

Story and photography by David Liscio

A SAILOR'S SAILING SCHOOL

New York's Oakcliff Sailing Center is growing by leaps and bounds on Dawn Riley's watch



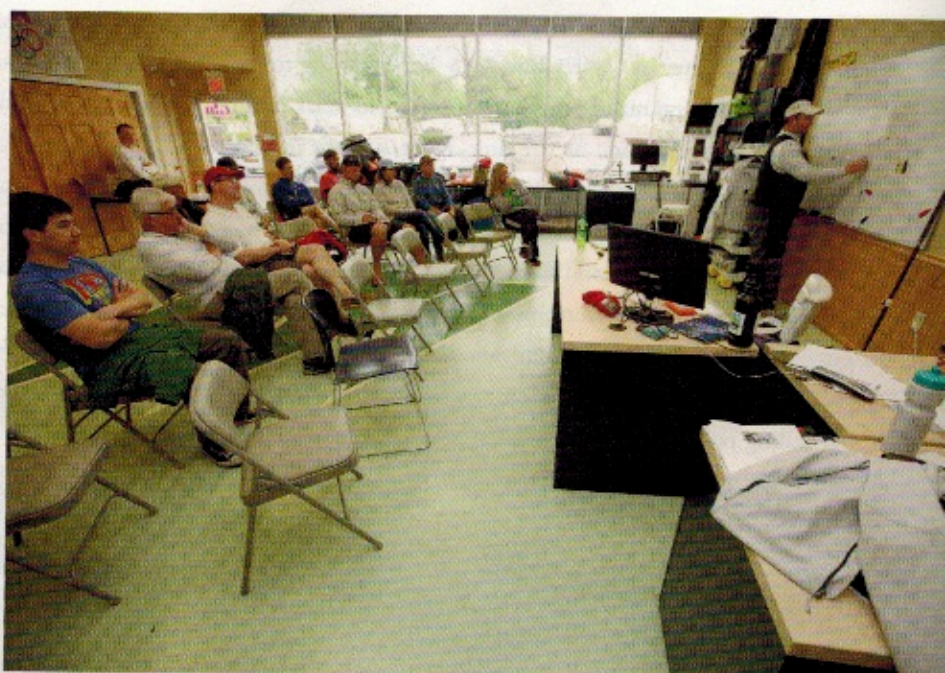
Three years ago, Dawn Riley took the helm of the Oakcliff Sailing Center in Oyster Bay, New York, hoping to hone the loosely organized program into a world-class training center for competitive sailors. At the time, the nonprofit program comprised of a low-slung building at the edge of the historic town, a booyard across the street, dock access and 37 vessels of varying size and physical condition. Leadership and purpose were lacking, but Riley was determined to reverse that course. Riley, who has participated in four America's Cups and two Transpacific Round the World races, embraced the invitation to bring her sailing pedigree, coaching skills, personal philosophy

and business savvy into a single mission: To build American leaders through sailing. Since then, the sailing center has evolved into a training camp where sailors of all ages, including those with Olympic or America's Cup aspirations, can refine their racing skills under the watchful eyes of professional coaches while sailing aboard well-maintained boats. Two full-time training programs have been established—Acorns for those 15 to 18 years old and Saplings for sailors 18 and over, along with a schedule of clinics and regattas for individuals and teams.

"This place isn't just about racing. It's also about teaching ethics," the 48-year-old Riley said during an on-the-water coaching



The action is quick aboard one of the center's Swedish Match 40s during a match racing training session. Dawn Riley rides shotgun, above.



session last spring while four Swedish Match 40s squared off on the bay. "We're training sailors to be better sailors because they also learn about themselves and everything about the boat."

Riley, the first woman to manage an America's Cup sailing team, has been known to bristle whenever men address female sailors as ladies.

"They're either women or girls. It's age dependent," she said, noting good manners and a positive attitude are part of the Oakcliff curriculum. "It's a matter of respect."

