

## Interview with Team Orca

Interviewer: Jake Beattie

Interviewees: Kayleen VanderRee, Sylvia Watkins

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**Q** Welcome both of you, Team Orca. First, I just want to know, like what you made you want to sign up -- Race to Alaska is still optional. So why did you decide to make it mandatory?

**A** Well, I first heard about it a few years ago from my friend Tavish Campbell who did it, and ever since then I've kind of had my eye on it. And this was the first year -- I just sold my 42-foot sailboat and just finished a big trip down to Mexico and back. And I couldn't handle the thought of not having a sailboat, so within, like, I don't know, there was even a little bit of a crossover there between --

**A** It was like a week or something.

**A** Yeah. Sylvia and I started hashing up ideas and thinking about the Race to Alaska and how we could pull it off. So I just kind of fell into place I guess.

**A** For me, Kayleen told me about it. I work on the ferry that goes from Port Hardy to Prince Rupert. And I remember last year seeing people rowing in Grenville Channel and being like, who are these people? What are they doing? I was so confused. And then Kayleen told me about the Race to Alaska and we watched the documentary over some glasses of wine. And then all of a sudden, we had -- we were on marketplace and we found a boat and it just kind of happened.

**Q** Well, first, thanks for not running over the row boats in Grenville Channel.

**A** No problem.

**Q** Race to Alaska thanks you. So but you're both -- sounds like you're both really experienced Mariners. First of all, you both -- you both live in the Comox valley?

**A** Yeah, we're both from there. I live in Campbell River now, so close by.

**Q** Wait, Campbell River is not close to Comox at all.

**A** It's 40 minutes, 40 minutes' drive.

**A** By car. By sailboat maybe a little longer.

**Q** Right. If you're rowing.

**A** If you're rowing a little longer.

**Q** Speak a little bit -- sailing from Mexico to Canada is not a small feat. Becoming a mate on a ferry is no small feat. Tell me about your maritime journeys.

**A** You go first, Kay.

**A** Sure. I grew up on the water with my family. My grandma actually wrote one of the first guide books for the BC Washington coast. We just have a very strong history --

**Q** Wait, which one, drop a name.

**A** I've got to find a picture of it. It was sold on BC Ferries for a long time. I'll get back to you on that one.

**Q** Okay.

**A** But yeah, it's just always been on the water, always on small boats and stuff. And then my parents bought a Formosa 51 when I was 10, and we ended up doing a trip down to Mexico on that boat and cruised around Vancouver Island all the way up the inside passage. And yeah, it just definitely instilled a connection to the water for me. And as I became an adult, I realized I didn't want to lose that and I bought my own sailboat, refitted it, bought another sailboat, refitted it and then ended up on a third. Each sailboat got a little bigger and ended up on a tartan 32. Sailed it down to Mexico last year and then did a 44 day passage from Mexico to Canada nonstop. Yeah, I've definitely just been drawn to the ocean, and not just in, like, out for a leisurely sail kind of way, but like always pushing myself and suffer-fests a little bit. Which is kind of why the Race to Alaska makes sense.

**Q** Yeah. We attract, like -- yeah, optimistic masochists I guess.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** Just for the people who haven't done the trip, going from Mexico to Canada, Vancouver Island, on a map is a fairly straight line. But sailing it is usually a different trip. How far west did you have to go to get back to Canada?

**A** Yeah, we -- sorry my brain is a little foggy right now with this cold. But we ended up going as far west as Hawaii. I'm blank on the longitude right now. But it's basically a big curve because you kind of have to follow the current systems in the Pacific. And the goal was to cross over the Pacific high, and then you then get the upper part of the current that brings you back into Vancouver Island. And it didn't really work out like that. The high broke up into a million pieces and it was -- it was some pretty slow sailing. So we ended up doing 4,400 nautical miles in 44 days.

**Q** Oh my God.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** How much water did you have left? Did you have enough?

**A** Well, that's actually kind of a funny story. Luckily I had a little water maker aboard because I accidentally drained the whole tank. Yeah. Twice actually for two different reasons. But we had enough. We almost had to turn back in the first week, and then -- but yeah. The water maker saved our butts for sure.

**Q** Crazy.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** So, Sylvia, tell us about your nautical experience life.

**A** Yeah. So growing up I was super fortunate. I got to join Kayleen's family on their sailing adventures because I didn't grow up with a sailboat or anything. We did a lot of kayaking and canoeing growing up. So yeah, I got to join Kayleen's family around Vancouver Island and then up the coast. And I became a guide kind of in the Knight

Inlet region. I did grizzly bear guiding and while watching around that area. And then when Kayleen bought her first sailboat --

**Q** Can I pause you there. What is a grizzly bear guide?

**A** Yeah, so I worked for a lodge, and people would fly in. And we'd -- we had like these crew boats, and so we'd go up Knight Inlet and other inlets in the area, anchor, drop the zodiac and go ashore and look for grizzly bears.

