

SAIL AMERICA NEWS

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WAYPOINTS COVER STORY



As CEO and captain of America True in 2000, Dawn Riley was the first woman to manage an America's Cup sailing team and it was the first campaign with a co-ed crew. She raced on four America's Cup and two Whitbread (now Volvo Ocean Race) teams. She is the former president of the Woman's Sports Foundation, serves on the board of US Sailing, and is an adviser to several public service organizations. Her newest challenge is creating and running Oakcliff Sailing Center, a completely unique training and coaching center that is building American leaders through sailing. The Acorn and Sapling programs at Oakcliff are intensive on- and off-the-water programs whose graduates receive training in all aspects of running a racing campaign from technical to finance to marketing and

strategy. Riley believes this center will prove to be significant in creating leaders inside and outside of the marine industry.

Sail America talks with Dawn Riley about her time on the water, her thoughts on management training through sailing, and her upcoming keynote address at the Sail America Industry Conference in Charleston, SC, June 9–11, 2014.

Sail America: Can you talk about your background in sailing and how you got into competitive sailing?

Dawn Riley: Technically, I've been a professional sailor since I was 15, but I was mostly paid in food. I also started cruising with my family. When I was 13, I went sailing for a year with my family. We covered 10,000 miles in a year. Whitbread is 35,000, so that was pretty intense. There was no recruiting in those days. It was a fight to get into professional sailing. I had to stand up and ask and demand and cajole. I sailed in college at Michigan State University, and I put myself through college working on and around boats.

SA: What made you decide to be involved with the America True team and how did that come about?

DR: America True was my third America's Cup. For the first one I was the only woman on the winning America3. They had open tryouts; I was lucky enough to hear about it and performed well. The all-women's team, also called America3, was significant not only for me but for all women in sailing and sport. America True came about because I felt there were mistakes managing America3 and I thought I would do better. It was arrogance of youth. Definitely not as easy as I thought.

SA: America True had not only the first female manager, but it was also the first truly co-ed crew. What are some challenges you encountered with that?

DR: And the youngest. I was 31. The initial challenges were to convince the sponsors because they are like WHAAT? A girl and a 'kid' wants how much money? But the ones who got it were super supportive. I was working with a solid group of people, a solid team. The only way to gain gender advancement is to sail side by side.

SA: What about the potential challenges of being a woman to managing men in an America's Cup campaign?

DR: To be totally realistic, there is one way to deal with discrimination issues, which unfortunately do happen. Whether a person is trying to overcome gender or race or sexual orientation, the first thing to do is behave as if it doesn't exist and power through. Second, make sure you fight for somebody else; don't just let it happen. And, third, address it. But mostly I power through. You will change their minds.

SA: During that campaign, America True Youth Program was founded. The program includes one-day events around the nation, bringing young people aboard private boats. Can you talk a little about the program? Were you involved in founding this group and how did it come about? Are you still involved?

DR: Our main benefactor Chris Coffin from the Midwest, it's in part due to him—the program is running on an endowment. We give out advice to communities starting programs, and offer advice to established programs. We call ourselves an incubator/hospital.

SA: Naturally, this brings us to Oakcliff Sailing Center. Why or how did you create this organization?

DR: It's due to the Lawrence family, who had the vision and resources to allow me and a small group to dream up this Utopia. I did a SWOT analysis and looked at everything happening in the industry, the nation, internationally. Then I identified the needs and created something to fit into that. We were pretty sure there would be very few, if any, Americans in the America's Cup. There hadn't been a true US team and we were worried about the results of the Olympics. I saw an increasing

lack of professionalism in sailing and we wanted to clean that up. If somebody is being inappropriate and thus insulting or alienating a potential sailor, you need to stop it. How should you act when no one is listening? What is ethical and what is not? These are some of the things we're talking about at Oakcliff. Also, you have your tennis pro, your golf pro...We need to have coaching and pros helping adults. We need to make the transition from junior sailing into adult sailing. When people say "young kids don't want to sail," well, we created this problem. You look at the young competitor and say he's phenomenal when he's 17, but he's never seen a winch. He hasn't been coached. There's too much of a disconnect.

SA: Can you talk specifically about the Acorn and Sapling programs available through Oakcliff? How do those programs help shape leadership qualities?

DR: We try to operate in ourselves and in our organization at the highest level of professionalism. We act professionally, ethically at all times. You have a goal. We hold ourselves to a high standard, with loyalty and ethics. All while sailing, fixing and managing boats. The programs are residential and full time, as in seven days a week. It is pretty intense. I'd like to add Oakcliff is a nonprofit. We need boats and sails and...money. [She laughs]

SA: What are some of the specific skills that translate from competitive sailing to the business world?

DR: Being a professional sailor isn't an easy task. You have to be professional in every aspect, with the possible exception of wet sanding. Everything translates. You learn how to win, how to lose, and how to win again. Sailing adds another element. You can be perfect but the wind gods make sure you don't win. You learn to push every nuance and every opportunity. It's multifaceted: weather, wind, current, sails, boats....Most boats have 4-16 people on board. You have to be a leader and work as team in extreme conditions, especially if it's blowing 40.

SA: You will be the keynote speaker at the Sail America Industry Conference in June. What do you plan to discuss?

DR: I'll be talking about how we can no longer sit here and say the sky is falling, that young people are too interested in electronic devices, and talk about the golden days of yachting. If we want to stay in this sport, we need to change the conversation and we need to be vigilant about welcoming new people. This leads into diversity, women, color, sexual orientation. Advertising needs to look like clients. We need to look at the other markets outside of sailing, not a wealthy retirement [demographic].

SA: You also work the speaker circuit, attending conferences as a motivational speaker. What are some of your favorite topics and how do you draw on your background in the sailing industry to get a motivational and positive message to your listeners?

DR: It's fun and easy for me to talk war stories as a woman in a man's word. I also like to talk about leadership, risk taking, focus, overcoming diversity. Remember, running an America's Cup campaign is putting together a multi-million dollar startup business and going to market in a high-pressure, time-sensitive industry. That directly translates to speaking topics.

Hear Dawn Riley speak at the Sail America Industry Conference, June 9-11, 2014, in Charleston, South Carolina.