



# Setting the standard

Carol Cronin talks to Dawn Riley, the former Whitbread Race and America's Cup skipper who since those heady days of major league competition has been developing an internationally renowned 'sailing centre'... though two words cannot come close to doing justice to a vast menu of educational programmes all known simply today as Oakcliff Sailing

Most of us excel at either: longterm vision (choosing a route that will best get us around next week's low pressure system, say); or diving into the details (like getting our hands dirty to fix everything those damn sailors broke today). Dawn Riley – professional sailor, inspirational speaker, designated grocery shopper – somehow manages to thrive and inspire at both ends of this spectrum. And though her no-BS manner has often got her into trouble she's finally landed in a place where she can use her entire toolbox of skills to create an easier path forward for anyone wishing to follow in her footsteps.

That place, of course, is Oakcliff Sailing.

For the past 11 years Dawn has put her larger-than-life drive and focus into building a world-renowned training academy. When I pin her down between meetings and other commitments for an interview I ask her to explain Oakcliff's stated vision: 'to build American leaders through sailing'.

'We train people to be professionals in the sport,' Dawn elaborates. 'To be in the America's Cup, go around the world, be boat captains.'

In addition to sailing skills Oakcliff also teaches the future unsung heroes so critical to sailing programmes: the boat mechanics and onboard reporters who will help their more visible teammates win both sailboat races and sponsorship deals. Like Dawn, Oakcliff grads know how to get their hands dirty.

Running a sailing academy on Long Island might seem like a strange job for someone so well-connected and respected, but Dawn's history reminds me of the saying 'We don't change as we get older, we just get more and more like ourselves.'

Here's a look back at how this woman grew into herself – which helps explain why Oakcliff Sailing is actually the perfect place for her unique spectrum of expertise.

## Hooked on sailing

Just as Dawn entered her teens the Riley family took off for the Caribbean on a wooden sailboat. A year later she returned to Detroit hooked on the sport and talked her way onto as many Maxi boats as she could, earning a reputation as a strong and smart crew.

There was no high school sailing in those days – and she was too big for dinghies anyway – so she learned her skills from the (mostly) men around her.

After two years at the local community college she transferred to Michigan State. The University of Michigan had a better sailing team, but in her opinion Michigan State offered a better advertising degree.

'I called up the coach and lectured him that just because I was a female I was not going to be relegated to a crew. And that his team was not as good, but I was coming for my education. He was just like, "Oh great, we have somebody who sails!"'

She laughs. 'They just wanted warm bodies.' She became captain of her college team, and she also 'worked for three different sailmakers, and at a boatyard. Basic rigging, installing electronics, winterising engines, all of that.'

GILLES MARTIN-PAGET



**Opposite:** *America True* during the 2000 Louis Vuitton Cup in Auckland where she finished 5th. As well as raising the team's mostly private funding, CEO Dawn Riley assembled an extraordinary sailing group with John Cutler driving alongside names like Buddy Melges, Jeff Madrigali, Liz Baylis, Katie Pettibone and Leslie Egnot – who steered *Mighty Mary* (above) in San Diego five years earlier. The 1995 all-women crew backed by Bill Koch benefited from the legacy of Koch's enormous 1992 defender programme and *Mighty Mary* defeated Dennis Conner's *Stars&Stripes* in the first race of the defender trials and eventually came within one race of the finals; actually they 'won' their semi-final before the series was unexpectedly extended to keep the Stars&Stripes team in the competition...

### Trimming beginnings

One key mentor was Tim Woodhouse, the longtime owner of Hood Sails. She first met him when he came aboard the boat she was sailing on a freezing cold day. 'I was miserable, wearing hardware store yellow foulweather gear that ripped. But he was impressed with my trimming, and that next year I was racing and working for him. That was a beginning, a huge point. He was a character...'

The next big moment came after Dawn agreed to run two boats at once. 'My owner said, "We're going to have you run *Lumatic* in the Great Lakes and *Trader* on the east coast. We'll fly you back and forth." And I was like, "Oh, great!" Of course, in reality, I was doing double the work for the same amount of money... but it was still cool.'

