



Dan Ljungsvik photo

# Addicted to Adrenaline

The fast-growing sport of women's match racing is spreading worldwide and setting its sights on the Olympic Games

By Betsy Crowfoot with photography by Sean Downey

Considering their stellar start—shutting out six opponents in a row on the first day of the 2007 Mayor's Cup—Liz Baylis and her San Francisco Women's Match Race Team found themselves in a predicament on Day Three. By their last race of the last day, Baylis and crew were in the crosshairs of Sandy Hayes, an equally tenacious, compact, East Coast sailor, whose team had clawed its way up the ladder to trail Baylis by just one point.

With light winds delaying the day's races, the prospect for semi-final and final matches were dwindling with the breeze. The competing skippers, who included five of the top 25 female match racers in the world, were hoping merely to complete the double round-robins sailed in Catalina 37s.

In the course of the competition thus far, Hayes had ominously handed Baylis one of only two losses the San Francisco sailor would suffer. For Baylis, with 11 wins and two losses, and Hayes, standing at 10-3, it would come down to this last duel. A win for Hayes would mean the Cup, because in match racing, the tie-breaker goes to whoever won their most recent match.

"My mom always said 'Win early and often,'" Baylis said. "And in match racing it's more true than anywhere else; so you're always in the catbird seat if something happens."

The 2007 Mayor's Cup had attracted a talented field of domestic and international competitors, not only because it is a Grade Two event, where women sailors earn points toward their international rankings, garnering invitations to more worldwide events, but also because in three short years the Mayor's Cup had earned a reputation for generous hospitality, smooth race management, and parties galore, in a cosmopolitan Southern California setting.

That's no surprise. The event was founded by the folks at Long Beach Yacht Club, which has run the Congressional Cup since 1965, and laid the foundation for match racing as it is known today.

Sailing has probably been around since our predecessors stuck a palm frond in a hollow log, but match racing didn't really get established until the 1930 America's Cup, when two J-class yachts raced boat-for-boat, without time allowances. The Bermuda Gold Cup and



Liz Baylis steers around the leeward mark during the Mayor's Cup, above, and earlier this year she competed in the Lysekil Women's Match Race in Sweden, top.

Congressional Cup followed, perfecting the art of the duel between two identical boats.

Aside from the boat-for-boat aspect, match racing also has its own precise set of rules. The racing begins in a meticulously timed and orchestrated pre-start session, during which the two rival boats must enter the engagement zone from opposite, designated sides of the course, and then take on their opponents in a battle to gain the most advantageous route to the mark, while luring the opponent into a penalty-inducing foul.

"It's intimidating," confessed hometown skipper Claudia Wainer. "You've got to fight the butterflies before you enter the box."

In fact it's this bittersweet mix of "butterflies" and "a blast," as Wainer describes match racing, that makes it so intoxicating.

"I love the thrill of the pre-start, the tactical game and sailing defensively. I might be addicted to adrenaline, I guess," said Caroline Béjar, a physician from Niterói, Brazil.

But despite the unbridled enthusiasm for the sport, in 2000 the International Olympic Committee about-faced on an earlier decision to add women's match racing to the Olympic Games.

"It was a political decision," Mayor's Cup Chief Umpire Barbara Farquhar said. "There are some people who like to think women might be able to crew on a dinghy, but not take charge of a big boat. So we have to educate them.

"They should be here to see this," Farquhar said, scanning the Mayor's Cup fleet. "Women can sail keelboats, women can match race, even in tough conditions. And they do it very well."

Farquhar, who has been sailing since her youth, segued into judging at local college events, and advanced to become an International Sailing Federation certified judge and umpire. In the last 20-plus years she has umpired at three Olympic Games, the Louis Vuitton Challenger Series of the America's Cup, and on every continent except Antarctica.

"In 1985 we started the Rolex International Womens' Keelboat Championship and people were very skeptical. They said 'Oh, women can't sail keelboats.' But they did as well fleet racing as any of the men. So that was a real breakthrough."

In 2001, the U.S. Women's Open Championship, a fleet race established in 1974, opted to switch to match racing. "Finally the women began match racing, in primarily three- and four-person keelboats," Farquhar said. "And we found that not only could they fleet race, but lo and behold they could match race in keelboats."

When Farquhar pitched in to help Long Beach Y.C. and the city of Long Beach organize the Mayor's Cup, some said women can't possibly sail a 37-foot boat, the same ones the men race in the Congressional Cup.

"And, lo and behold," she said with a smile, "they can."

**T**his is the climate that Baylis dove into when she took over the leadership of the Women's International Match Racing Association in June.

"I grew up in a sailing family. It has always been an important part of my life, given me a lot, defined who I am," said Baylis, 44, during a break in the Mayor's Cup action. "The lessons learned in sailing—respect, confidence, sportsmanship, problemsolving—can be applied throughout our lives."

