



Using all the tools

Since 1979 five-time Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year Betsy Alison had been steadily adding skills to a race-winning toolbox. But then in 2023 she found that she needed every one of them plus plenty more to take home a very different kind of title... Carol Cronin

In the summer of 1991, two months before my first Rolex International Women's Keelboat Championship, I managed to talk my way onboard Betsy Alison's J/24 for a practice regatta. Her local team of all-stars had won the inaugural 1985 event, and I found myself completely wowed, particularly by some exceptional boathandling. I was also quite impressed by their unstained

matching foul-weather gear; I was just hoping my own scrounged pants would keep my own butt dry.

That September Betsy's six-person team came from behind in the last race to win what was then considered the world championship of women's sailing. Six years later, after she had won it for the fourth time in a row, the organisers retired the original trophy in her name.

Betsy's untempered fiery approach to winning often induced a bit of eye-rolling in her competitors – but even then we all respected her passion and drive and absolute commitment to never ever giving up.

Then a long time later, in August 2023, Betsy won yet another world championship, as a cancer survivor and missing half of her pelvis.

Moments after she crossed the finish line to win the 2023 Para Sailing Worlds, I emailed the editor: 'Now can I write a profile of her?' His nod is what led me to sit down with Betsy in the cosy Newport house where she's lived for almost 40 years, surrounded by trophies and photos...

Just having fun

Elizabeth Gelenitis grew up on Barnegat Bay in New Jersey. Her father told her and her two brothers that they had to learn how to sail 'because it's something you can do for ever'.

'But when I started I didn't know anybody; like going into first grade for the first time. So I was a little reluctant. But there was such a great group of kids that from the time we were seven or eight until our late teens we all hung out together.

'It became a great social environment and we sailed everything from Sunfish to Blue Jays to Scows to Hobie 14s; whatever we could get our hands on.'

Her first sail was on a Rhodes 19, but perhaps the most memorable was on a Sunfish. 'Junior sailing, everybody's afraid when there are whitecaps. And the instructor would say, "Which one of you wants to go out with me on the Sunfish and we'll see whether it's too windy?" One of us would volunteer, and come in hooting and hollering. And then everybody's like, "Oh, we should go out and do that." So it was less about making us do things and more giving us the carrot; a little more freeform than today's junior programmes...'

There were 13 different yacht clubs on Barnegat Bay, and weekend racing expanded 'my little social network. I was a good local sailor; but I wouldn't say that I was anything great...'

When Betsy entered Tufts University in the autumn of 1977 to study chemistry she had 'no intention of sailing whatsoever.

'But the day before I was supposed to start my freshman year my Dad suddenly passed away unexpectedly.

'That was really tough. Some friends of my brother dragged me down to the lake, and so for me sailing became an emotional escape. Joe Duplin was the Tufts coach, and I was surrounded by other really good sailors who all knew far more than I did.

'Over those four years I was exposed to people who helped me on the technical skills, but they also connected me to other sailors who took me to the next level. I sailed with Jud [Smith] and Dave [Curtis]



Left: as praiseworthy as praiseworthy gets, Betsy Alison applies the same intensity to winning the 2023 Para Sailing World title in the Hansa 303s as she did winning four Rolex International Women's Keelboat titles as well as the 2003 Yngling Worlds in Cadiz (*above*). Such was her dominance in the women's keelboats that the regatta organisers would award her the trophy in perpetuity

on the Lightning Southern Circuit, then I started sailing with Dave all the time. Then I sailed with Bill Shore. And they were so different! But I learned from both of them, from both a tactical and technical standpoint; more tools in the toolbox. That's what really led me to be where I was.'

It's Dave Perry, she claims, who 'made me buy a Laser', right after Tufts missed qualifying for the collegiate women's nationals. 'So in 1979 I went to my first [Laser] Nationals. I drove all night to get there, and then someone asked, "What do you think about the fleet this year?" I didn't know anybody... but I ended up winning, then going to my first [IYRU Women's] Worlds in Rochester, where Dave was the coach! I finished fifth.'

