

HISTORY OF SALTY SISTERS OF ST. PETERSBURG YACHT CLUB

In the fall of 1951, under the guidance of Dr. W.W. Jennings, a group of ten women, all of them wives of St. Petersburg Yacht Club (SPYC) members, formed what is now believed to be the first organized women's sailing group in the nation. The group's objective was to learn the principles of sailing and to sail small boats in sessions each Wednesday afternoon after lunch at the yacht club. The original ten founding members were Eleanor Ellis, Betty Jennings, Dotty Lang, Joyce McEvoy, Mary Jane Misener, Margie Peterson, Joey Powell, Ruth Rifeley, June Schowe and Phyllis Shaver.

Membership originally was limited to wives of members of SPYC. In 1956, this was amended to also include any female member of the yacht club who was 21 or older.

At first, all sailing was done in 8-foot Hagerty prams, which were later replaced by Optimist-class prams. As the women became more proficient, they sailed in the club-owned 22-foot, gaff-rigged Fish Class sloops. These were replaced first by Rhodes 19s and later by Ideal 18s, both St. Petersburg Sailing Center boats. Through the years, Salty Sisters have sailed many other boats including Flying Juniors, O'Day Sprites, Flying Scots, Sunfish, 420s and Sonars. With the Sprites, spinnakers were introduced, and they continue to be part of Salty sailing in all boats equipped with them. Over the years, sailing became a morning activity, followed by lunch at the yacht club. As many as 60 to 70 women have participated on the water, sometimes having to take turns in the available boats.

In 1958, the Salty Sisters began sailing against other women's sailing groups, which followed the Saltys' lead with colorful names. Among interclub regatta challengers were the

Mainsheet Mamas of Tampa Yacht & Country Club, Barnacle Belles (no longer in existence), Windlasses of Dunedin YC, Dinghy Dames of Davis Island YC and Broad Reachers of Pass-a-Grille YC. (Pass-a-Grille YC became part of SPYC in 2008, and a large number of Salty Sisters are also members of the Broad Reachers.)

In 1964, a British Royal Navy vessel came into port with a sailing team that promptly challenged the Salty Sisters to a three-race battle. It's said this was a regular event with Her Majesty's vessels. The story goes that British sailors lived up to their reputation as gentlemen, letting the Saltys remain undefeated. The same can't be said for our own SPYC Junior sailors, who beat the "old ladies" handily in pram races during the two years of Hospice National Championship fundraising races in 2012-13.

In the fall of 1973, Fran Weaver and Ardith Rutland spearheaded the formation of the Women's Interclub Council "to promote women's interclub racing in Florida." This group evolved into the Florida Women's Sailing Association (FWSA). Weaver, now Weaver-Nohren, became its first president; Rutland was its second.

In addition to interclub regattas that were sailed several times a month during the season, the FWSA has two big sailing events each year – the Championship Regatta and the Rainbow Regatta – hosted by its member clubs. The Championship, which originated in 1976, is in one-design boats sailed with crew. The winner represented FWSA for US Sailing's Adams Cup, the U.S. women's sailing championship, in the quarter finals. Salty teams reached the finals three times and were runners-up in 1993, with Nancy Graham at the helm. The Adams Cup was retired in 2011.

The Rainbow, which originated in 1981, is a regatta for single-handed boats: prams, IODs and Sunfish. In 1983, the Salty Sisters purchased five Clearwater Optimist prams from reserve funds to be more competitive in this regatta. As

Clearwater prams were beginning to be phased out of the Rainbow, the Saltys purchased six International Optimist dinghies and a trailer in 2007 with member donations. Since 1981, Salty Sisters sailors have won a preponderance of these regattas.

Many members of the Saltys are accomplished sailors in their own right in many kinds of boats, including Lightnings, Thistles, Flying Scots, J-22s, J-24s, Sonars, Snipes, SKUDs and others. They participate in regional, national and international regattas at all levels. Saltys' spouses, known as Briny Brothers, are often (but not always) part of the mix.

