

The New York Times

The Athletic

The Mighty Mary: The America’s Cup, an all-women’s crew and an audacious premise



Mighty Mary competed in the 1995 Citizen Cup against Dennis Conner’s Stars and Stripes. Don Emmert / AFP via Getty Images

By **Andrew Rice**

Sept. 25, 2026 | Updated 7:22 am CDT

Share full article

In the spring of 1995, a boat called Mighty Mary set out to do something that had not even been attempted before.

An all-women’s professional sailing crew had never competed in the America’s Cup, the oldest competition in international sport. Then a U.S. billionaire entered the fray, a call-out ad followed in The New York Times and a team, largely consisting of sailing rookies, was assembled.

What happened next — the triumphs, the public unraveling, the swearing and cussing — has gone largely untold outside sailing circles for three decades.

But now, the wider world gets its chance to learn about this extraordinary story in documentary “Mighty Mary.”

Its director, Mary Mazzio, who was on the U.S. rowing team at the 1992 Olympic Games, first encountered the Mighty Mary campaign through teammates. “About six jumped aboard this other vessel,” she says. “I remember thinking at the time, hearing the story of the campaign, ‘This is built like a murder mystery, with all the twists and turns.’”

Mazzio was struck by the audacity of the premise. A team of America’s Cup rookies, with the exception of Michigan native Dawn Riley, who was the only woman to have taken part in a previous edition of the competition, was being asked to maneuver a 55,000-pound (27.5 U.S. tons) vessel against the world’s most experienced and decorated sailors as they attempted to be the United States’ representatives in the 1995 America’s Cup.

Mazzio, who had spent years in the gym alongside several of the women, had no doubts about their physical capabilities. “I knew how strong they were,” she says. “I was like, if anybody could do this, it would be them.”



Driver Leslie Egnot on board Mighty Mary. Don Emmert / AFP via Getty Images

The idea for a film first surfaced years before Mazzio ever embarked on this project.

While producing a documentary for ESPN about elite athletes and their mothers, a project that featured basketball players Grant Hill, Shaquille O’Neal and soccer’s Mia Hamm, she pushed to include Riley, who would go on to become the first woman to lead an America’s Cup team in 2000. However, with the runtime at 95 minutes for a 90-minute broadcast slot, Riley’s footage hit the cutting-room floor.

“Dawn was not pleased,” Mazzio recalls with a grave smile. But, in retrospect, she is grateful the segment never aired in that form. “If I had done a five-minute segment as part of a larger compendium of stories, it would have been a blip,” she says.

Three decades later, with the America’s Cup itself embracing the story, she calls the timing “a perfect storm.”

Much of the film’s power, Mazzio says, comes from the willingness of the men involved in the original campaign to speak candidly about the culture of the sport at the time.

She points to a moment in the film when yachtsman Paul Cayard says: “As we evolve, it’s really important for us to move away from what our fathers taught us and lean into what our sons are learning.” It struck a chord with Mazzio: “The hair on the back of my neck stood right up.”



Mighty Mary ultimately lost to the Stars & Stripes. Al Bello / Allsport

Dennis Conner, the skipper of the Stars & Stripes boat the women were competing against, very nearly didn’t sit for an interview at all, Mazzio says. A mutual friend, the three-time Olympic rower Tom Darling, who had been a grinder on Conner’s winning 1987 America’s Cup crew, vouched for Mazzio and helped bring him to the table.

What emerged, she says, surprised her: a portrait of a fiercely competitive man whose gamesmanship on and off the water was often mistaken for personal animosity.

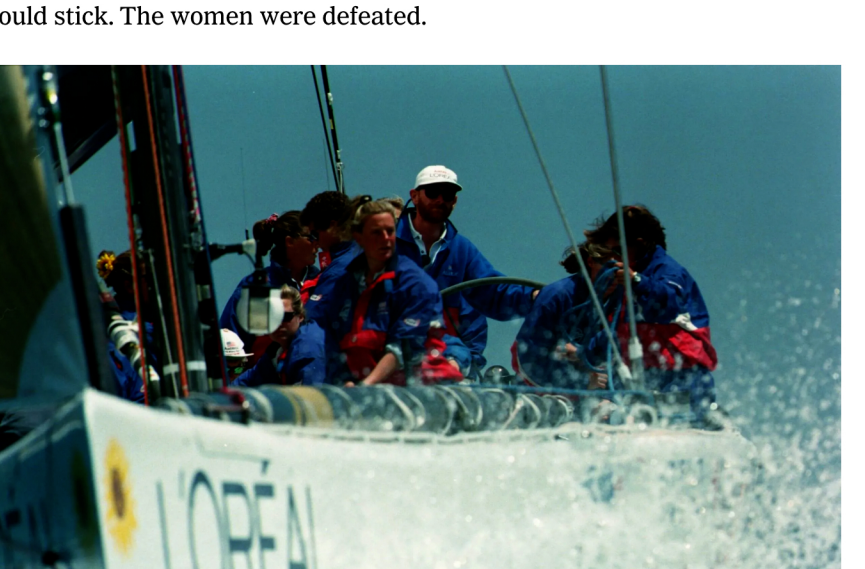
One of the missing pieces from the documentary is an interview with Bill Koch, the syndicate owner and MIT-trained scientist who bankrolled the all-women’s team after winning the 1992 America’s Cup with a mostly male crew that included Riley in a supporting role. The viewer has to reach their own conclusions about why Koch launched this extraordinary project, and why he made some decisions which undermined the team at various points.