Her three subsequent regattas in what's now the ILCA 7 were all podiums (third in 1981 and 1983, second in 1982). And in 1981 she won her first Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year award.

Sailmaking

Betsy earned a degree in history and political science, which she says taught her how to write and analyse, employing a logical approach. 'That has helped me with my sailing too, in some weird respect.' She was also named a college All-American in 1981.

After graduating Betsy moved back to New Jersey and worked as a 'permanent substitute' teacher in public schools. 'And then Mike [Alison] and I got married [in 1985] and he wanted to move up to Newport, so we bought this house. That's when I ended up working at Shore Sails – not for Bill, but for Kenny [Read] and Dan [Neri], who had just bought Shore Sails Newport from Bill and his brother.'

That company briefly rebranded as Sobstad before taking shelter under the North Sails umbrella. 'I was in sailmaking for 11 years in total, and I ended up running

the one-design side of the business until North moved production off to Sri Lanka.'

By the time her marriage ended in the early 1990s her reputation for winning big championships was established. Here's a quick list of accomplishments from her World Sailing profile: 11 world championship medals (five silver, four bronze, two gold) in four different classes (Hansa 303, Yngling, ILCA 7, J/22). Her first gold came in 1998, sailing J/22s at the ISAF World Championships in Dubai; she finished first in match racing and second in fleet racing. She also won multiple women's match racing championships like the Osprey and Santa Maria Cups at a time when sailors around the world were stepping up their game, following the signs then pointing toward the discipline being included in the 2004 Olympics.

Paralympic coaching

In 1998 the [US] Paralympic Team hired Betsy to coach at the Disabled Worlds. 'They were going to be racing inside Narragansett Bay, so they asked me to be a local expert. I'd never coached anybody with a disability before, and they said "we can't pay you all that much". But I agreed to just do it...

'And then I was like, "Oh, my God, I don't know what I'm dealing with here."

She told the six Sonar sailors, all men, 'I'm gonna ask you questions and I'll probably offend you with some of them, which is not my intention. I just want to know what your physical parameters are, what we can do and what we can't do. Rules, tactics, strategy – all the same; that's how I'm gonna coach you.'

'They said OK. One guy was born without a hand, so I asked, "How much can you use your stump or whatever you call it?" Another guy was missing his leg below the knee; he couldn't sail with a prosthetic. So I

asked, "How do you balance it? Can you kneel?" Another guy was missing both of his legs below the knee and he's got his prosthetics on, so I asked, "At what point do you lose your balance crossing the Sonar?" And then I looked at the two quadriplegic drivers and I go, "Forgive me for asking, but what can you do... And I know that's probably a bad question..."

Once they left the dock 'Paul [Callahan] was faster upwind, while JR [Duggan] was faster downwind – game on. I said, "We're going to share everything, and we're going to learn from each other." And on the last day of racing both of them could have won the 1998 Worlds.'

JR beat Paul by a quarter point. 'It was such a great experience, because they actually did what I asked them to do... The year after that both of them thought they knew better and they didn't want to share any more; neither of them had good results. Funny how people's minds can go to a place where they're not receptive to the formula that actually got them there...'

In 1999 Betsy finished second at the ISAF Women's Match Racing Championships and 10th at the Congressional Cup in Long Beach. The next year she was hired as the US Head Coach for sailing's inaugural Paralympic Games, where the US won a medal in the 2.4Meter. (To fill that tiny toolbox she finished eighth herself at the 2000 Open 2.4M Worlds.)

Yngling years

At the November 1999 ISAF meeting women's match racing was selected as the 'extra' 11th Olympic discipline for the next Games. We all expected J/22s to be chosen as the equipment. Instead, in November 2000, the final decision reverted to fleet racing – on a three-person boat that most of us had never heard of let alone sailed.

