



WOMEN AFLOAT

Five women sailors show their grit, determination and calibre on the sea which was predominantly a male turf

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In earlier times, seamen had a love-hate relationship with women. Many boats and ships were adorned with figurines of nude women as it was believed to have a calming effect on the sea. Yet, having a woman on board, or naming a boat after an engaged woman, was considered to make the sea furious or jealous. Women were seen on ships, but only as shadowy figures flitting below the decks. They had been debarred from undertaking the arduous task of sailing.

The role of a woman in the sailing world has undergone a sea-change since then. Women now love the sea and call the shots from the skipper's high seat. Naomi Christine James, the first woman to sail solo around the world in 272 days in 1978 and Ellen MacArthur, who also circumnavigated the Earth solo in approximately 72 days are some fine examples here. Read about five women sailors who tell us about their sailing expeditions as they traverse high and low tides and brave the oceans.



PALLAVI NAIK



HER STORY

I have been sailing since the age of 11. It started as a hobby. I was initiated into it by a family friend Umaji Chowgule. The first day I went sailing I had a vague image of a boat with sails in my mind. I did not know what it was and how to go about it. But the experience I had was mind blowing and I decided to take up sailing as a sport. I started with the Optimist class which was for children below the age of 15 years.

After Optimist, I graduated to the 420 class which I sailed with sailor Rohini Rau. We won the first gold medal for India in 2004 at the 11th Asian Sailing Championship in the youth women's section. We were the number one girl's team in India till the 420 class became a youth class (for under 19 age group). Now, I am sailing the J24s and I have also formed an all women's team. Rau and Alekhya Sudam sail with me. Recently, we participated in the Nations Cup Regional Qualifiers, Asia 2008. Here, we won the gold medal and were selected to represent Asia for the Nations Cup held in March 2009 at Brazil. We were also invited to represent India at Women's World Match Race 2008, Busan, where we won the ninth place. We recently participated in the Mumbai International Match Race in January 2009, Mumbai Match Race in April 2009 and the Monsoon Regatta 2009 in Hyderabad.

PASSION PLAY

Sailing is my passion and love. Ever since I took it up, I have fallen in love with sailing. I don't participate in competitions just to win. I go because I love to sail. Winning comes with it. For me, every championship is a learning experience.

X FACTOR

I had a dangerous experience once when I was sailing the 420 with a friend Kabir. He was new to boating, especially when it came to trapezing. The wind was high for a beginner. While sailing, the boat capsized. We managed to upright the boat once, but the boat again started capsizing over us. Kabir was able to get away from the boat. When I was trying to get away, something pulled me back to the boat. I thought my pants were stuck to a hook, but that was not the problem. By this time the sails were pulling me down underwater. I realised that my shoe was stuck in the hook and quickly unzipped my shoe and tried to get my foot out, but it remained stuck. Finally, I managed to get my foot out.

During the capsize drills, we were taught to go towards the back of the boat. But as I tried to do that, I got entangled in ropes and didn't have any knife to cut myself free. Further away from the boat, I could vaguely see a head bobbing up and down and knew Kabir was looking for me so I extended my hand towards the sunlight. Someone grabbed it and pulled me to safety. That was a hellish experience.

GENDER DIVIDE

Since there have been few female sailors, sailing is viewed as an all-male sport. But if you step out of India, there are many women sailors. A lot of girls start sailing in India when they are young, but give up as they grow older. Some tend to get allergic to sun tans! But it's not that men are unbeatable either.

JUST DO IT

Sailing is not difficult at all. You get to learn something every day in this sport. Being a woman, it is tough, not because of the competition, but because there are very few women sailors. This applies when we sail in India. Competing against other countries tends to get difficult considering their standards, the kind of training they get and the infrastructure is far superior. We are working at it though.

WILL POWER

Even though I come from a non-sailing background, my parents have been supportive. My grandmother, though, felt that a girl should stay at home and look after her home and hearth and not be out in the sun. I have faced a barrage of inane questions from people on sailing, but I overlook them and as long as my parents and people close to me are with me.

NUMBER GAME

Personally, I have been trying to introduce more and more women into sailing. Over the years we have seen girls drop out of sailing for a cushier career or life. Some have also dropped out because they don't want to get tanned.



Pallavi Naik, Rohini Rau and Alekhya Sudam sail together



ROHINI RAU

HER STORY

I got interested in sailing after I took part in a summer camp organised by my parents Aysha Rau and Navaz Currimbhoy, who is the present Commodore of Royal Madras Yacht Club. I have had a lot of support from them, especially since my brother also sails. My grandmother Supriya Cheriyan has helped with funds, even though she is quite nervous every time I go sailing. I am currently studying MBBS. I started sailing competitively at the age of 11 in the Optimist class.