**Q** Like on purpose?

**A** On purpose, yeah. We purposely looked for them, yeah.

**Q** Okay. Yeah.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** Humans.

**A** Yes. Yeah, I loved that job. It was great. Yeah, so then yeah, Kayleen's first sailboat was a 30 foot -- what was it.

**A** A North Star.

**A** So yeah, I lived on that sailboat with her for a few months in Victoria. And yeah, I went back and worked at the lodge for a few years. And then when COVID happened, it kind of shut everything down in the tourism industry, so I went and got my bridge watch at BCIT, and yeah, now I work for the ferry that goes from Port Hardy, Prince Rupert and over to Haida Gwaii.

**Q** Cool.

**A** And I'm currently taking some courses for my mate's ticket. So I'm hoping the knowledge of that route will help a bit, and kind of knowing the area. Yeah. I think both of our -- yeah, combined we'll hopefully make a good team.

**Q** I think that's the most striking thing about your team. Not the most. It's one of the most striking things about your team, just how this -- for a lot of people, especially people who are coming in from out of the area. They've seen this on a map and maybe they watched the documentary or something.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** But you've kind of lived this course, area?

**A** I live -- I can see the course right now from my balcony. I see Cape Mudge right before Seymour Narrows. So I've been picturing every day, I look out the window, that looks rough today.

**Q** So it's not necessarily better. It's just it's the devil you know.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** What is your favourite part between, you know, Comox and Ketchikan?

**A** I love Grenville Channel. I think that place is just so beautiful. I've only done it on a ferry. Ask me again after the race when we've probably had to row it. But I love that area, around kind of around Butedale, Grenville Channel. That place is just so beautiful.

**Q** How about you, Kayleen?

**A** I know my least favorite part is off of Kelsey Bay. I've worked out of that area in Johnstone Strait and that's a scary place sometimes. But it also can be absolutely beautiful too, so yeah, I guess Johnstone Strait is kind of a love hate area for me. I think it's going to be exciting.

**Q** Yeah. It's probably the most under-heralded villain of the race.

**A** Yeah. Seymour Narrows, I had our boat out of Campbell River for a couple years, and we've learned a few -- we definitely have a lot of respect for it. But there's like a few little, like, tricks and stuff about it that I hope that we can use. So it's not as intimidating as maybe it could be. But honestly, Johnstone Strait kind of holds a bit more power in my mind.

**A** Yeah, I think it's in there.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** Especially on a Santana 20. So tell me, so you had a 42 foot boat, you had a 30 foot boat and now the two of you are going to spend an endless adventure on a Santana 20, which is very small.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** It's gone to Alaska before in the Race to Alaska. So, like, what made you choose the Santana 20?

**A** Yeah. Our criteria was we wanted to go as small as possible without losing some sort of cabin structure that we could tuck below and get out of the elements. Big hats off to all the people that don't have that.

**A** Yeah.

**A** That's just kind of where we drew the lines. We wanted to be able to have some sort of comfort.

**Q** Like the theoretical possibility of a dry space, even if it's not actually dry?

**A** Yes.

**Q** It's a hard shell?

**A** Yeah, I can already tell she leaks a little bit.

**Q** No.

**A** We'll see if we fix that or not. We actually haven't used her yet. We both went away for work as soon as we bought it but we're going to start taking it out in January. Oh, yeah, back to your question, this one, we were just like perusing through and it didn't even say Santana in the ad. It was a really crappy little ad for it.

**A** Yeah.

**A** And the guy wouldn't respond to us for weeks. And I don't know what it was, probably because it was called Orca. We were just drawn to it. But we were doing research and we realized okay, it's been in the Race to Alaska before. I feel I'm more comfortable on monohulls. I've never really sailed cats or trimarans before, so even though they may not be as fast, that's just where my comfort lies. And yeah, I liked the cockpit too, and it was nice and long and looked like there could be space for adding

some rowing structure. And it just fit a lot of the criteria. This one had some awesome crispy sails come with it, and it's never been in salt water. So we're about to take that for her.

**Q** Whoa.

**A** Yeah.

**A** Yeah, it came from Manitoba and before that it came from interior, somewhere in the states.

**Q** You had to drive to Manitoba to get your boat?

**A** No, we didn't, someone else did and then lost their dream.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** Okay. Interesting. Very interesting. So I didn't know your boat is named Orca, that's why team Orca?

**A** Yeah.

**Q** I thought maybe you were like anti Spanish boats.

**A** I mean maybe that too.

**Q** Maybe, who knows. Okay. So this is a multiple choice question. You know the course really well, both of you, so what keeps you up at night? Think about it. Seymour Narrows, bears, or that the war between Israel and Gaza Strip might escalate into a full scale regional and global conflict that kills millions of innocent people on multiple continents?

