

PUIG WOMEN'S AMERICA'S CUP

# NEW HORIZONS

A REPORT ON THE BURGEONING OF WOMEN'S SPORT



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AMERICA'S CUP  
BARCELONA**

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Women's sport is under full sail and running before the wind. Women are attaining ever greater heights not only on the playing field, with the notable increase in the number of federation licences and medals in major tournaments, but also beyond the athletics tracks and the courts. There has been an increase in media visibility; the commitment of companies and sponsors to provide female athletes with greater resources; the presence of women on the bench, in offices and in senior management positions and positions of responsibility that until recently were unheard of; and the recent conquest of disciplines traditionally dominated by men, such as football, rugby and boxing.

The last decade has seen an unprecedented boom in women's sport. Of course, there is still much to be done and many barriers to break down, but the data in this remarkable decade from 2014 to 2024 are really encouraging. This is demonstrated by the figures. In Spain alone, according to data from the CSD - Consejo Superior de Deportes - (High Council of Sports), 50.2% of women practise sports and 23.8% of federated licences are female, an increase of 3.96% in the last decade. Gymnastics is the discipline with the highest female presence, with a percentage of 93.47%, followed by equestrian sports (72.45%) and skating (61.99%), while there has been a marked increase in football (from 3.86% to 7.40%) or American football (from 2.77% to 14.51%). In sailing, women are close to occupying 25% of the total percentage. Interest in watching women's sport among fans has also grown considerably: in Mexico (39%), India (36%), China (34%), United Arab Emirates (33%), Spain (32%) and Sweden (31%), at least three in ten people report watching women's sport regularly on different platforms. And the number of female spectators has risen from 17% in November 2020 to 25% in July 2023.

In terms of business, women's sport is growing at a record pace worldwide. Spending on sporting goods by men has grown by 14.5%, while that of women has grown by 52.7% in the last decade, reaching 1.7 billion euros, according to a report by Nielsen. A report by Deloitte predicts that women's sport will exceed one billion euros in revenue by 2024, an increase of 300%. Major competitions such as the Women's World Cup and the WTA circuit are expected to bring in a total of 389,603,875 euros.

To cap it all, this year saw the first women's edition of the America's Cup, a giant step forward for the sport of sailing after 173 years of history of this prestigious competition. Twelve boats crewed only by women will compete in the Formula 1 of the sea next October in Barcelona, in a first edition dubbed the Puig Women's America's Cup.

# PIONEERS WHO LED THE WAY

"I don't see why they don't have to let me sail because I am a woman. The time has come for women to enjoy sailing." The quote comes from Tracey Edwards (UK, 1962), a true pioneer. The British woman had participated in the 1985-86 Whitbread Round the World Race as a cook, the only role a woman could have on board at that time. However, she wanted to sail, so she decided to lead the first female crew to circumnavigate the globe, even though her idea generated serious doubts and was even the target of persistent ridicule.

At the age of 24, Edwards managed to get a vessel, the Maiden, built in 1979, and to recruit a total of twelve women. It was by no means plain sailing. To buy the boat, she had to mortgage her house and it was the crew themselves who undertook the restoration.

The 12 women set to work in a shipyard to get the boat ready and cast off to take part in the 32,000-mile, six-stage round-the-world race. Nobody gave a jot about them until, fighting against prejudice and facing the extreme cold of Antarctica, they managed to win two of the six stages they competed in. It was totally unheard of.

The Maiden soon won international acclaim and admiration. At each partial finish, thousands of people turned out to greet the seafarers with applause and cheers. A documentary tells the story of these women who changed the course of transoceanic sailing to fulfil their dreams. Today, the Maiden continues to make expeditions around the world, crewed by women only, as part of The Maiden Factor project to raise funds to provide education for girls around the world, an initiative launched by Tracy Edwards herself.

# WOMEN CONTINUE TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

Sport has had great role models for women: Serena Williams in tennis, Megan Rapinoe in football, Nadia Comaneci in gymnastics and Yelena Isinbayeva in pole vaulting all left their mark for future generations. Women's sailing would not be understood without the figure of Dee Caffari, the only woman to have circumnavigated the globe solo and non-stop in both directions and the first to circumnavigate the globe non-stop three times.

The descendant of a Maltese sea captain, from whom she inherited her passion for the oceans, the British yachtswoman was born 51 years ago in Hertfordshire. She went to university to become a physical education teacher, but it was there that she realised that her life was on the water. She left her profession, graduated as a water sports instructor and completed the miles required to become an ocean racing competitor to start from scratch at the age of 27.

The young woman received a call from Sir Chay Blyth, who opened the door to a real challenge: to lead an 18-man crew in the 2004-05 Global Challenge. It was in the middle of this tour that the idea of completing the same route, but solo, occurred to her. She had only eight months to prepare for the great challenge, but Caffari did not hesitate.

The challenge was enormous: a six-month odyssey without stopping, against the waves, winds and storms, the icebergs and the deepest loneliness. In addition to all this, she did it by the famous "wrong way", from East to West, so called because of the difficulty of sailing against the prevailing winds and currents. On 18 May, 2006, after 178 days at sea and 29,100 miles logged, the Englishwoman became the fifth person, and the first woman, to join this select club of adventurers who chose the "wrong" direction.

