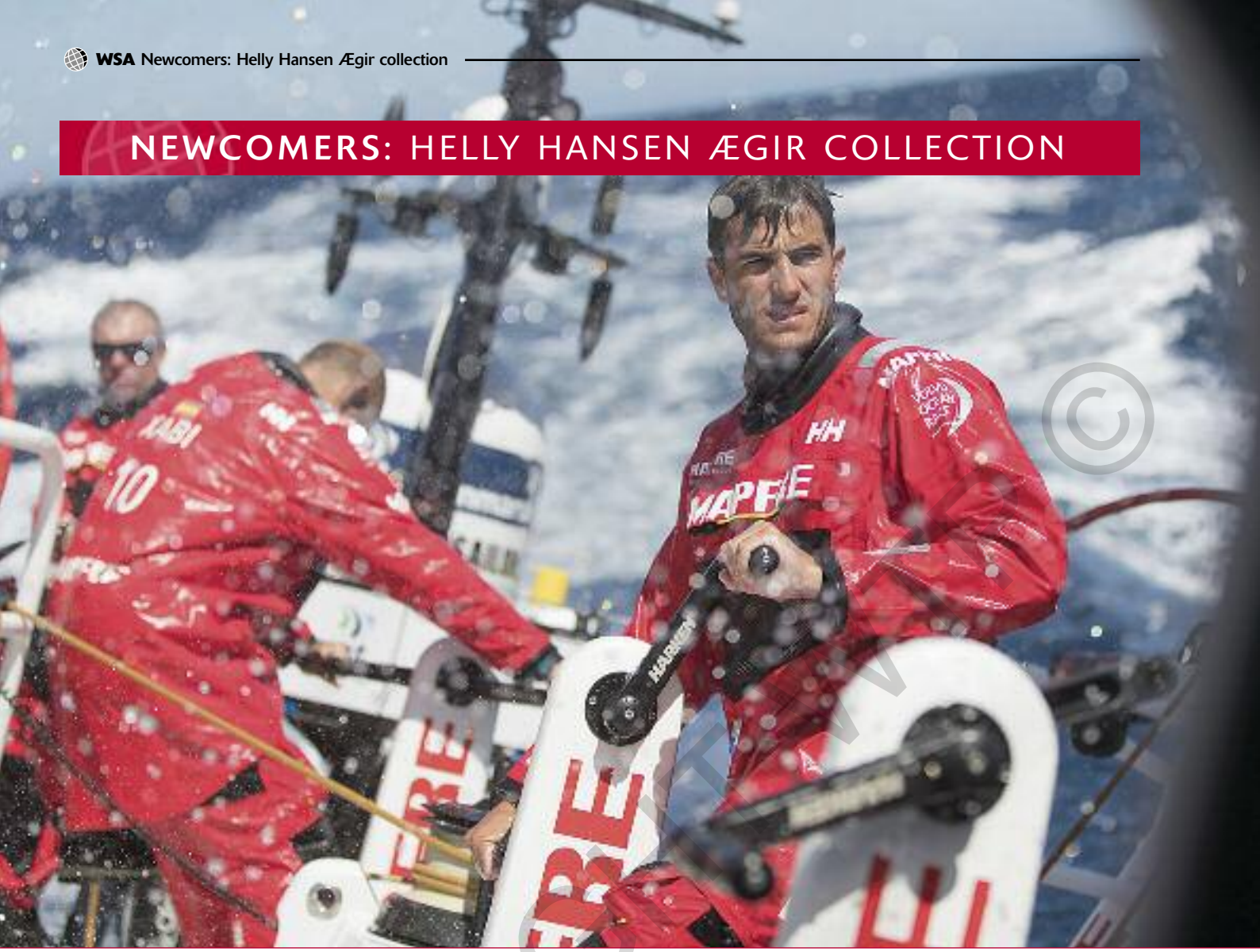
NEWCOMERS: HELLY HANSEN ÆGIR COLLECTION



The round-the-world Volvo Ocean Race proved the ideal testing ground for some of the products in Helly Hansen's new offshore sailing collection.

Helly Hansen rides the wave of Volvo Ocean Race

Norwegian outdoor brand Helly Hansen has been involved in the Volvo Ocean Race in some capacity for more than 40 years. During that time, it has sponsored and provided kit for a number of competing teams. The race itself took place for the first time in 1973 and has continued to do so at three or four-year intervals since. The 2017-18 race, the thirteenth, was perhaps the most thrilling yet, with three teams tied for the lead as the final 'leg' - from Gothenburg, Sweden to The Hague, the Netherlands - got underway on June 21.

One of the teams in this three-way tie was Spanish crew MAPFRE, which was unveiled in September last year as Helly Hansen's latest partner for this gruelling round-the-world competition. Victory in the final leg was enough for Chinese entry Dongfeng to pip MAPFRE to victory at the last. It was the closest finish in the history of the Volvo Ocean race and brought to an end a competition which had begun eight months and 45,000 miles (72,000 kilometres) earlier in Alicante, Spain.