One of the strangest moments is watching the Mighty Mary crew finish well ahead of Conner’s boat, celebrating their qualification to the next round of the Citizen Cup against another team, Young America. They had knocked Conner out of the competition fair and square.

However, the women would soon discover that, only a few hours before, Koch had carved out a back-room deal with Conner to have a three-way battle in the next round, effectively making that race null and void.

Conner, the most wily match racer of his day, was given a stay of execution. He used his second life to devastating effect.

In the next round, Conner would beat Mighty Mary in a decisive match, eliminating her from the competition. This time, the result on the water would stick. The women were defeated.



In the latter stages of the competition, Dave Dellenbaugh joined the Mighty Mary crew. Getty Images

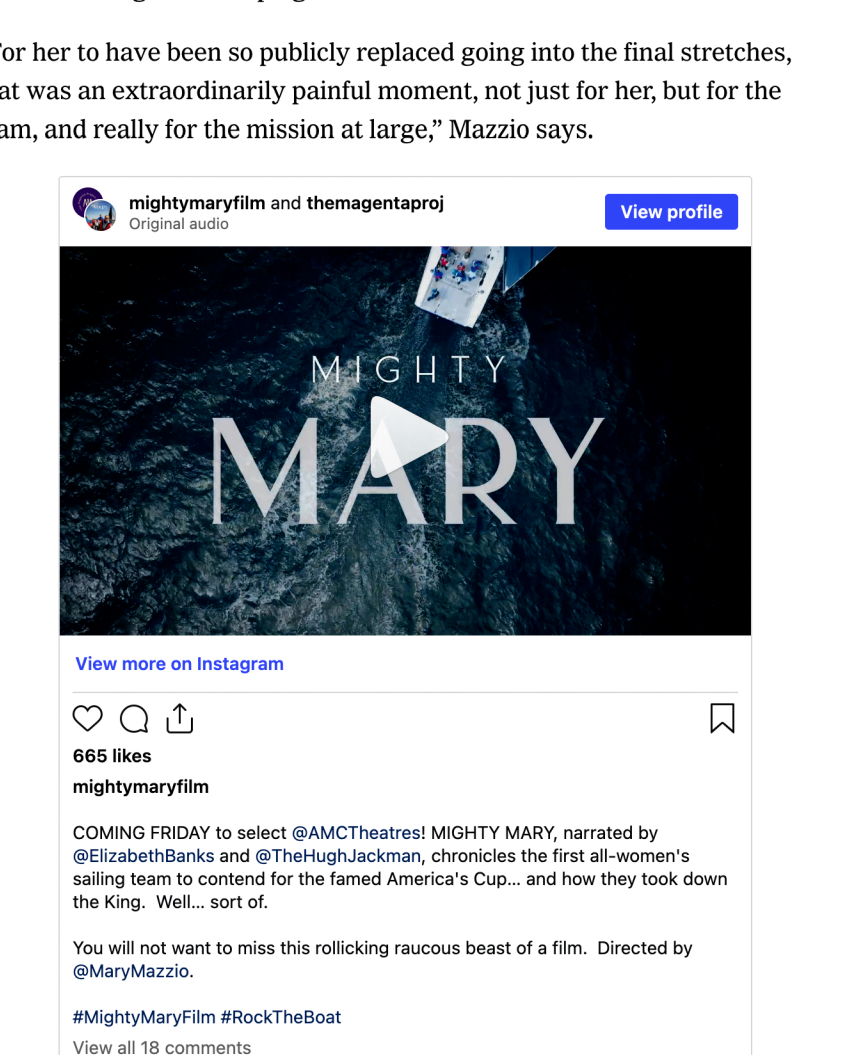
Conner would go on to win the defender trial but ultimately lost the America’s Cup to New Zealand, who won the event for the first time.

Mazzio says that while Koch made some mistakes along the way, he had nevertheless presented “this extraordinary opportunity”.

“I truly believe that he saw Dawn Riley in the pit and what she could do,” she says. “I think that’s when he said, ‘Let’s try a group of women’, which was just a fool’s errand to almost everybody else.”

The most painful moment in the documentary, in Mazzio’s view, belongs to JJ Fetter, a champion Olympic sailor who was replaced late in the campaign by tactician Dave Dellenbaugh, who had played a key part in Koch’s winning 1992 campaign.

“For her to have been so publicly replaced going into the final stretches, that was an extraordinarily painful moment, not just for her, but for the team, and really for the mission at large,” Mazzio says.



The documentary received an unexpected assist from Hollywood.

Hugh Jackman, an avid sailor and co-owner of Australia’s SailGP team, signed on after Mazzio’s staff noted his habit of posting his rowing machine times online, and offered, half as a joke, to help him shave seconds off his score.

“He apparently laughed so hard,” says Mazzio, of the moment Jackman was told of this audacious approach for his time. But, she adds, the Australian actor — who became not only an executive producer but co-narrator — committed to the project without hesitation.

Actress and writer Elizabeth Banks is also a narrator, bringing what Mazzio calls “a sense of humor and drama” to the film’s presentation.

Last weekend, 16 of the original Mighty Mary sailors flew to Naples, Italy, where next year’s America’s Cup will be held, for the memorial event. What had been a footnote in America’s Cup history has now come to be recognized as an important chapter in its own right.

“For the women,” says Mazzio, “it’s a validation of the legacy that is being carried forward now into another generation.”

Andrew Rice [+ Follow](#)

Tagged To: [Global Sports](#), [Sailing](#)