

The New York Times<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/29/style/cole-brauer-solo-sailing.html>

As Cole Brauer speeds to the finish of a solo race around the world, she is using Instagram to blow up sailing's elitist image.

By Chris Museler

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Video dinner parties, spa days, stuffed animals, favorite hoodies and cozy, colorful fleece blankets. Cole Brauer's Instagram feed hardly feels like the work of someone racing a 40-foot sailboat around the world in the Global Solo Challenge. But Ms. Brauer, 29, is not an average ocean racer.

In 2022, Ms. Brauer had tried out for another competition, the Ocean Race, which is considered the pinnacle of professional ocean racing. Sailors in that race are highly trained, wear matching foul weather gear and have corporate sponsors. And most of them are men. Ms. Brauer, who had sailed thousands of miles on high performance ocean racing boats, felt she was ready to join their ranks.

But after competing in trials in France, Ms. Brauer was told she was "too short for the Southern Ocean" and was sent on her way.



Ms. Brauer built up a wealth of professional experience on various types of boats before taking on the Global Solo Challenge. Richard Mardens

In spite of her small stature — she stands 5 feet 1 inch — Ms. Brauer rounded Cape Horn, Chile,

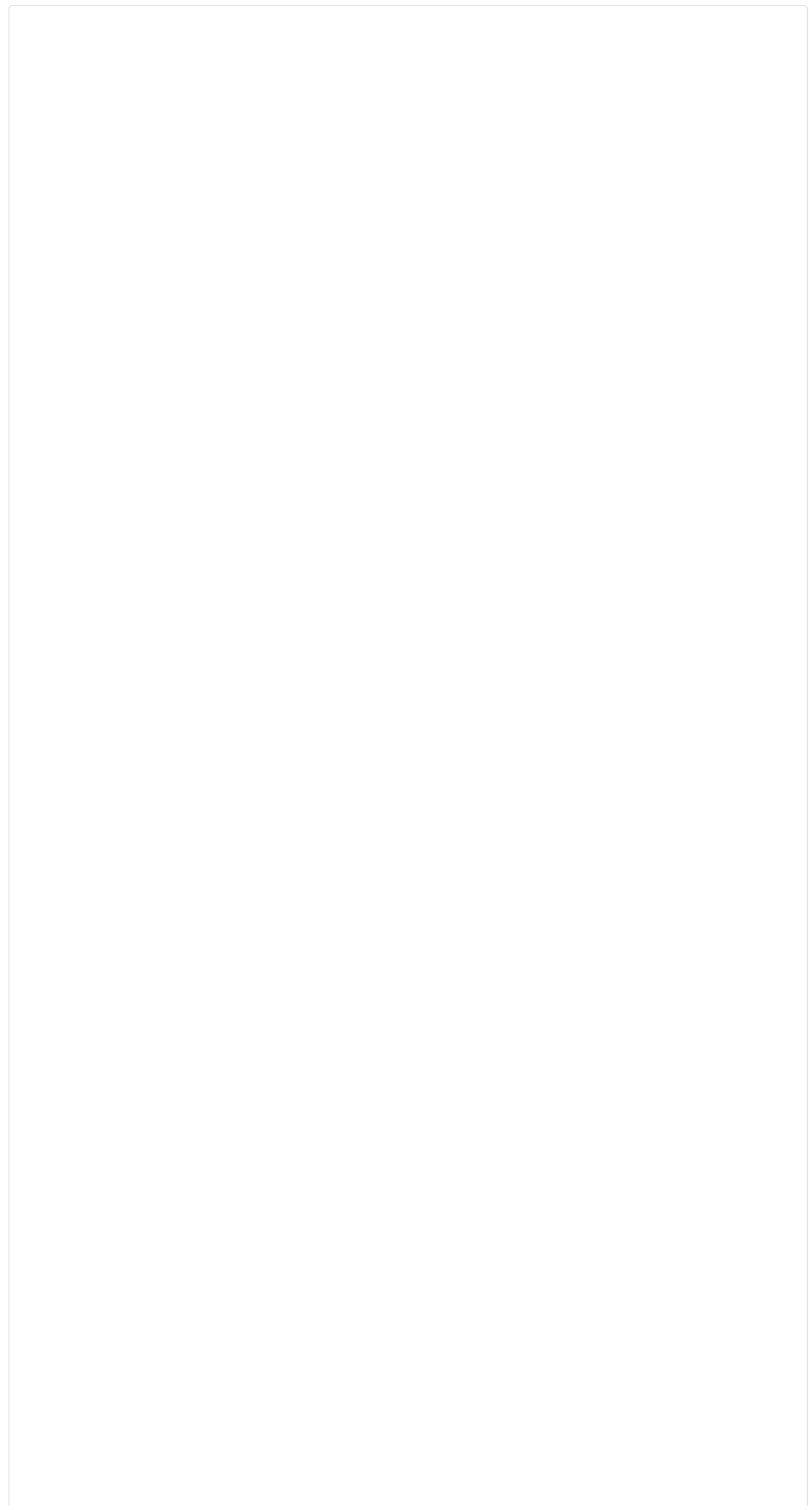
on Jan. 26, the last of the three great capes of her journey to finish the Global Solo Challenge. It is a feat most of the Ocean Race sailors picked instead of her have never even attempted. And despite being the youngest competitor in the race, she is ranked second overall, just days away from reaching the finish line in A Coruña, Spain.