Then a few weeks later I helped Betsy



WILL RICKETSON/US SAILING



Above: 1998 and Betsy Alison just coached the US Paralympic Team to their best ever result at the Disabled Worlds; Alison freely admits that the switch from Olympic aspirant to the Para Sailing culture and competitive criteria had made for a hard adjustment. It is a sad irony that Betsy Alison now (right) finds herself applying the same lessons learnt back then to her own competitive sailing

earn a bronze medal at the 2000 Women's Match Racing Worlds. I also wasted a lot of hot air with friends rehashing ISAF's alarming decision. Betsy's attitude? Move on.

The following summer five US Olympic hopefuls finished in the top eight at the 2001 Open Yngling Worlds in Newport. Betsy finished second that year, and in 2002 she was third in the separate women's division. Then in 2003 she won the Open Yngling Worlds (such is the upward pressure on Olympic class performance that by now there was only one non-female team in the top 16). But two months later she and her team could only manage a fifth at the ISAF Worlds, while another American team won the regatta.

The stage was set for a final showdown at the US Olympic Trials in February 2004. My own team won that light-air regatta and went to Athens, while Betsy again posted a fifth – out of five. But later that spring she finished second at the Women's Match Racing Worlds, perhaps a better fit for her combative style than endless hours of speed testing.

In 2005 Betsy finished ninth at the Bermuda Gold Cup and third at the Chicago Match Racing Regatta. Then over the next decade, until sailing was dropped from the Paralympics, she would help US Paralympic teams win seven more medals.

So many watches

Betsy is the only five-time winner of the Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year award, and her watches cover a 17-year span. 'The first two [1981-82] were when I was doing a lot of Laser sailing, but after that it was such a blend of disciplines and different types of boats. And that's what I'm most proud of; I've had such great longevity in so many different things over such a long period of time.' And they don't even give out watches for coaching victories...

After Rio 2016, US Sailing hired Betsy to write their SafeSport manual – and she's still there, but now as Adult Director... 'Maybe I should be called the director of adult programmes,' she jokes, 'because there's definitely no pole dancing.'

As new programmes develop, she's expanded her responsibilities. 'Building the schools network, a powerboat programme, Safety at Sea; I didn't know a whole lot about any of those, but I figured it out. We brought one-design in, and then adaptive sailing. I still really enjoy what I'm doing.'

Change of life

Which brings us to a Wednesday evening in the summer of 2022, when as usual she was steering a Shields – and her left hip locked up so badly that she wasn't sure if she could finish. (She did.)

'I'd had pain in the hip for a year, but nobody would order an MRI. Finally I got one done and the radiology report said there was an occluded mass (the size of a football) "that is very likely malignant". So that's how I found out.

'Now I'm a party of one,' she adds, explaining how rare it is to find squamous cell carcinoma, a skin cancer, growing in bone and muscle. After many consultations she moved to Boston for radiation and chemotherapy treatments, which shrank the tumour enough to operate. 'But I was super lucky that it hadn't spread anywhere else.'

In November she went into a nine-hour surgery, not sure if she would come out with both legs or not; 'You basically sign everything away, because nobody knew how extensive it was going to be.'

In the end that surgery removed about half of her pelvis, along with most of the muscles supporting her left hip – but she still had two legs.

She'd been told that she might eventually be able to walk with two canes, so

'obviously my whole goal immediately became to walk with no cane'. Taking her own advice was hard but, by combining sheer determination with what she'd learnt working with Paralympic sailors, she managed to walk (with a walker) into her first post-surgical appointment. 'Every time I see my doctors,' she says proudly, 'I'm exceeding their expectations.'

Early in 2023 Betsy 'noticed' that no US sailors had applied to sail in the Hansa 303 Women's division at the Para Sailing Worlds, which for the first time would be included in the Sailing World Championship for Olympic classes. She had never set foot in a Hansa 303, wasn't even sure she could manage the air travel, and it also seemed really weird to think of herself as a Para athlete... but she told the selectors that 'I will happily go and represent the United States with a disability'.

Having committed, she decided to treat the regatta as a recovery milestone – 'and to show other people that they can do it too'.

A practice session in California gave her a chance to test her travel tolerance, and to line up with the US Men's Hansa 303 representative. She also weaned herself off all painkillers and continued working hard on both balance and strength.