Three years later, the Englishwoman made history again in the 2008-2009 Vendée Globe, the most extreme round the world race. Of the 30 competitors who set off from Les Sables d'Olonne, only 19 returned. The Englishwoman came sixth. She was the first woman to complete two solo, non-stop circumnavigations, one in each direction.

Her last challenge to the oceans was in 2011, together with Spaniard Anna Corbella. It was in the Barcelona World Race aboard GAES, a voyage she completed in 102 days, 19 hours, 17 minutes and 18 seconds without touching dry land.

# NEW CHALLENGES

Far from being a passing trend, women's sport is here to stay. The gap with their male counterparts is narrowing thanks to the professionalisation of the leagues, the entry of sponsors, the interest of the media, the support of public entities and the change of mentality that prevails in society, with mass movements such as #SeAcabó (It's Over) promoted by the women's world football champions that have opened our eyes to a new reality.

Female athletes no longer have to combine sport and work, but can dedicate themselves to sport as a profession thanks to the increase in salaries in the clubs, the bonuses and incentives of the Federations and the increase in prizes in the major tournaments, many of them with full equality between the male and female categories.

At the upcoming Paris Games there will be gender equality for the first time in history. The IOC - International Olympic Committee - has distributed the quotas equally among athletes with 50% male and female participation, while there will be 152 women's events, 157 men's events and 20 mixed events.

In the sailing events, the increase in women's participation from the Beijing Games in 2008 to the Tokyo Games in 2020 was from 33% to 50%. For Paris 2024 there will be 50% equality in both yachts people and number of events: three men's, three women's and four mixed.

Never before have sportswomen made so many front pages or opened news programmes, only in cases where they achieved historic feats, whereas now it is becoming commonplace to follow women's sport on a daily basis. It has entered our homes. Some sportswomen have become media phenomena, some with hundreds of thousands of followers on social networks such as Alexia Putellas, Simona Biles and Naomi Osaka. Stadiums are filled, as at the Camp Nou match between Barça and Wolfsburg on 22 April, 2022 with 91,648 fans in the Champions League semi-finals. The match was surpassed only by the NCAA volleyball match between Nebraska Cornhuskers and Omaha Mavericks on 31 August, 2023 at Memorial Stadium in Nebraska (USA), with 92,003 spectators, setting a new world record for attendance at a women's sporting event.

The emergence of role models is vital in this new landscape where girls can dream of following in the footsteps of their idols. Women have been gaining ground not only on the playing field, but also in the offices as managers, in the editorial offices, in the coaching staffs of teams, in the refereeing bodies and in the decision-making bodies.

Alison Mitchell (1980), born to an Australian mother and English father, is a former hockey player and star commentator for the BBC who is a prime example of an elite sportswoman who has put her knowledge and experience to good use after her professional career to crown herself as a true media queen. Hers is a powerful and influential voice.

She was the first woman to become a regular commentator on the BBC's Test Match Special and has been reporting on men's and women's international cricket around the world since 2007. From there she went on to specialise in other disciplines and tournaments, including the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, Wimbledon, the Australian Open, the French Open and the Open Golf Championship. Her work for the BBC, Sky Sports, TNT Sports and The Guardian has brought her international acclaim and prestige. In 2014 she was voted Sportscaster of the Year by her peers. She is a source of inspiration for female sports journalists and for highlighting the fact that no territory is off-limits to women.

# EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES: THE FINAL BATTLEGROUND

In sports, as in many other areas of life, equality of opportunities between men and women continues to be a struggle for women. Despite all that has been achieved, there is still much to be done.

The sport of sailing is no exception from this reality. A recent report published by the World Sailing Trust highlights that 80% of women and 56% of men believe there is gender discrimination. A more detailed analysis shows that this belief intensifies with age: 80% of girls aged 11 to 18, 84% of women aged 19 to 25, and 86% of women aged 26-30 believe that equality is an issue.

The survey also reveals that 59% of women have experienced gender-based discrimination. Looking forward and not giving up in this obstacle course is the challenge for women who, with determination and unwavering faith, continue to lead the way.

One such example is Spanish sailor Mónica Azón. The Olympic sailor and world champion is the coach of the female team of the Spanish Sail Team BCN in the Puig Women's America's Cup held in Barcelona. She confesses, "I never could have imagined in my wildest dreams that I would be here participating or helping a Spanish team be in the America's Cup".

A double world champion in the Yngling Class (2002 and 2006) and European champion (2006), she was a reserve for the Olympic team in Barcelona '92 at the age of 20, competing in the Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008 Games. At 50 years old, experience is her best asset. "I believe that life gives you opportunities, and this is a dream come true for me. After living the experience of the Barcelona '92 Games, now, thirty-two years later, as a Spanish, Catalan, and Barcelonan athlete, I have been granted the great opportunity I never had before," the yachswoman points out.

Her mindset is to "go out to win" in a Puig Women's America's Cup that aims to highlight the increasingly significant role of women in sports.