In 2002 Baylis won the Women's Match Racing World Championship, and was named Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year. "I felt part of the responsibility that comes with winning that award is that you become an ambassador for the sport. I can't think of a better way to become an ambassador than to get more women interested in match racing. Match racing makes any sailor a better sailor."



She loves the sport, she said, because it's "fun, exciting, challenging, physical and cerebral all in one. Your brain and body working together." Another adrenaline junkie, Baylis admitted a preference for extremes—short courses, really fast, really physical, intense sailing and short-handed offshore racing. When asked what sports she likes besides sailing, she quipped, "Is there something besides sailing?"

Earlier this year, Baylis shelved her career as a public health virologist to take the helm at WIMRA full time.

"Women's match racing is going through an exciting growth period, and at this critical juncture, it became apparent that if we want to take advantage of this growth and keep it growing in the direction we want, the movement needed some more leadership," she said.

The recent acquisition of sponsorship has done just that, supporting salaries, day-to-day operations and the running of introductory match-racing clinics worldwide in a joint effort with North U.

"I get a lot of satisfaction from seeing the sailors I work with excel in sailing and in life. If I were able to help someone achieve a lifetime goal such as winning an Olympic medal, I would feel like I had contributed," Baylis said. "If that person was me, I might feel very good."





*It was fast action aboard Catalina 37s. The Mayor's Cup in Long Beach, California, attracted women match racers from around the world, below left.*



Tomboyishly cute, Baylis has a mischievous smile and wit that keeps you guessing whether she's yanking your chain or not. But she's serious when she talks about match racing.

"We think sailing should be in the Olympics and match racing in particular. It's about getting more women worldwide participating at the highest level, in an aspect of our sport that is exciting and challenging," Baylis said. "It's a display of athleticism and skill, and it's exciting to watch, as was evidenced by the last America's Cup. I think seeing that in the Olympics would be great."

WIMRA has an ally in Henry Menin, a longtime umpire, and current chairman of the ISAF Match Racing Committee, who said, "I am very, very pleased to see the rebirth, revitalization and re-energizing of the Women's International Match Racing Association.

"Sailing could be in some jeopardy for continuing in the Olympics," Menin said. Although an Olympic sport since 1900, originally categorized as yachting, "it is at or near the bottom of the list in terms of television exposure and public interest."

As it is, the IOC plans to reduce sailing events from 11 in 2008, to 10 in 2012, and the number of sailors from 400 to 380 in that same time period, while mandating that

the percentage of women's representation maintain or improve.

"If I understand correctly, I believe that the IOC wants to see better and easier television coverage, more understandable scoring and more exciting events on the water," Menin said.

The IOC makes money via the sales of televised Olympic events. Granted, fleet racing can be time-consuming, and hard to comprehend for landlubbers. That translates to lost revenue, which apparently is what drives the IOC.

"All of that is satisfied by match racing, and the (2012) venue in Weymouth, England, is perfect for bringing the match racing right up to the sea wall, where spectator stands and sponsor banners can be located," Menin said.

Television crews can also more easily film the events from the shore, without the high cost and logistical difficulties of hiring numerous helicopters and chase boats. And they can get more interesting shots, with two boats racing in close proximity; plus spectators and local color.

That match racing is easier for the public to understand and more exciting to watch is "simple" according to Dawn Riley, Volvo Round-the-World Race and America's Cup veteran, past president of the Women's Sports Foundation and all-around rock star. "You are ahead, or you are behind. And match racing mimics other sports much more closely, where there are 'moves' and 'plays.'"

"You're either winning or you're losing," concurred Katie Spithill, a Mayor's Cup skipper from Australia and secretary/treasurer for WIMRA, who pointed out another aspect of match racing: "Doing this, rather than fleet racing, is about your skill, not money. I can't blame the boat for my results."

Match racing also encourages a broad spectrum of participants, as evidenced by the Mayor's Cup, which included teens and grandmothers racing side-by-side.

"The bottom line is that the current Olympic classes are quite limiting due to their costs and weight categories," Riley said. "Introducing match racing is going to open up the possibilities for many more people to have a legitimate chance to dream of going to the Olympics. The athlete will only be limited by their talent and determination, not by their wallet or their size or their location."

This cost advantage will help embrace competitors from smaller and developing countries.

"An Olympic campaign for a women's team in match racing is less expensive, because in a fleet racing campaign, you must have your own boat, and often several: one here (North America), one in Australasia, one in Europe," Farquhar said. "For match racing, you just get yourself and your crew from one place to another, and compete in boats that are provided. And the boats are absolutely equal."

The Mayor's Cup is raced in an equalized fleet of Catalina 37s, built specifically

for match racing. Each day the crews rotate boats, and on the second day of competition, Hayes found that boat No. 3 was her good luck charm.

