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These Mainers shined on sailing's biggest stage

A new documentary chronicles the 1995 America's Cup journey of Mighty Mary, a boat with an all-female crew that included Yarmouth's Merritt Carey.



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It was perfect sailing weather, blue skies and strong wind. Merritt Carey and Jim Brady weren't navigating Casco Bay. They sat at a picnic table at SailMaine's center near the Old Port, navigating memories three decades old.

Thirty-one years ago, Carey and Brady took part in the America's Cup defender series, the competition to determine who would represent the United States in the prestigious sailing race. Carey was with Mighty Mary, the first all-female America's Cup crew. Brady, who won a silver medal in the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, was the navigator for Dennis Conner's Stars and Stripes during the defender races.

A new documentary has stirred memories, too. "Mighty Mary" tells the story of the race through the eyes of Carey's team. The film will be screened on Nov. 5 at Hannaford Hall on the Portland campus of the University of Southern Maine, with a panel discussion including Carey to follow. Proceeds from the screening benefit SailMaine's programs for girls and women, as well as the Hearts of Pine Foundation's programs for girls and women.

Carey was fresh off taking part in the Whitbread Round the World Race with captain Dawn Riley, who also captained the Mighty Mary team.

"My job was to do the things nobody wanted to do," said Carey, who now lives in Yarmouth.

Brady remembered thinking at the time that the Mighty Mary team had a lot of talented sailors, but their overall lack of big boat experience could be a factor.

“I never thought it was going to be a cakewalk,” Brady said. “Right off the bat, we knew we had a battle.”

While Riley and Carey had plenty of racing experience, many of their teammates did not. Some had been Olympic rowers who knew port and starboard, but from a backward perspective because when they rowed, they had their backs to the front of the boat. They were constantly worried they would cause chaos with a mistake, Carey said.

The team was a few races in by the time they received the new Mighty Mary boat. Getting used to the boat’s feel while competing for such high stakes was difficult, Carey said. Their concerns and complaints were brushed off as operator error. If Dennis Connor had the same concerns, they would have been dealt with seriously and fixed, Carey said. But these women?

“They thought, these women don’t know how to sail,” she said, “and they were wrong. We didn’t have any doubts about our ability to handle the boat at all. Everyone on that boat was a hard-driving competitor.”

This was 23 years after Title IX, the landmark law that prohibited sex-based discrimination, Carey noted. Nowadays, each America’s Cup boat is required to have at least one woman on the crew. That requirement shows how slow progress is, Carey said. There are plenty of female sailors qualified for positions who should earn those spots without a requirement.

Later in the competition, Dave Dellenbaugh was added to Mighty Mary’s crew as tactician, ending the team’s all-female status. Carey thinks that was the work of team owner Bill Koch. He won the America’s Cup in 1992 and had a hand in everything, she said. That was the first of three gut punches, Carey said.

The second was what happened after Mighty Mary beat Stars and Stripes in what they thought was an elimination race. Before Carey and her teammates could celebrate, they learned a deal had been struck to make the final a three-boat event. Beating Stars and Stripes that day didn’t matter. Both were moving on.

“I thought we were eliminated,” said Brady, of Portland.

Gut punch three was the final, when Mighty Mary saw a four-minute lead over Stars and Stripes evaporate in tough racing conditions. Stars and Stripes caught a little wind at the right time and eked out the victory.

“There’s no other way to put it. It sucked,” Carey said.

Carey said she hadn’t thought of the experience too much in recent years. The documentary, which she’s seen twice, sparked memories as she reconnected with teammates she hadn’t seen in

decades. Taking her three children, son Liam and daughters Madeleine and Grace, to see the film gave her some cool mom cred.

Carey couldn't recall exactly when during the experience she realized her Mighty Mary team had a real chance to win. Thinking about it, maybe it was from the second they arrived in San Diego to compete. The doubt of others is a deep well. Athletes have drawn from it for motivation for centuries.

It came down to this: Carey and her teammates knew they could race the boat. If you didn't believe it, that wasn't their problem.

"Why would you bother if you didn't think you had a chance?" she said.