To help grow the center, Riley brought aboard Jay Kehoe, former head sailing coach at Stanford University, as head coach. She also hired former U.S. Sailing team member Peter Manion as shore coach and local competitive sailor Bill Simon as race program director and finance guru. Other key staffers, like global sailor Ladi Oguntoyinbom, who were with the program prior to Riley's arrival, have been retained for their knowledge and abilities. A corps of volunteers has kept the center afloat since its inception, she said.

Asked to define Oakcliff, Riley said the surroundings are telltale—no yacht club, no swimming pool, no junior sailing program, no learn-to-sail classes, but there are sail bags and life jackets strewn about, the smell of nylon, rubber and acetone in the air. On a tour after Kehoe's pre-race briefing in the conference room, she pointed proudly to the cavernous space at the rear of the building, a warehouse big enough to accommodate four 40-foot hulls and masts for repair, along with niches for rigging, spray painting, sail stitching, composites, fiberglass patching and engine and mechanical work.

"We're a high-level match-racing school and we have everything we need right here," she said, adding that some of the 40-footers sank at their moorings during Hurricane Sandy last October but were quickly refloated and repaired. "We can do our own repairs and even make our own sails if needed."

Keeping the donation-dependent center running is a challenge, but benefactors like local sailor and businessman Bryan Hunt Lawrence have reduced the strain. Last spring, Lawrence announced plans to buy 24 new Olympic training boats for the program, including 49ers, 49erFXs and Nacra catamarans.

"Because of Hunt, we'll soon have 24 new Olympic-class boats that will be kept in top condition. Professional sailors can come here to train and all they'll have to do is bring their sails and their coach," said Ron Saccardo, who specializes in fiberglass repairs at the center. "Where else can you do that?"

Riley offered a similar view. "The Lawrence family has given the sailing world an incredible gift by underwriting up to 50% of the Oakcliff programs," she said. "Now it's up to us to donate and support Oakcliff to rebuild American sailing as a sport, an industry and a place that provides so much for those looking to grab the future and make a difference."

The Oakcliff fleet also includes six Swedish Match 40s, six Shields, six Melges 24s, two Farr 40s and three IRC racing boats, including a Ker 50 and two Ker 38s.

Out on the water on a cool early summer weekend, umpires and coaches in three RIBs monitored the two pairs of Swedish Match 40s as they raced, notifying the skippers by marine radio about infractions, overlaps and apparent tactical mistakes. Match racing is intense because it pits one boat against the other head to head, Riley said.

After each drill and race, coaches discussed the particulars, such as how one skipper made a wrong move and lost his edge, or how another took advantage of a sloppy tack by his competitor and gained the lead. Tacking duels, downwind runs and spinnakers twisted around headstays were all part of the action as the wind topped 30 knots.




The sailors hailed from all walks of life. The youngest, Oliver Berg, 15, a student from Scarsdale, New York, has sailed Sunfishes and Optimists since he was 8 years old and wants to become a professional sailor. Christian Grigolcit of near Huntington learned to sail in the Boy Scouts and was eager to join the Oakcliff program. Among the sailors were business owners, computer technicians and a few past retirement age, all with a passion for competitive sailing in common. According to Riley, Oyster Bay is an ideal place for teaching because it has tides, currents, variable winds, navigational landmarks, and offers bay, sound and open waters.

"You come here to become a better sailor," Kehoe said. "Our goal is to improve their skill levels, take them to the next level as professional sailors. Oakcliff gives them the opportunity to race at the top level."

So what's next for Oakcliff?

According to Riley, a lot more Olympic-style racing and, if all goes as planned, practical classes on how to clean and lubricate your winches or apply varnish.

"Oakcliff teaches sailors to become better racers and boat workers and managers, but mostly it teaches sailors to become better people," she said. 



Sailors learn match racing techniques. Jay Kehoe, facing page top, explains the intricacies of match racing both on the water and in the classroom debrief. The fleet of 37 boats requires upkeep in the center's dedicated shop, top.