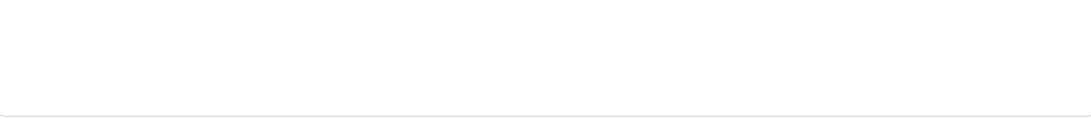
Along the way, her tearful reports of breakages and failures, awe-struck moments during fiery sunrises, dance parties and “shakas” signs at the end of each video have garnered her a following that has eclipsed any sailor’s or sailing event’s online, even the Ocean Race and the America’s Cup, a prestigious race that is more well known by mainstream audiences.

“I’m so happy to have rounded the Horn,” Ms. Brauer said in a video call from her boat, First Light, after a morning spent sponging out endless condensation and mildew from its bilges. “It feels like Day 1. I feel reborn knowing I’ll be in warmer weather. The depression you feel that no one in the world can fix that. Your house is trying to sink and you can’t stop it.”

Shifting gears, she added, “It’s all getting better.”

Ms. Brauer’s rise in popularity — she has more than 400,000 followers on Instagram — has come as a surprise to her, but her achievements, combined with her bright personality, have struck a chord. And she has set a goal of using her platform to change the image of professional ocean sailing.





“Cole wants to prove you can go around the world and watch Netflix every once in a while and wear your pajamas,” said Lydia Mullan, Ms. Brauer’s media manager. “As for her mental health, she’s really creating a space in her routine for herself, to create that joy she hasn’t seen in other sailors.”

Four months after she began the Global Solo Challenge, a solo, nonstop race around the world featuring sailboats of different sizes, Ms. Brauer is holding strong. Sixteen sailors began the journey and only eight remain on the ocean, with the Frenchman Philippe Delamare having finished first on Feb. 24 after 147 days at sea.