The Volvo Ocean Race is a test of endurance, skill and courage.
Matt Knighton

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Gear upgrade

Despite their defeat, Helly Hansen paid tribute to MAPFRE's "spectacular performance". The outerwear worn throughout by the crew was designed over a series of months in the build up to the start of the race. It was based on the existing Ægir Offshore Sailing Collection, itself developed based on feedback from previous races of the Volvo Ocean Race. The brand says its aim was to supply the sailors with "the best possible gear that we could create".

Before development of the kit began, MAPFRE asked for it to be, above all, lightweight and breathable. To make it race-ready, Helly Hansen tweaked the construction of the collar on a number of garments in order to make them lighter and more comfortable, as well as to give the wearer a better range of vision. One way it reduced the weight was by removing the neoprene layer. Instead, the team members wore a neoprene balaclava when conditions were harsh. During calmer periods, they could remove this item and so did not carry any unnecessary weight. It also updated the Cordura fabrics used on reinforced areas of the garments, allowing for a decrease in weight without affecting abrasion resistance.

The products they wore during the race included the Ægir H2Flow Jacket and the Ægir H2Flow Salopette, along with the Ægir Race Smock Pro and Ægir Race Jacket. The Race Jacket features Helly Hansen's own Helly Tech material, a polyurethane-based multi-layer membrane that is both waterproof and breathable. It was first launched in 1984. The product also incorporates a nylon face fabric made by Japanese textile manufacturer Toray, zippers from YKK and hand warmer pockets using material from US insulation specialist Polartec.

The brand has said the Ægir Race Smock Pro became "a real favourite" during the competition. It also has the Helly Tech membrane and YKK zippers, as well as a Polartec fleece collar. Several team members contributed to the development of this product in spring 2017, resulting in a more minimalist design without a collar or a hood.

All in the details

The MAPFRE team were presented with their Helly Hansen gear months before the race began in Alicante last October. One of the brand's main design focuses was the latex cuffs and necks seals. To make sure it optimised these areas it presented materials from three different manufacturers to the crew in blind tests. It also personalised them to each person, which meant they had softer, more stretchy cuffs and seals in custom sizes.

Other pre-race tweaks to products included changing the position of the Velcro on cuffs, hoods and facemasks to make it easier to use. The shape of the hood and the facemask were altered as well. Members of the team also visited the Hong Kong factory where Helly Hansen's products are manufactured in order to get a better understanding of how their gear was created.

Helly Hansen's work didn't end when MAPFRE set off from Spain, however. It used the race's various stopovers – which this time included Melbourne, Hong Kong, Cape Town, Auckland, Itajaí in Brazil, Newport in the US and Cardiff, UK – to evaluate the kit's performance and make real-time improvements to it. This involved sending a small crew to meet the team at different locations to get their feedback and carry out on-the-spot modifications.



The Ægir H2Flow Salopette was among the products worn by members of the MAPFRE team during the race.

Helly Hansen

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The gear became lighter and simpler as the race went on. One of the things Helly Hansen did along the way was to reduce the number of seams so that there were fewer vulnerable areas. They also had to adapt the kit to the changing bodies of the sailors. Due to the intensity of the competition, they lost weight, and so this required constant adjustments to the fit of the cuffs and collars of the garments.

"Having a huge company like Helly Hansen behind us has been very important for us as a team," MAPFRE skipper Xabi Fernández told *WSA*. "Everything comes down to the details, from the quality itself to the logistics of a big project. We made real changes and they were delivered at the next stopovers".

He adds that although the "real changes" made to the kit during the race were relatively small, they made the gear more comfortable, a crucial element as the sailors had to wear these products for such prolonged periods of time. Some of the in-race modifications included a change to the length of the smock jackets, the opening of pockets to increase breathability and the addition of Velcro and Cordura patches in certain areas.



The 2019 Ægir Offshore Sailing Collection, which includes the Ægir H2Flow Jacket, is designed based on feedback from the MAPFRE team.

Helly Hansen

The next level

"We have always seen the Volvo Ocean Race as the most important testing ground for our gear," Helly Hansen says when discussing its long-term association with the round-the-world competition. It aimed to use the 2017-18 event and its partnership with MAPFRE to "take our product development to the next level".

The result is the updated 2019 Ægir Offshore Sailing Collection, which the brand has said will allow other offshore sailors to benefit from the Spanish team's experience at sea. The key difference compared to previous versions of this range is more lightweight products and more minimalist design. Even though the release of the collection comes hot on the heels of the Volvo Ocean Race, Helly Hansen will try to incorporate the post-race comments from the MAPFRE team. It hopes to feed these last-minute details into the final production line so the offshore sailing enthusiasts who use them can be confident they will perform in even the most extreme conditions.



The Volvo Ocean Race gives Helly Hansen the chance to puts its products to the test in some of the world's harshest conditions.

Maria Muina

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