I then graduated into the 420 and the Laser Radial class. The 420 is a double hander, trapeze boat. It was in this class my partner Pallavi Naik and I won India's first international gold medal in women's sailing in the 11th Asian Sailing Championship (2004). I then chose to sail the Laser Radial and work towards the Olympics as it is chosen to be women's single hander class at the Olympics. I was the first Indian woman to get an International Sailing Federation (ISAF) World Ranking after taking part in the ISAF World Sailing Championship 2007 in Portugal. Currently, I am ranked 220.

The sport doesn't pay too much, so it is difficult to make it a full time profession. Since I am also studying, it is difficult to sail all the time. But I am determined to make both work, and prove that it is possible for an Indian girl to excel in sport at an international level and pursue an MBBS degree.

PASSION PLAY

Sailing is very addictive and so is racing. That's why after 12 years of competitive racing, I am still at it. It is a wonderful sport as you are so closely involved with the elements – wind and water. It's not just a physical sport, but is also mentally challenging as you have to anticipate wind shifts, tactics, strategy, etc. It also teaches you to be independent and make decisions at a very young age. Yachting is definitely fun. It is different from dinghy sailing since it involves long distances and more team members. It is where the money is, like the Volvo Ocean Race, Rolex Sydney Hobart Race, etc. I would like to move to yacht sailing after I am done sailing smaller dinghies.

GENDER DIVIDE

Sailing in India has been dominated by Army and Navy for the last so many years. But that is slowly changing as more civilian sailors are coming into this sport. Also when I started, there were only four women sailors in India, now we have more than 100. Women here usually don't take up the sport, as it tans them. Also it is an adventure sport, so you are bound to get a few cuts and bruises. It is still dominated by men, but it is a great feeling when you beat them.

JUST DO IT

It is not difficult to learn the basics of sailing, but it takes a lot of time and training to master it. Sailing is like chess with a lot of physical activity as you always have to anticipate the competitors' move as well as yours. Strategy plays an important role when the wind is light. Strength is needed when the wind is strong. Sailing is one sport that stimulates both the mind and body. Every country has different conditions – sea state, wind and current. The playing field is always different. Consistent results are achieved only after years of experience. Since there weren't many woman sailors competing at a national level, I always had to beat men to prove that I was good enough. It was easy to be number one among women. After lots of training and practice, I was able to become as strong as men and win races. Reaching the top at an international level will be difficult.

NUMBER GAME

India can definitely look forward to seeing more women taking part in sailing. As more girls are starting to compete at higher levels, the standard will also improve. I hope to be the first Indian woman to participate in Olympics in sailing. Hopefully, then people will become more aware about the sport.



ALEKHYA SUDAM



HER STORY

I started sailing at the age of 10 and I participated in my first national championship in 2003 at the age of 13 in the Laser Radial class, held in my home town, Hyderabad. I am in the second year of Mechanical Engineering. When I started sailing outside my city, I realised that I wanted to take the sport seriously and make it big. I can't take it up as a full time profession because there's no money in the sport and I have my education to balance too. I won bronze medal in the Inland Nationals, Hyderabad in 2007 and silver medal in Laser Radial National Championship, 2009.

PASSION PLAY

Sailing is a brilliant sport. I enjoy it more than anything else. The water, wind, speed and the adrenaline rush is unbeatable. Once I was sailing the Laser 4.7 class in Hyderabad during the Inland National Championship. I was underweight for the boat and the wind was blowing upto 30 knots that day. Almost every other sailor had either abandoned the race and gone back to shore or had to be rescued and taken back. I was one of the only three people to finish that race. Someday, I would really love to represent my country at the Olympics.

GENDER DIVIDE

The sailing population does constitute a lot more men than women. It's a physically demanding and time consuming sport. Men are genetically stronger, hence it is easier for them to take it up. Although, nowadays, more women are willing to venture into this sport.

JUST DO IT

Sailing is a physically demanding sport. Also it is difficult to get hold of equipment since you don't get any of it in India. It has to be imported from abroad which makes it very expensive. Unless you have sponsors to help you out with the finances, it's difficult to go places. You end up spending a lot from your own pocket. Also, being an engineering student, I spend very limited time on water for practice. I am learning to cope with the schedule and hopefully I will be able to push myself up through the competition.