**A** Oh, that's heavy.

**A** I was going to say I'm fine with the bears.

**A** Yeah.

**A** We're both confident with Seymour Narrows. So I guess C.

**Q** Yeah, fair. Me too.

**A** I hope that doesn't happen.

**Q** So okay, imagine yourself. You've made it to Ketchikan. Fast forward six months. You're on the dock, eating fish and chips and like what's the one thing that you're like oh, we made it. We made it because we relied on our super power, which is blank?

**A** Fixing things, like being optimistic and realizing there's like a solution for every problem that comes up.

**A** Yeah. We know each other really well too. We know we've lived together before, been best friends since grade 2. We know when to shut up. We know when the person needs help. We don't have to say anything. We're able to help each other so I think that's going to be a big aspect to it too. And hopefully we're still friends at the end of it after being in a 20-foot sailboat for so long. But yeah, I think that's going to be a big factor too.

**Q** Yeah, that's great. You know, the Race to Alaska tends to bring people together that are in the experience. But like, I always worry about married people who go and then, like, I think we have like five divorces that have come out of the Race to Alaska.

**A** Oh no, really?

**Q** You're going to be fine though. You're going to be great.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** So you're in Ketchikan, and also you're just being thankful about your super power, and then like what's the thing you're super thankful that we didn't know about when you applied?

**A** I -- I don't know.

**A** I mean, I think I kind of jumped in the application about this, but I think our super power is Sylvia because she looks so innocent and, like, blond and cute. But really, once she gets competitive, there's nothing that will stop her. Like, she is the feistiest -- I can just picture you rowing, and I just picture your like hands bleeding. I'm not stopping.

**A** Yeah, I'm very competitive.

**Q** That's good. I would have known that. That would be fun to know when you applied. That's great?

**A** Well, I still haven't been able to practice rowing yet. I've had a broken wrist and I'm still recovering from it. So I'm hoping -- I'm starting physio so hopefully I can actually get on a rowing machine and start rowing in the next few months.

**A** There's time.

**A** Yeah, there's time.

**Q** Okay. We've reached the part of the interview that I like to call the totally unfair either or questions.

**A** Oh, no.

**Q** I'm going to offer you two choices and you have to pick one. And you can either agree or not, it's up to you.

**A** Okay.

**Q** Would you rather have the current with you or the wind with you?

**A** Current.

**A** I was thinking current.

**A** Yeah, because this sailboat can sail up wind pretty well. Supposedly anyways.

**A** Yes.

**A** We haven't put that to the test yet.

**Q** Because you haven't sailed it yet. And it's not even the new year yet. You've got plenty of time?

**A** Oh, yeah, not worried.

**A** The current in Campbell River here is brutal. You see people just like full speed trying to just move and they're just going backwards. It's like oh, so --

**Q** It is one of my deviously favorite parts of the race is sitting in Campbell River on the shoreline, you're not -- no.

**A** Eating a burger and watching.

**Q** You're new here. Stop, the fastest thing to do is anchor.

**A** Yeah.

**Q** Okay. Next one. Would you rather finish the race or have a good time?

**A** Finish the race.

**A** Yeah, I'd rather finish.

**Q** That's good. Good alignment. Okay. This one is a little abstract. Would you rather not have quite enough food during the race or eat rehydrated food for two weeks after you get home?

**A** Probably rehydrated food after.

**A** You don't want to go hungry.

**A** I don't want to go hungry.

**Q** And do you love Mountain House?

**A** I just get really hangry. Wouldn't be a good time.

**A** No.

**Q** Would you rather get eaten by a bear or have your teammate get eaten by a bear?

**A** That's terrible.

**A** That's terrible. We can just say teammate and we'll both be dead.

**A** Yeah, both of us.

**Q** Okay. \$10,000 steak knives?

**A** I mean, \$10,000 would be sweet but I'm so intrigued by the steak knives.

**A** Or we might be going -- there's the spork prize this year.

**Q** Oh, yeah, you could get that too. That's an adder.

**A** Oh, yeah, true. I mean, \$10,000 would be pretty nice, but I don't have a nice set of steak knives.

**Q** Who does?

**A** Yeah.

**A** Only the people who have gotten second.

**Q** That's true, there's six other teams. Well, well done on the interview, you two. I'm really excited about you guys being in the race. Do you have any questions for me?

**A** I don't think so. I think once we get closer to, maybe, but not today.

**Q** I don't have a lot of answers but I like to make people think I do. Well, thanks so much for your time. Thanks so much for entering this race and becoming part of this crazy tradition. And I really look forward to meeting you in person when you get here. I host the lamb roast at my house, so hopefully...

**A** Oh, amazing.

**Q** Unless you're offended by whole things being cooked?

- A** No, bring it on.
- A** I'm looking forward to that.
- Q** Awesome.
- A** Thank you so much.
- Q** So pleased to meet you. Good luck.

Transcribed by Kelsey Fletcher