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LATEST HEADLINES

In 1995, San Diego hosted a historic battle of the sexes in America's Cup sailing. A new documentary tells the women's story.

'Mighty Mary' shows how the sailors defied expectations and blazed a trail for women in the sport



Merritt Palm Keffer trimming at a 2025 reunion in Oyster Bay, New York, while filming on location for "Mighty Mary" documentary. (Richard Schultz. Courtesy of 50 Eggs)



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In 1995, a group of 23 women set out to challenge male dominance in sailing and make history in the sport.

Now, they're sailing onto the big screen in "Mighty Mary," a documentary set to hit AMC Theatres Friday, Sept. 11 to Friday, Sept. 18.

The documentary, named after the yacht of the all-women's team, is narrated and produced by actors Elizabeth Banks and Hugh Jackman and directed by filmmaker and Olympian Mary Mazzio. It premiered at the Nantucket Film Festival June 18, where it won the Maria Mitchell Visionary Award, which honors female filmmakers.

"Mighty Mary" tells the story of the first all-women sailing crew to compete for America's Cup, a sailing competition [described as](#) "the oldest trophy in international sports." The previous winning country contests a challenger country, and yacht clubs compete against each other to represent their respective countries. The competition had been dominated by men since it began 1851.



The former Mighty Mary crew members sailing together at a 2025 reunion in Oyster Bay, New York, while filming on location for the documentary. (Richard Schultz. Courtesy of 50 Eggs.)

But in 1995, billionaire businessman Bill Koch, the owner of a previous winning America's Cup team three years prior, decided to assemble an all-women team to compete for the trophy. That year, teams trained in San Diego, and the races were held off the coast of Point Loma.

Media pundits described the move as setting up the largest "battle of the sexes" since Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs. Many of them also criticized Koch's decision as a joke or publicity stunt.

Few women had ever competed in the America's Cup, and there were just 10 months to assemble and train a team of rookies. Koch opened applications to the public and received around 700, which he whittled down to a team of 23.

Only one member of the team, Dawn Riley, had competed on an America's Cup team before. Several others were Olympic rowers, with a weightlifter, Olympic gladiator and NASA engineer rounding out the team. The sailors trained 13 hours each day.



The former Mighty Mary crew members sailing together at a 2025 reunion in Oyster Bay, New York, while filming on location for the documentary. (Richard Schultz. Courtesy of 50 Eggs.)

Some of the crew members said they had to balance their ambitions in the sport with expectations in their family lives. Mighty Mary sailors Annie Gardner and JJ Fetter said they were initially torn about whether to participate, as both had young children.

"Even though my husband wasn't happy about it, I was like, I have to do this," Gardner said. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Despite the team's wide dismissal as a publicity stunt, the Mighty Mary team went on to stun the world by defeating the team led by four-time America's Cup champion Dennis Conner in their first race. In the film, viewers watch as the tournament unfolds with Mighty Mary, Conner's Stars & Stripes and a third team, Young America, fighting it out over many days of competition.

The film compiles archival TV footage, radio soundbites and newspaper clippings from coverage of the 1995 competition. It also features video from a 30th reunion, when many of the original crew members came together to sail in Oyster Bay, New York.



Olympian Annie Gardner at the wheel at a 2025 reunion in Oyster Bay, New York, while filming on location for the "Mighty Mary" documentary. (Richard Schultz. Courtesy of 50 Eggs.)

Christy Crawford Donnelly (previously Christy Steinman), the first woman to compete on an America's Cup team over a decade before the Mighty Mary team, believes the women sailors featured in the documentary exemplify determination and perseverance against the odds.

"You can be an underdog, and you can really come up and do something," Crawford Donnelly said.

Fetter, who now coaches youth sailors in San Diego, noted how the sport has made strides toward gender inclusion and equality over the last two decades. For the first time in 175 years of the competition, America's Cup organizers introduced a mandate requiring each team must have at least one female crew member for the upcoming 2027 competition.



World Champion Suzy Leech laughing on deck at a 2025 reunion in Oyster Bay, New York, while filming on location for the "Mighty Mary" documentary. (Richard Schultz. Courtesy of 50 Eggs.)

"It does seem like now there's a lot more equality," Fetter said. "I think this story will help some of those girls appreciate that it wasn't always so easy for us back then."

Gardner said she hopes audiences will walk away from the film with a greater appreciation for all the hard work that went into preparing for the competition and the importance of believing in one's self, even when others cast doubt.

"If you have a passion for something, and you really want it, you gotta do everything you can to make it happen," Gardner said. "We were given an opportunity, and we didn't just take that opportunity and go, well, this is fun. We really worked hard because we believed in it, and the longer it went on, the more we believed in it.

"There were people that said we couldn't do it," she added. "There were people that said, it's a fluke. There were people that thought it was a publicity stunt — but we always believed."