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The Billionaire Yacht Battle That Still Makes Sailors Furious

A documentary revives the tumultuous but groundbreaking voyage of an all-women America's Cup team



By Jason Gay

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It felt like betrayal on the high seas—one that 16 sailors haven't forgotten.

A new documentary is reviving the stirring if maddening voyage of the “Mighty Mary,” a groundbreaking America's Cup crew undermined by one of the most baffling backroom deals in sports history.

(Yes, we're doing yacht racing today. Come on! Expand your palate! It's not like it's NFL or baseball playoff season.)

The year was 1995. San Diego was host to the Cup's defender series, a competition to select the syndicate to represent the United States in the prestigious yacht-a-palooza.

Billionaire Bill Koch, the 1992 winner, jolted the sport by assembling an all-women's team to mount a state-of-the-art defense.

After an open-call tryout, a vessel switch partway through the competition, and a good deal of skepticism, Koch's women's team—which included celebrated sailor and 1992 member Dawn Riley—had proven its mettle.

Powering aboard the 75-foot Mighty Mary, the women defeated the legendary Dennis Conner's Stars & Stripes in the semis to book a spot in the final.

It was a staggering defeat of a sailing behemoth, a Billie Jean King vs. Bobby Riggs-type monument for women in sports.

Or so the crew on the Mighty Mary thought.

Moments after vanquishing Conner, the Mighty Mary crew learned that Koch had agreed to a three-way deal with Conner and a third yacht syndicate, Young America, to



slide all three teams to the final. The move—explained at the time as beneficial to sponsors and protective to all three teams—negated Mighty Mary's seismic win and kept Conner in the mix.

The Mighty Mary team had gone out and raced for no reason, unaware of the three-way arrangement. The win didn't matter.

"Just excruciating," says "Mighty Mary" director Mary Mazzio, a former Olympic rower turned filmmaker.

It sounds just as crazy all these years later. I'm trying to come up with a proper comparison.

Imagine two Major League Baseball teams being tied at the end of the regular season. Imagine them playing a tiebreaker, only for the winning team to be told at the end, yeah you're both moving into the playoffs, we made a deal, the game didn't count.

How would that go over with the winning team?

I'm guessing not well.

As Mazzio's film makes clear, it didn't go over well 31 years ago, either. The team was devastated. Dawn Riley curses like Earl Weaver steamed at an umpire.

She hasn't really cooled.

"I'm still pissed off," Riley tells me. "It was a clear lack of faith in those of us who were on the boat busting ass every day for more than a year."



One of Riley's crewmates, Merritt Palm Keffer, uses the same term: P.O.'d. Similar feelings linger for another controversial maneuver, in which Koch opted to replace the vessel's tactician, JJ Isler, with a man, David Dellenbaugh.

The film "brought up a lot of old feelings which I think I buried for 30 years," Keffer said.

Conner's Stars & Stripes wound up prevailing in the defender series, defeating Mighty Mary and Young America to represent the United States. Alas, the yacht was then smoked by New Zealand's Black Magic I.

Don't get the wrong idea: "Mighty Mary" isn't a simmering cauldron of resentments. Mazzio's film, which uses hours of exquisite archival footage, does a rousing job of restoring a historic team's legacy.

The crew of Mighty Mary was, indeed, a wonder—a quickly-assembled but deeply talented collection of vets and rookies who jelled into a world-class outfit. Koch isn't interviewed, but Mazzio sits with team members, rivals and the now-83 Conner who bring to life the skill and tenacity of the pioneering team. Its influence is clear: Today women are abundant in sailing, at the highest levels.

"Mighty Mary," which is currently playing in theaters before making its way to streaming, vividly renders the athleticism and teamwork required to compete in a dangerous sport.

The women aboard Mighty Mary aren't demure passengers. These are cutthroat, often hilarious competitors. (Wait until you learn the name they bestow upon Mighty Mary's lengthy rudder.) There's enough colorful language to impress Scorsese.



The film also rekindles a lot of the romance that's been missing from the Cup as it's evolved into its multi-hull, super-technology era. Wealth and tech have always been part of the Cup, but it was once a sport of charismatics piloting recognizable vessels. Lately it's become a spaceship derby.

Gloriously, "Mighty Mary" includes footage of the old band getting back together for a sail off of Oyster Bay, N.Y. They let it rip like old times.

"The F-bombs were flying," says Mazzio, laughing.

For the Mighty Mary women, the sail was more than a reunion. It was a reminder of how good they really were.

"It was awesome," says Keffer. "It brought so much gratitude back to my heart."