The connections she made in the active east coast sailing community led to more opportunities. She started a list of useful contacts; 'The good engine repair people in Charleston, South Carolina... that kind of stuff. At one point I thought I was going to create a boat captain's guide, for how to get anything fixed anywhere – remember, there was no internet.'

Dawn graduated in the middle of a

recession, so instead of an advertising job she continued working as a pro sailor. Decades later she admits that her own school of hard knocks was much less organised than the school she runs now. 'Oakcliff is a single answer to how to become a professional.'

In the late 1980s she learned there would be a women's team in the 1989 Whitbread. Shortly after sending Tracy Edwards a fax, 'I had a very expensive phone call from St Thomas, where I was racing on [the IOR Maxi] *Matador*... and she's like, "Oh, I love *Matador*, come over to England afterwards."'

Dawn flew straight from St Thomas to England, a climactic shock after a winter in Florida and the Caribbean. (Living in her van on South Beach could be an article in itself... though for a very different type of magazine.)

I ask Dawn what she thinks of *Maiden* the movie. 'I thought the film was really good, and it showed the struggle and it showed the time. The only thing they stretched is trying to make Tracy go from a troubled kid who ran away to sea into the world's best sailor. She was legitimately one of the best navigators, man or woman,

at that time. But she wasn't the best sailor.'

Racing around the world increased Dawn's sailing ambitions; the only question was... which path? 'Should I do an Olympic campaign in the Europe, or should I do an America's Cup?'

'I realised right away that I could make money in the America's Cup, and I would have to spend money to campaign for the Olympics.' (This still true reality has now inspired an Oakcliff-run Olympic training programme.)

When a try-out with Dennis Conner's team for the 1992 America's Cup didn't work out she called Gary Jobson, who was in charge of Bill Koch's America's Cup team. That earned her another try-out – however, she thought it was an interview.

'Gary still gives me shit occasionally, because I showed up with my nails done, wearing earrings and my best pair of khakis. And they're like, "No, dude, we're going sailing." So I changed in the parking lot.' To this day Jobson teases her: 'That's the first time I ever sailed with a racer with nail polish and earrings!'

Despite her inappropriate attire Dawn earned a spot on the America's Cup sailing team – only the second woman to play a racing



PHIL UHL

role in the America's Cup (23-year-old Dory Vogel had been Dennis Conner's back-up navigator on *Stars & Stripes* in Fremantle in 1987). But shortly before the racing started Dawn was downgraded to the B-boat. 'My competition lobbied successfully that if I was on the A-boat then Bill Koch was going to be relegated to second-tier publicity,' she explains now.

'I was the better sailor. And it was great for the sponsors: *Time Magazine*, I was already on the cover. I was also in *People Magazine* and *USA Today*.' But sure enough none of that featured the skipper, and 'the guy who took my job knew which buttons to push'. A fellow team member later told me that Dawn hurled a dumbbell across the weight room in frustration.

'That's the most difficult part for anybody in an under-represented class,' Dawn says now; at that point, her only option was to 'keep my head up and do the best I can. Then, when you have the opportunity, you fight back hard, really hard'.

### Women's teams

Even before America<sup>3</sup> won the America's Cup Dawn was already writing a 'manifesto' for an all-female AC team. But when that started to gain traction with her boss, Bill Koch, and his management team, she was told bluntly that she'd 'never be in the back of the boat – and to get over myself'.

'Problem was I was still considered a non-dinghy offshore sailor, so I must not know what I was doing. I'm like, OK, fine – I'll go do the Whitbread instead.' She flew to Uruguay and replaced the skipper on *Heineken*, the all-women's team, for the rest of the 1993-94 round-the-world race.

Meanwhile, plans for the America<sup>3</sup> Women's Team had moved ahead without her. Dawn was somewhere off Cape Horn for the much hyped press announcement (Bill Koch even trailered an ACC yacht into New York City) and, though she was invited to call in via SSB, she wasn't able to get through.

After the Whitbread she says she was 'guaranteed' an A-team position with the

New York Yacht Club for the next Cup – at double the salary Koch was offering. But she felt it was more important to be part of the women's team.

'I would have been a good pit person on [the NYYC] team, but I wouldn't have been part of management, part of decision-making. I'm not one of the "kumbaya" women – I just knew that I was going to have more influence.' More than a quarter century later she says she would make the same decision again.