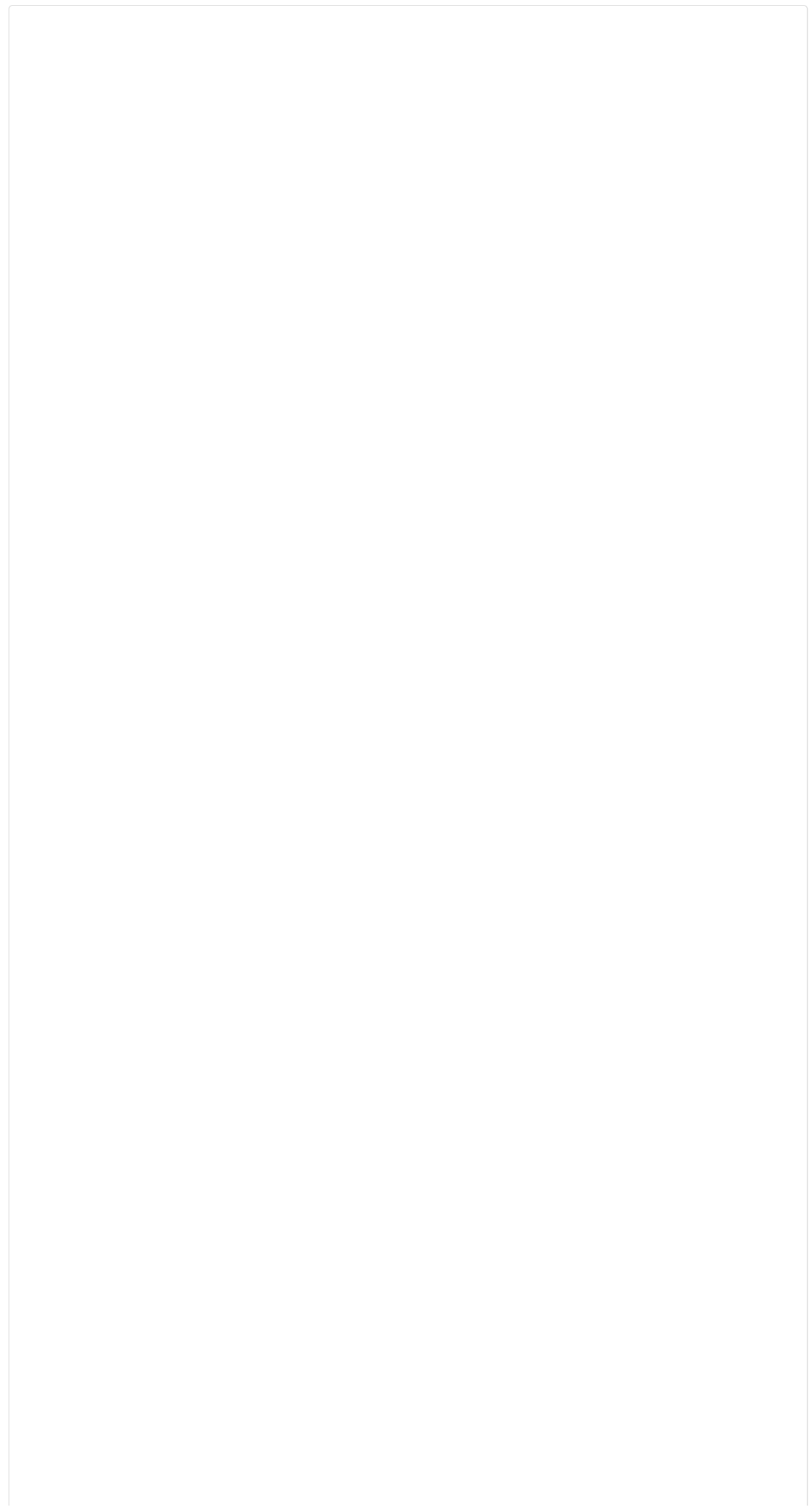
Ms. Brauer, who was more than a week ahead of her next closest competitor as of Thursday morning, is on track to set a speed record for her boat class, and to be the first American woman to complete a solo, nonstop sailing race around the world.

Her Authentic Self

Ms. Brauer has been happy to turn the image of a professional sailor on its head. Competitors in the Ocean Race and the America’s Cup tend to pose for static social media posts with their arms crossed high on their chests, throwing stern glares. Ms. Brauer would rather be more comfortable.

She brought objects like fleece blankets on her journey, despite the additional weight, and said solo sailing has helped give her the freedom to be herself.

“Without those things I would be homesick and miserable,” she said of her supply list. “We need comfort to be human. Doing my nails. Flossing. It’s hard for the general public to reach pro sailors. People stop watching. If you treat people below you, people stop watching.”



Other female sailors have noticed the same disconnect. “The year I did the Vendée Globe, Michel Desjoyeaux didn’t mention that anything went wrong,” Dee Caffari, a mentor of Ms. Brauer’s who has sailed around the world six times, said of that race’s winner. “Then we saw his jobs list after the finish and we realized he was human.”

Ms. Brauer, as her social media followers can attest, is decidedly human.

They have gotten used to her “hangout” clothes and rock-out sessions. Her team produces “Tracker Tuesdays,” where a weather forecaster explains the routes Ms. Brauer chooses and why she uses different sails, and “Shore Team Sunday,” where team members are introduced.

“In the beginning I looked at what she was doing, posting about washing her knickers in bucket and I was like, ‘No! What are you doing?’” Ms. Caffari said. “I’ve been so professional and corporate in my career. She’s been so authentic and taken everyone around the world with her. Cole is that next generation of sailor. They tell their story in a different way and it’s working.”



