

No Going Back

Women at the elite level of sailing are here to stay...



MAGNUS WHEATLEY

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The Nantucket Film Festival was the setting for the first private screening of the amazing 'Mighty Mary' documentary that scripts the extraordinarily ground-breaking all-women's team, led by the peerless Dawn Riley, in the 1995 America's Cup. We all know the story of how the team eliminated Stars 'n' Stripes but how a back-doors deal kept DC in, and even now some 30-odd years later, it still makes mine and many others' blood boil at how awful our sport was in the treatment of women. Since then, progress has been painfully slow, and I take for example the fact that it took until 2013 for the Royal Yacht Squadron to abolish its men-only membership. Thankfully, and after a lot of shouting

from people like me and plenty of others, those horrible days are over, but it's still a fight.

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If we're honest with ourselves, the battleground at the pinnacle is still on but it is logically moving in the right direction. I can remember arguing here for women to be mandated in SailGP long before it happened, and when it did, it has been sensational and opened the doors of the sport. Credit to the league for doing that. If we'd left it alone, stayed silent, it simply wouldn't have happened.

The Cup took its time to catch on, and even in 2024 there were dinosaurs telling me privately: "We'll never mandate women on the AC75." Those stegosaurus have rolled over, perhaps in the face of pressure from the French and the dull hand of the gazillionaire of gazillionaires Madame Bettencourt, but there's no going back now.



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The Women's America's Cup in Barcelona shone a light of such intensity on the issue that just to play witness to it, you could feel the ground shifting. Despite the fleet racing being affected by Mother Nature horribly, the final between Hannah Mills/Tash Bryant and Giulia

Conte/Margherita Porro, was arguably the best racing of the entire regatta.

The Italians won by a whisker but what we saw was brilliance on display by both teams. We also saw throughout the week-long regatta, a renewed energy in the Cup, and I will never forget interviewing the outstanding Odile Lambriex van Aanholt who just has a brilliant way with words, telling me directly: “WE WANT AND WE DESERVE OUR OPPORTUNITY.” Love that.



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Come the Protocol discussions for AC38, and suddenly the mandate was on the table in the drafts. I held my breath that there wouldn't be a last-minute change, and there wasn't. It was everything. Women on the AC75's, where the argument over physicality has evaporated, is the bridgehead to a future 'Mighty Mary' team - and in my view that can't come quick enough.

Sailing at the elite end is a transitional game at the moment. The 'Foiling Class of 2013' still dominate but that will not last. I've spoken a thousand times about the Youth & Women coming through at pace, and this is just the first wave. With opportunity to get experience in both SailGP and the Cup boats, pretty soon the current crop of champions, the ones that you would put in your fantasy dream team, will be gone. Real-life, kids, and the endless grind of international travel will call time on their enthusiasm and brilliance and give way to the next gen, and the gen after that. Within that, there's a whole raft of women coming through just as fast as the boys, and the team bosses (probably the 'Class of 2013') will be open to the change far more than the current lever-pullers in the sport.



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That's a good thing. Sailing at the top end is predicated on change. Too many hang on for the pay cheque for too long. We saw it in 12 Metres. We saw it in the IACC. Foiling gave an excuse of 'experience' to hang on for even longer. But it's changing. Trust me.

If you were a nascent America's Cup team eyeing AC40, or perhaps you're looking at a new entry into SailGP, then an all-women's programme from top to bottom is the PR gold-dust that any marketer would advise. Why would you do anything else? I can't wait to see it in SailGP and I can't wait to see it in the Cup. It will happen.



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The big question that my colleagues at the America's Cup have asked in the recent must-see 'Inside America's Cup' YouTube video (see above) is: "When will we see a woman drive an AC75?" Good question. Various answers. If I was Ian Walker, I would be eyeing Hannah Mills for the port helm on GB1 as a starter.

Hannah has done so much for the profile of women in sport to be almost unquantifiable. The whole Athena Pathway programme has forged a way that is unquestionably the finest pathway for women and young people in the sport anywhere in the world. And it's not just sailors, it's shore team, data analysts, boat-builders, RIB drivers,

designers, you name it. My sense is that Hannah deserves the AC75 slot more than anyone else for AC38 - what has the team got to lose?



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Will it happen? I think it's 50/50 but I'll bet the discussions are going on. If GB1 do it, then all PR bets are off for Naples in 2027. It is **THE** story. It's ground-breaking and brilliant in the same kind of way that Dawn Riley was in 1995, yet without the petty boys'-club politics behind the scenes. I really hope it comes to fruition.



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Elsewhere, we all know the sport is changing. Lady Commodores are now everywhere from the grass roots to the New York Yacht Club - and that's to be applauded. Events like the Admiral's Cup have cottoned on too. Offshore sailing is a rich hunting ground for the most remarkable storylines - and I highlight Cole Bauer, Elizabeth 'Za' Tucker, Francesca Clapcich, Justine Mettraux, Sam Davies - the list is endless. And then down through the dinghy classes, wow it's just a thriving scene of equality and diversity. All this pressure has to burst at the top...and it is.

There's no going back. I'm delighted to see it.

Keep rocking the boat.

Magnus Wheatley

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