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*Du 19 au 24 septembre 2023*

**Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération :**

## **New faces: fresh talent in the Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération!**

All systems go for the Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération 2023! Welcoming the last IMOCA's into Lorient La Base, hosting the first workshop on societal engagement, a tour of the dock by the local schoolchildren, the opening ceremony this evening at the Cité de la Voile Eric Tabarly... With the weather forecast still looking manageable, we take the opportunity to go on an epic dockwalk to meet the new faces and the varied profiles gracing today's IMOCA fleet. The low-down.

**To note:**

- More than 15 sailors to make their season debut in IMOCA in the Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération
- A wide variety of profiles including multiple Figaro sailors and a strong female and international contingent
- The Runs Azimut postponed till Sunday due to overly boisterous weather conditions on Wednesday.
- Start of the 48H Azimut still scheduled for Thursday.



Rémi Aubrun, co-skipper to Louis Duc, ranks among the new faces in this Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération.

With 34 IMOCA's taking the start, some 68 skippers and co-skippers will be competing in the Défi Azimut - Lorient Agglomération in Brittany through until Sunday. This year, in addition to the leaders and the regulars who make up the IMOCA class, the fleet will welcome some brand-new crews and up-and-coming skippers who will be joining the fray from a host of other series.

The bulk of the troops hail from the Figaro circuit, but the sailors all have a wide range of backgrounds. More familiar with the Mini and Class40 races, Rémi Aubrun, head of the design office at the Incidence Sails sail loft, is teaming up with Louis Duc (Fives Group - Lantana environnement). Laurent Bourguès, who has been a technical director within Thomas Ruyant's team for many years, is racing alongside Damien Seguin (Groupe Apicil). Meantime, chief regional weather forecaster for Météo France, Pierre Le Roy, winner of the Mini Transat 2021, will be paired with his old classmate Benjamin Ferré...

More than 15 sailors will be making their Défi Azimut debut this week. New blood and new faces then and there's every chance that this event will serve as a springboard for a future career in IMOCA...

### **An armada of Figaro sailors**

Four sailors are planning to pack a punch at this Défi Azimut having only just returned to the dock with their Figaro Bénéteau 3s. Keen not to miss a beat, these brave skippers are now preparing to explore the subtleties of an IMOCA and experience just how powerful they can be. Benoît Mariette will be alongside Japanese sailor Kojiro Shiraishi (DMG Mori), Swiss sailor Nils Palmieri is teaming up with compatriot Ollie Heer (Oliver Heer Ocean Racing), Gaston Morvan will be supporting Giancarlo Pedote (Prysmian Group), whilst Loïs Berrehar will be joining forces with Romain Attanasio (Fortinet Best Western). It's down to them to demonstrate the parallels between Figaro and IMOCA and prove just how beneficial the transfer of technology and experience can be for all parties.

A Figaro sailor at all costs? "There's a bit of that involved. And a good one if possible!" beams Romain Attanasio, who can congratulate himself on having had a good hunch about his teammate. Indeed, at 29, he's

just finished 3rd in the famous Solitaire du Figaro. “I wanted an enthusiastic youngster who knows how to crack a joke... Plus I wanted someone from this circuit. The IMOCA fleets are increasingly big, with some races that are just as demanding as those on the Figaro circuit,” concludes the skipper, he too with a decade of experience competing in the famous Solitaire du Figaro behind him.

Like his three other Solitaire buddies, Loïs is buzzing at the prospect of getting aboard an IMOCA for the Défi Azimut. In fact, this won't be his IMOCA debut as he has already competed in a Transat Jacques Vabre in 2021 with Fabrice Amedeo. “Yesterday morning I wasn't feeling at my freshest, but the enthusiasm was still there and that's the most important thing. Crucially, this will enable me to be firing on all cylinders for the Transat Jacques Vabre,” admits this new recruit, who views the 48H race as a full-scale training session.



Sophie Faguet is alongside Sébastien Marsset.

### **A sizeable female contingent!**

No fewer than eight mixed doubles will be doing battle in this year's Défi. Some of them also stand a good chance of a podium position too: Clarisse Crémer-Alan Roberts, Paul Meilhat-Mariana Lobato, Samantha Davies-Jack Bouttell and Justine Mettraux-Julien Villion to name but a few.

A fantastically diverse line-up, it shines a spotlight on some of the rather atypical offshore racing profiles.

Russian sailor Irina Gracheva made landfall in France in 2018 to compete in the Mini Transat (4th in 2021). Banned from racing since war was declared on Ukraine, she has had to really work hard to pursue her passion and earn her permit from the French Sailing Federation. “I set up my own micro-business in France to step into the role of boat maintenance worker in the meantime as I was no longer able to race. I met Szabi (Weöres), who arrived on the IMOCA circuit last year and I've been supporting him. I only received authorisation to compete again in August so here I am!” grins the native of Saint Petersburg, who is hitting the racetrack with Szabi Ocean Racing and is eager to point out that she has her sights on the Vendée Globe.

Meanwhile, Mariana Lobato is certainly no IMOCA rookie since she's already sailed aboard Biotherm, which made her Défi Azimut debut in 2022. Representing Portugal at the London Olympics in 2012 in match racing, this round-the-cans specialist participated in The Ocean Race with the crew of Paul Meilhat, who subsequently asked her to join him for the upcoming two-handed season. “What I love is crewed sailing, learning with others, and this approach appeals to me”. She has no Vendée Globe aspirations however, as she already has more

than enough on her plate juggling the work schedules of her and her husband, he too a sailor, and bringing up their two daughters, aged four and eight, in Lisbon...

Sophie Faguet has yet another profile. When her phone rang last winter and Sébastien Marsset offered her the chance to join him aboard Foussier-Mon Courtier Energie, Sophie didn't think twice. After four seasons on the Figaro circuit, match racing and securing a fourth place in the double-handed Transat Paprec in 2023, this first taste of IMOCA, "on a older generation boat, but with a solid skipper and a team of human proportions", couldn't have come at a better time. A team with less funding than the big racing stables, the autonomy Sophie has gained whilst putting together her own campaigns singlehanded is evidently a precious asset.

Finally, to say that Violette Dorange knows how to manage her career effectively is an understatement. At 22 years of age, the youngest sailor of the fleet has purchased Jean Le Cam's highly respected 'Hubert', rechristened McDonalds, and is eagerly awaiting her IMOCA debut as skipper: "I don't yet feel too stressed. Essentially, I'm looking forward to slugging it out with my rivals. I have a good feel for my boat and I'm able to control her more and more, which is reassuring and I feel safe. Damien (Guillou) and I are on the same wavelength: focusing on good seamanship, being careful, protecting the boat and anticipating things well so we make the right choices..."

The contenders enter centre stage on Thursday for the 48H Azimut!

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