### Lessons learnt

Dawn was named skipper of Koch's 1995 Cup defender, *Mighty Mary*, and they ultimately won several big races – but not the right to defend the Cup. She blames that in part on an all-male management team, not because men and women are so different but because 'you can't have good management if they don't know what's going on in the team, and you can't be a good team member if you don't know what's going on in management.

'It needs to be integrated, or you will fail. Russell Coutts would never allow decisions to be made for him. And then have the management go, "Now just run along and go sailing, young man." You cannot have a women's team without women in the management; you will fail.'

It also taught her that the best team is never built through artificial segmentation. That would help inspire her next project – which again she began to work on even before the 1995 racing concluded.

### America True

About six weeks before the A<sup>3</sup> Women's Team finished a close second to Team Dennis Conner in the defence selections Dawn decided the way to win the next Cup was to create a mixed team. 'I'd been on the men's team. I'd been on the women's team. We need to have one that's open to everybody – and means something more than just America's Cup stuff.'

They didn't win the 2000 Cup, but the America True Foundation would go on to

help thousands of kids experience sailing. Just recently, however, it became a victim of its own success; 'It's not really needed any more, because there's so much [community sailing] around the country. So we're taking the assets and incorporating it into an America True fund at Oakcliff, specifically to bring graduates of community programmes up to the next level.'

That's a sign of progress, she reiterates. 'Like my friend Billy Jean King says; she started the Women's Sport Foundation... hoping that it would not be needed.'

### WSF

The Women's Sports Foundation is a national organisation that promotes equity and inclusion, and Dawn says walking into her first fundraiser felt like home. 'All of these women who had fought the same battle, in different sports...' She served as president from 2001 to 2003.

One key focus was to convince fathers of daughters to advocate for women's scholastic sports. At that time many mothers might not have understood what their daughters were missing. 'But when the dad was told, they knew. And they were waking up to the fact that it was unequal in a personal way.'

### Plant a seed...

By the late naughties Dawn had moved back to Michigan. She combined motivational speaking, Maxi racing and writing a second book with a run for state legislature – until Hunt and Betsy Lawrence asked for help writing a business plan for a sailing academy.

Their original idea was to set up a local community sailing facility in Oyster Bay – an America True-style mission. 'And then they said, "Well, we also have these other boats [a fleet of Match 40s]. What would you do with them?" Six months later the Lawrences chose the training academy model from a list of options Dawn presented and asked her, "OK, so when do you start?" She laughs. 'I accidentally designed the best job for myself, with no intention of working here.'

Eventually 'they just wore me down:



**Left to right:** after starting small, today Oakcliff Sailing offers a thought-provoking spread of educational courses covering every area of the sport and related marine industry disciplines – from business and boatyard management right through to elite-level match racing and most recently an Olympic pathway programme; Dawn Riley at the helm of the 1992 Cup defender *America*<sup>2</sup> in 1995 during practice in San Diego against the team's raceboat *Mighty Mary* – skippered by New Zealand 470 Olympic silver medallist Leslie Egnot; Dawn Riley (at left) with Tracy Edward's (centre) all-women crew of *Maiden* in Southampton shortly before the start of the 1989/90 Whitbread Round the World Race. Sailing their ageing 1979 aluminium Farr design *Disque d'Or*, which had been sailed in the 1981 race by Swiss skipper Pierre Fehlmann, Edward's crew shook the boys' tree pretty hard, finishing 2nd in Class D, also winning their class on two of the race's six legs, including the longest, 7,260nm stage across the Southern Ocean

ALAMY

1 January 2010 I drove to Oyster Bay expecting to stay for a brief period. Eleven years later...'

### ... and watch it grow

Oakcliff offers apprenticeships, short training blocks in specialised sailing disciplines, customised coaching, clinics and seasonal racing. Recently they've added Helix, a step-by-step pathway to Olympic excellence. Dawn says the Oakcliff board didn't ever 'envision doing anything with the Olympics, because we thought that US Sailing had that covered'. Instead they tried to assist sailors at arm's length with direct grants and coaching programmes.