In October, Ms. Brauer arrived in A Coruña, Spain to begin the race. Samuel Hodges

Finding a Purpose

Ms. Brauer was introduced to sailing at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Those days of casual racing on the turquoise waters of Kaneohe Bay informed her vision of an inclusive sailing community. That image was shattered when she came to the mainland to try her hand at professional sailing.

“When I came to the East Coast it was so closed off,” she said of those early experiences. “I couldn’t get a job in the industry. Pro sailors were jaded. They didn’t want anyone to take their job. It’s a gig-based economy. Competition, we’re pinned against each other, especially women in high-performance sailing since there are fewer of us.”

“This whole process of being a pro sailor over the past five years, I feel mentally punched in the face and my legs kicked out from under me,” she added. “I screamed and I cried. Without those experiences I wouldn’t be as mentally tough. It made me callused.”

A big break happened when she landed a gig as boat captain for Michael Hennessy’s successful Class40 Dragon. The boat was a perfect platform to hone her ocean sailing skills as she ripped up and down the East Coast delivering it to races, often alone, pushing Dragon to its limits. Her Instagram posts of those adventures drew attention, and she was invited to tryout for the Ocean Race, a fully crewed race around the world in powerful 65-footers.



Ms. Brauer only had a few months in Rhode Island to get First Light ready for competition. Samuel Hodges

“I was crushed,” Ms. Brauer said of being rejected after the trials.

Ms. Brauer, though, found a new purpose. After months of living in her van and working on Dragon, she found a benefactor in F.K. Day, the president of World Bicycle Relief and the executive vice president of SRAM Corporation, who, along with his brother Lincoln, agreed to buy a boat and fund a massive refit for the Global Solo Challenge, which was only three months away.

Conducting the hurricane of activity last summer in Newport, R.I., Ms. Brauer knew this was

her moment to shine. But representatives for her new sponsors had reservations about her bold social media experiment.

“I got a massive pushback: ‘How can you be so vain. This isn’t important. We don’t want to pay for this,’” she said. “I said none of this is going to matter if the world can’t see it.”

Her boat was covered with cameras her shore team could monitor, with technology allowing for constant recording that could be used to capture unexpected twists. Ms. Brauer got some immediate traction, but nothing prepared her for the numbers she would hit once the race began.

“We were taking bets in Spain,” said Ms. Brauer, who had to sail First Light nearly 3,000 miles from Newport to Spain as a qualifier for the race. “There was a photo of me excited we hit 10,000 followers. Ten thousand for a little race? That’s massive.”

A few months later she has 40 times that count.



Ms. Brauer's photographs and videos have made it clear that a journey like hers can be dangerous but also fun. via Cole Brauer

A Dangerous Journey

Only a handful of solo ocean racers have been American, all of whom being male. Now Ms. Brauer has a larger following than any of them, pushing far beyond the typical reach of her sport.

“This is a really good case study,” says Marcus Hutchinson, a project manager for ocean racing teams. For me she’s an influencer. She’s a Kardashian. People will be looking for her to promote a product. She doesn’t need to worry about what the American sailors think. That’s parochial. She has to split with the American environment.”

Unlike her peers, Ms. Brauer is happy to do some extracurricular work along the way toward goals like competing in the prestigious Vendée Globe. “I’m part of the social media generation,” she said. “It’s not a burden to me.”

The playful videos and colorful backdrop, though, can make it easy for her followers to forget that she is in the middle of a dangerous race. Half her competitors in the Global Solo Challenge have pulled out, and ocean races still claim lives, particularly in the violent, frigid storms of the Southern Ocean.



The Southern Ocean is the toughest part of the Global Solo Challenge and Ms. Brauer celebrated rounding Cape Horn last month. via Cole Brauer

“She was apprehensive,” Ms. Caffari said of Ms. Brauer’s rounding Cape Horn. “I told her: ‘You were devastated that you didn’t get on the Ocean Race. Now look at you. Those sailors didn’t even get to go to the Southern Ocean.’”

The question now is how Ms. Brauer will retain her followers’ desire for content after the race is over.

“She will be unaware of the transition she went through,” Mr. Hutchinson said. “She’s become a celebrity and hasn’t really realized it.”

Ms. Brauer, however, said she received as much from her followers as she gave them.

“They are so loving,” she said. “I send a photo of a sunset, and they paint watercolors of the

scene to sell and raise money for the campaign. When I start to feel down, they let me stand on their shoulders.”