"I love the bigger boats, and the wheel. I just like the whole setup," said Hayes, who beat five of her six opponents that day, including Baylis, who was previously undefeated.

"That was a great race," Hayes said. "We got ahead upwind, then lost her downwind, then we got her again upwind, there were a lot of lead changes in that race. It was full on fantastic."

Meanwhile, San Diego's Charlie Arms climbed into third place while the rest of the fleet almost evenly traded wins and losses, with the exception of France's Delphine Casas, who won her first race of the regatta.

Casas, 18, represents the new generation of woman sailor. She started in the Optimist circuit, where youngsters learn team racing—a steppingstone to match racing.

Farquhar pointed to the recent Optimist Worlds in Sardinia, Italy, where 251 young sailors from 55 countries competed. "We have a whole new generation of young people and young women who are equally enthusiastic about participating in match racing."

And Casas, although petite and shy on land, is a tigress on the water. Unfamiliar with sailing the bigger Catalina 37s with their larger crews, she was off-pace at the 2007 event. But her teammate (and translator) Marie-Agnes Hoche pledged they will return and win in 2008.

Casas has an eye on the Olympics if women's match racing makes it in to the 2012 Games. Likewise for Mayor's Cup competitor 16-year-old Martina Grael. The daughter of Brazilian gold medalist and America's Cup tactician Torben Grael, she thought match racing had "much action" and "attracts more public," and responded with an enthusiastic "Yes!" when asked if she hoped to follow her father's lead and mount an Olympic campaign.

Her mother, Andrea, who was also sailing in the Mayor's Cup with skipper Caroline Béjar, is also actively involved in WIMRA, as representative for Central and South America, working to improve sailing opportunities for her daughter's generation. "I think we have to encourage young women to sail more match racing because you use a lot of your intelligence skills."

**O**n the final day of the Mayor's Cup the wind was squirrely. "You expect Long Beach to be light in the morning, and throughout the day, the wind to go right," Baylis said. But that hadn't been the case all week.

Going in to the last match, Baylis was still banking on a semi-final and final round of sail-offs. "We've been bitten on the other end, where they say they're going to do semi-finals and you're in third or fourth feeling pretty good, and then all of a sudden



*The sailors let their hair down, above, after the close racing off Long Beach, California, top.*

they cut it off and you're not racing for the championship. So we knew this race was important."

She took consolation in a crew that was experienced sailing Catalina 37s. "It was a huge advantage: our boat handling has been great," Baylis conceded, praising tactician Pease Glaser, an Olympic medallist in the Women's 470 class.

After a lively pre-start, Baylis' team took the lead. "It was tough because you just didn't know what the weather was going to do. You weren't sure what side to protect upwind. And it's really easy to get attacked downwind because all the puffs were coming down the course, so we never felt comfortable with any lead."

But, she admitted, "It was the only race that we had that must-go-right feeling."

They led the match wire-to-wire, to triumph with a 12-2 record over Hayes in second place at 10-4. With daylight and wind waning, Long Beach Y.C. officials concluded the event based on the double round-robin scores, giving the victory to the San Francisco Women's Match Race Team.

"I felt a little rusty coming into this year, so this feels really good," Baylis said. "We want to get our rankings up so we get an invi-

tation to next year's World Championships in Auckland, which will be a great, fun event."

But she still has another battle to wage. Some key decisions will be made at the ISAF annual conference next month in Portugal, pertaining to future Olympic sailing events.

"The perfect solution, in my opinion, is to convert the women's keelboat (event) from a fleet racing format to a match racing format," said Menin, adding that the political climate at ISAF seems more favorable than in the past.

And although some ISAF Council members continue to favor Olympic classes with their own country's medal strength in mind, informal polling has shown a stronger inclination toward this match racing proposal.

Worldwide, there was a 35-percent growth in women's match races between 2005 and 2006, with similar progress in 2007 to date. Advocates must continue this expansion, to ensure at least 35 countries (IOC criteria for an Olympic sport) have women's match racing programs. Reinstatement will also lead to additional financial support for competitors.

Meanwhile, events like the Nation's Cup, a biennial competition for the top men's and women's teams from each of eight geographic regions worldwide, continue to help broaden match racing opportunities for sailors. And WIMRA has introduced match-racing clinics in addition to ISAF's efforts.

"ISAF sends teachers like me out to do match racing and umpiring clinics, so people who know how to sail learn to match race, and people who know about rules learn about umpiring," Farquhar said. Umpiring in match racing is done in real time on the water.

"And we umpires love to do women's events, because they're so open to learning. And off the water, it's just a big party," she said. "These women are engineers, doctors, moms, what have you. And they match race for fun."

For more information on women's match racing visit [www.wimra.org](http://www.wimra.org).