



Braving new horizons

In a big-boat sport where women are seldom seen, a Detroit native became the only woman to compete twice in the world's most demanding sailboat race — and to captain the first all-women America's Cup crew. BY DIANNA STAMPFLER

Early training on the Great Lakes prepared Detroit native Dawn Riley for her leadership role aboard the Heineken in the 1993-'94 Whitbread Round-the-World Race. Serving as captain, Riley maneuvered her all-female crew through icebergs, freezing temperatures and near-hurricane gusts.

At age 12, Detroit native Dawn Riley stepped aboard a 36-foot, Great Lakes cutter with her family and took off on a year-long adventure to the Caribbean and back. She had already learned to sail on Lake St. Clair, becoming a member of the North Star Sail Club and commodore of the junior sailing program.

"The Great Lakes provided an excellent training ground to learn sailing in all conditions and how to react quickly to those changes," Riley said.

Such waves of change prepared Riley, a Michigan State University graduate, to make history.

In 1989, Riley sailed aboard the Maiden as part of the first all-women's entry in the 1989-'90 Whitbread Round-the-World Race. This nine-month ocean marathon, sailed in six legs, poses 32,000 miles of extreme ocean challenges from England to Uruguay, Australia, New Zealand, back to Uruguay, Florida and then England. In 1992 she won the Santa Maria Cup and placed first in the Women's Cup in Portofino, Italy. That same year she also became the first woman to play an active role on an America's Cup team, serving as pit person for the winning America3.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GETTY IMAGES/STEPHEN MUNDAY

That she would be tapped to pinch captain the U.S. Women's Challenge — the sailboat bearing the Whitbread's 1993-'94 only all-female crew, after key members mutinied and the original skipper withdrew after the race's first 6,000-mile leg — made sense. But while competitors had been preparing for the next leg in a Uruguay port over a month's time, Riley had just four days upon arriving to rejuvenate the newly named Heineken (reflecting a change in sponsor) and its 11-woman, skipper-less crew.

"Was it just an ego thing that made me think I could save this project?" she said in a fax to her fiancé, Barry McKay.

"I am having second thoughts ... Adrienne says that I shouldn't make any rash decisions, because this will be great for my career. My answer is, 'Not if someone dies.'"

Icebergs, near-hurricane gusts, freezing temperatures, dwindling supplies, exhaustion — Riley shares the details of these challenges and others of her arduous journey of self-discovery in her memoir, "Taking the Helm," written with Cynthia Flanagan. Roughly 16 hours behind the Whitbread's winner, the Heineken arrived, crew intact, in Auckland.

"When it came to adventure, the idea of fear was never introduced," Riley said

of her parents' influence on her approach. "Do it, but do it right; take time to make the proper preparations, and don't ever be afraid."

Riley went on to captain the America3 team in the 1995 America's Cup; won the Santa Maria Cup for a second time in 1999; served as CEO and captain of America True in the 2000 America's Cup; and became the 2002 IC45 World Champion. She is presently general manager of the K-Challenge, the French entry in the 2007 America's Cup, and doubles as CEO and captain of the American True Foundation.

In this role, Riley helps break down traditional barriers to put women of all ages at the helm through programs such as Tall Ship Semester for Girls, and Tall Ship Week for Women. She is also president of the Women's Sports Foundation, founded by Billie Jean King.

"I sail because I love it," she said. "Our foundation's work is to make sure that others have the chance to enjoy the sport, too."

She denies she's courageous, instead referring to herself as stubborn and bossy.

"Don't you dare tell me what I can do or cannot do," she said. "Anything is possible if you're willing to pay the price."

≈

Dianna Stampfer is a contributing editor to BLUE. To learn more about Dawn Riley, visit www.dawnriley.com. To learn more about the Whitbread, check out www.solarnavigator.net/history/whitbread_round_the_world_race.htm.