WILL POWER

It's hard to make a stand as a sailor because people tend to think that women are weak sailors. But handling this is easier with the full support of my family.

NUMBER GAME

The women sailing population is growing every year. It's good to have more girls in the sport as it's always nice to have people with similar physical abilities as you.



“Sailing in India has been dominated by Army and Navy for the last so many years. But that is slowly changing as more civilian sailors are coming into this sport”

CRISTIANA MONINA



HER STORY

I started sailing at nine years of age, egged by my father. I started with the Optimist class and then graduated to 420, Europe, 470, Laser Radial, Yngling and finally big boat classes ORC and IRC. It is difficult to confirm if this is my profession, because it does take a lot of my time, but I still spend a lot of money to do it! My first activity, actually, is the organisation of sailing events like team building, incentive and shipyard events.

PASSION PLAY

I love the sailing and yachting world. It has been and still is my greatest 'life school'. I have learnt to solve problems, to work in team, to stay afloat in any situation and I have friends all over the world. I am reminiscent about all the unforgettable days I spent with my family on board our boat. In 2006, in cooperation with Cancer Institute of Milano, I made a project 'Una Vita d'aMare' related to the sail therapy, aimed at women with cancer. It is the best project I have undertaken till date!

X FACTOR

During my Olympic campaign, 10 days before the first Italian qualification, I had an accident on-board Yngling. I was giving a tow to another crew. While doing the knot, I amputated a piece of my forefinger and it fell down on the boat. Fortunately, I still have the other nine fingers intact!

GENDER DIVIDE

I have noticed that to have the same consideration as a male, a woman must be four times as good. But when they recognise your capacity, expectations also become higher. It is always like an exam, never relax!

JUST DO IT

Sailing is not difficult. It becomes difficult when you sail at high levels. In that case, it is not enough to be only a good sailor. You also have to be a good communicator, a good team

manager, you have to think about creating relationships, heal your image and be a good manager! You have to be motivated and professional. We have to do everything with passion.

NUMBER GAME

We will have many more women in the yachting world for sure. Strength will be replaced by technical skill. More and more women will sail across the oceans, but it is equally important to have the opportunity to work with male crew. Certainly, we will have to work hard.



TEA EKENGREN

HER STORY

Sailing and racing is more like a lifestyle for me. I am working as a development manager in multi-business company, but I am in a happy situation as my employer is flexible with my time off. I have always enjoyed yachting, but I started racing quite late at 30 years of age. I bought a Laser to learn the basics and started racing in national championship level. My first goal was never to be the last one! Soon, I was racing 6 mR as well, where we have a very competitive fleet in Finland. At the 6 mR Worlds 1998, I received a trophy for being the best women sailor.

After racing for about 10 years, I was looking for more challenges. I was attracted to one design racing. I was thinking about Farr 40, but I wanted a boat suitable for cruising also. I was told that it is impossible to combine good racing with cruising, but I found Swan 45 to be ideal. However, now I am racing so much that I don't have time for cruising. As Swan 45 class is owner-driver class, I also decided to helm the boat myself.

I am now racing five to 10 regattas a year, half of them with Swan 45. Our Swan 45 crew has been the same for two years with minor changes. We have two Dutch sailors,

two Finnish and rest are Americans. We are 12 together, of which three are women. We have more women than in any other Swan 45 team. Also, I am the only woman and Scandinavian skipper in this class.

PASSION PLAY

My non-sailing friends shut their ears when I start talking about sailing. It is a different world and people who don't share it can't really understand what is going on. I have learnt a lot from people in the sailing world. Some of them are good friends now. When I race, I totally concentrate on it. After racing, I like to relax with my crew with a nice dinner.

X FACTOR

I had a near-fatal accident in 2008 when I was racing a small two handed boat in Finland. We had a collision with another boat. I was skippering and the mast of the other boat fell down on our boat on my friend's head. He was lucky to survive! I forced myself to continue racing the next day after the accident.

GENDER DIVIDE

I try not to think of boating as a male world, because it does not really take you anywhere. Besides it's all equal on the water! Also, I have found that people take interest in you because you are in minority.

JUST DO IT

You learn the basics of sailing pretty soon. But to be a good sailor, you need years of experience. Starting as old as I did, I don't have that same kind of natural instinct as many other sailors have. But we are doing a good team work on our boat.

NUMBER GAME

At least in Finland, young girls have almost always been more successful than boys. I hope they will continue sailing for bigger classes. At the moment, there seems to be much interest for women sailors. ☑☑☑