In 2012, Jennifer French won a silver medal sailing a SKUD in the Paralympic Games based in London, with crew JP Creignou, who is a Briny Brother. French, who is quadriplegic, also teamed up with Creignou, who is legally blind, in 2009 to win gold in the U.S. Sailing Disabled Regatta and in 2010 to win silver in the IFDS World Championships. Sherry Welch and Susan Wallace sailed in the Snipe Women's Worlds in 2010 and Welch placed in Snipe Worlds Masters and Snipe Women's Nationals for multiple years. In 2009, a dozen club members participated in the Hinman Masters Team Racing Championship in Newport, RI. In 2010, a group sailed in the first Hinman Grand Masters Team Racing Championship. Two Saltys were among the racing skippers.

Salty Sisters are heavily involved in all facets of race management at SPYC. Most regatta organizing and race committees are made up mostly of Saltys and Brinys, sometimes completely. Saltys and Brinys are also called upon to do race management elsewhere. In 1996, Salty Sister Patricia Seidenspinner became the first woman to serve as principal race officer of the Olympics, that year based in Atlanta. A large contingent of Saltys and Brinys joined her to conduct the sailing events in Savannah, Ga.

Seidenspinner earned a long string of firsts to her credit: first female PRO for the Southern Ocean Racing Circuit and first woman international race officer appointed by the ISAF. In 2000, she became the first (and so far only) woman to become commodore of SPYC.

Other Salty Sisters have stepped up to achieve club and regional race officer status, some even more. Carole Bardes served as a national race officer and Barbara Farquhar served as an international judge for many years.

Over the years, Salty Sisters have reached out to younger sailors, especially girls. At one time, the group sponsored a Mariner Girl Scout troop. One member of the troop grew up to join Salty Sisters and become captain in 2012, Sandy Ripberger. In 2000, Saltys organized a regatta for girls, ages eight to 18, named after one of SPYC's famous sailing prodigies, Allison Jolly. Jolly and crew Lynn Jewell won the first women's sailing gold medal in the Olympic games. They sailed a 470 in the 1988 Summer Games, based in Seoul, South Korea. Jolly grew up learning to sail through the Junior program at the now-named St. Petersburg Sailing Center with other champions (notably including America's Cup-winning skipper Ed Baird). She and her family continue to be involved with the regatta, and she teaches more young sailors now as the University of South Florida sailing coach.

Salty Sisters exists as a club "to promote sailing and to assist our members in becoming proficient in the science of sailing." Members participate in formal and informal racing, plus education in race tactics, strategy, seamanship, safety, power boat handling and race management throughout the year on the water and in the classroom.

New members are welcomed in October, as Saltines, after they pass their six- to eight-week training.

But it's not all serious business. Salty Sisters are well known for their fun, too.

In December, there's the annual Candy Cane regatta, which features fun in prams. The three-ring circus includes on-the-water tree-trimming, a candy cane race and a poker run race, run by Helen Larsen. In July, there's a Firecracker regatta done on paddleboards. Other pop-up events, such as the Showercap regatta and Mother Ducky races, are irregularly scheduled.

There's also considerable history on land as well. When the Salty Christmas party grew too big for individual members to host it, the party moved to the SPYC clubhouse, starting in 1968. These gatherings continue to be a highlight for members, with the new class from the previous year providing entertainment.

Through the years, holidays have provided and continue to provide impetus for Salty celebrations, often at lunch, but occasionally with the Briny Brothers at a weekend event. The Welcome Back party in September signals a new sailing season and often is a highlight of the year. For the 50th anniversary, an ice-sculptured 50 heralded a new decade; for the 60th, more than 140 members had a flashback party dressed in 1950s style; and headed into the 65th, Saltys celebrated with line-dancing, boots and jeans and a country-western theme.

Each year in October at the annual meeting, Salty Sisters elect three new directors and install new officers. Three other directors serve the second year of their terms. The board meets following lunch on the first Wednesday monthly to conduct club business.

In 2015, the board voted to take over supervision of the annual SPYC Christmas Boutique event, putting the popular Junior Sailing fundraiser under the Salty Sisters' wing.

2020 proved to be a challenging year worldwide, and no less for the Saltys. Determined to hang together, Zoom board meetings, email Bingo (with exercise and other tasks

attached) among some of the members and random outreach of any kind kept the group together. When it was deemed safe enough, we found ways to sail and be together for picnics and even indoor lunches that were socially distanced according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Saltys just keep going.