By the time racing started, 'I was able to figure out a couple of little things to be higher and faster in the boat.' When I ask for specifics, she explains how she windward-sheeted the jib. 'And on the main there was so much friction in the traveller that I would just grab the boom and pull it closer to centreline to open up the slot.

'I was surprised nobody else caught on; there were people watching the tracker who'd send me emails saying, "You're higher and faster all the time! What are you doing?" It was pretty fun to apply what I knew to those boats, even though they are super simple.'





Para Sailing Worlds 2023

Just as in her first big Laser regatta, Betsy didn't dwell on the competition ahead of time because 'I'd certainly never sailed against any of them before. I knew I could do well if I didn't have too many issues, but would I have said beforehand that I would win? No, because there were three or four world champions in that fleet. I didn't know what I was going to be up against until we started racing.'

The Polish entry was 'especially good, very well coached, and faster downwind; she had a piece of adaptive equipment so she could slide farther forward. But I was able to use other skillsets; I wasn't looking to match race anybody, but when someone sails into an overlap from clear astern, what are you going to do? You're going to luff them, and then you're going to drive them past the gate. I think I was a little unpredictable...'

The venue also required plenty of walking, and she says that every day there she got stronger physically. Her boathandling also improved throughout the week, though on day one she swore on live camera and had to apologise! 'I was so frustrated with myself.'

She calls the sailing 'a bonus. I was able to enjoy it probably more than if I had planned for two years. There were people there who I've coached with and against, so it was fun to see some old faces. And nice to meet some of the other competitors. And then, you know, you just fall into that rhythm of regattas.'

Betsy started the Worlds with a pair of

bullets and a second, but then she was over early in race four. 'When I had the UFD I was like, "Oh, forget about it, I can't change it. It's gone. Just don't dwell on what happened. Just go forward."'

But she did file for redress to find out exactly how far over she'd been. 'I knew I couldn't make another mistake like that.' Then she won the next two races.

Ten seconds before the start of race seven she trimmed in to accelerate and the traveller shackle exploded. 'I couldn't even cross the line, and it was breezy. I could get myself up on the back edge of the seat to reach back, but now I can't steer. So the boat's sailing in circles...'

'I managed to reconnect it, then I tried to catch people as I obviously couldn't afford another bad race.' She estimates she started two and a half minutes behind the fleet on a five-minute beat, but she still managed to pass five boats by the finish.

'That gave me confidence going into the last day, and a one-point lead; now it was just a question of finishing in the top five.'

'We couldn't lose the top two places which made it a little simpler. But for Olga (Gornas-Grudzien, POL) the night must have been more frustrating: wondering what I was going to do. Everyone kept asking, "Are you gonna match race her?" And I said, "I don't know what I'm gonna do tomorrow. Right now that's not what I'm thinking, but that could change..."

'But inwardly I was smiling to myself: "You know how to do this, Betsy. The boat is different, but the skills are there." I

knew I had tools in the toolbox.' She won the last race and took the gold medal by two points. 'I felt like I had already won before I got into the boat,' she told a reporter afterward. One month later she posted another important win: *Seahorse Sailor of the Month*.

The fun part

'I'm older and wiser now,' she reminds me. 'Things tend to bother me less – and again, I went to those Worlds without any expectations. Of course I was going to race as hard as I could and start as well as I could and manage people on the starting line; someone's a little out of control, just please go by! All the lessons learnt over the years served me well. And it just made me so grateful that I could get out on the water again and still sail at a high level.'

I'm no longer scrounging for waterproofs or quite so in awe of matching foul-weather gear, but Betsy's passion and drive and never-give-upness continue to impress – especially when she talks about what she learned from her latest victory. 'It may not have been a complicated boat, but do you need that to go sailing? It takes it back to the pure rules, tactics and strategy, which is such a fun part of the game. And sometimes that gets lost in a speed war.'

'I think my big lesson learnt was that it's not the boat that matters; it's the racing itself. That makes me really hungry to get back in the Shields again, once my stability is better; to get back to what I'm used to doing. One step closer, you know?' □