Last autumn, full of pandemic what-the-hell attitude, she went ahead and implemented Helix under the Oakcliff umbrella. The graphic maps out a non-linear course from a first sail on Olympic equipment all the way to international competition. The goal is to establish a clear path to success while providing support – not just financial, though that's a piece of it – at every level. 'Obviously there's still a lot more work to do,' Dawn says, 'and we can just keep adding to how we get there.' (Tagline: 'Sailing Success is Never a Straight Line.')

### Life isn't a straight line either

Expanding Oakcliff's reach while keeping it focused hasn't all been easy, of course. In December 2019 a car ran into Dawn's house and 'almost killed me'. She has lingering memory issues, and says she was still in a 'brain fog' in February 2020 – but even so she recognised the threat of Covid weeks earlier than most Americans.

'I started to see friends in the Canary Islands and in Spain and Italy post about Covid. I realised immediately that this could be serious and started to formulate plans.

'There was a day when everybody started talking about testing, and Trump boldface lied. He said, "We've shipped this many tests, and we're going to have that many by Friday." It was Wednesday. And I'm like, if he's lying that much about shipping tests,

what else is he lying about?'

Oakcliff went into lockdown on 5 March, over a week ahead of anyone else in the US: 'I assumed the rest of the country would as well. That was my mistake.'

Oakcliff went virtual immediately, she continues. 'We started figuring out how to do our programming and just used our collective brains.' No one left campus, except Dawn and one other employee, who also lived alone. Dawn became the official grocery shopper; decked out in full foul-weather gear, reading glasses and a face covering, she said shopping for 11 hungry people once every two weeks earned her plenty of strange looks – especially early on. But, thanks to this aggressive lockdown, they created a Covid-free bubble where they could keep learning and moving ahead, even as other (larger) resident programmes sent students home in a panic.

And when summer arrived they soon figured out how to hold their usual racing series. 'We had two 40ft Protectors that you could put a whole match racing team onboard in a team bubble up in the bow. So we used those for our launch service. You were dropped off on a sanitised boat to race. We didn't do any rotations.' After racing teams washed down their boats they then had a chance to socialise safely.

'We have a donated boat we nicknamed Hot Dog Stand, with a barbecue on the back. We would deliver trays of hot dogs and ginger beer, and everybody would party on their boats on the moorings. You could still trash talk each other and socialise, but you're in your own bubble. So lots of fun.'

They made it work because 'instead of saying, "we can't do this, we can't do that", we said, "How are we going to do this?'

'That's the whole thing with Covid and planning and crisis management,' she concludes; first, 'you have to think long range. Then when you get the facts... the decision and the immediate planning are easy.' Turns out Dawn's unique combination of big picture vision and attention to detail is great in a health crisis as well as deep in the Southern Ocean.

### Filling the gaps

Once their regular programmes were operating smoothly Oakcliff looked at filling the pandemic's educational gap. 'All these kids kept thinking they were going back to in-person learning,' she said, shaking her head, adding that every year there were children who just didn't want to leave after the summer or planned to take a gap year. 'And we said, "Everybody is going to end up virtual, why don't we just open up the doors for people to do their studying here, and we'll design a programme?'"

They connected with the US Performance Academy, a virtual high school designed for elite athletes, and five kids signed up for the autumn of 2020 'beta group'. For spring 2021 they had eight students...

Sailing, of course, is wind and weather-dependent, but 'we can study at any time of day. So, OK, this morning is good [for sailing]. Your school is going to be from 3pm to 7pm. Then the next day there's no wind, so you have a long day. And then the next day, when there's great wind, there's no school – all sailing. Plus we have a learning coach permanently on site, like an all-purpose teacher.'

Also new this year is their first off-campus Olympic training, an important piece of the Helix. 'We're moving down to Dolphin Island, Alabama for a month, with eight students and three staff.' (The cost of living there is much cheaper than Miami.) Students will combine studying with training, joined by other Olympic hopefuls. 'This is like a test balloon.'

Longer term Dawn envisions a year-round training village for Olympic hopefuls. As she sign off from our call I have no doubt it will happen.

A few days later I follow up by email to ask what's still on her bucket list. Dawn's quick reply inspires a coffee-spit of laughter: 'Get back to 11 per cent body fat, bench-press my body weight and lick a stranger.' Watch out, strangers – because whether that's part of a longterm vision or just a dirty-hands detail Dawn Riley will make that dream happen too. □