

Can Girls Make It In Sailing?

Why we try anyway.

I heaved a ragged breath, taking in water as I did. The rain pouring down and the salty ocean surrounding me seemed to close in on my chest. Water stretched around me in all directions, but my focus was on one thing: the edge of my capsized boat. It was just a few centimeters from my fingertips, but that seemed like miles. I had no leverage to push myself out of the water, and I would be disqualified from the race if I couldn't grab the edge and pull the 175 lb. boat upright. Far ahead of me, the rest of my fleet had already finished.

It was at that moment that I was questioning why I did this: why I endured long car trips, the brutal physical requirements this boat placed on my body; why I still sailed, even though at times I feel I will never win. Maybe at some point I will, but certain people will always stay ahead of me. This isn't a defeatist attitude; it's a fact. The Laser requires strong legs, abs, and upper body strength. Against teenage boys, we girls don't have a chance. Even the most athletic, experienced female sailor will lose to an equally experienced, athletic male sailor.

I'm not the only one who feels the pain of losing because of biological differences. As Emily Fuller, a fellow female sailor, remarked one day while we were racing together in the Little Egg Harbor Yacht Club (LEHYC) Fall Classic, "I complain about every regatta. But I still do it."

It's a tough sport. And my dad, who has been sailing for forty years, always sailed with my uncle and my grandpa. Girls joined their crew only when they sailed large boats. But I have a brother who's



My approach to a buoy in my Laser sailboat at BBR (spectrumphoto)

about a year younger than I am. I'm used to doing what the boys do. And I've been sailing successfully for five years now. I've logged hours on the water in several different kinds of boats, and in the summer I practice every day for several hours at a time. And after participating in countless races, I've had sufficient experience to realize that my chances are slim compared to those of the boys.

One example of how heavily the odds are stacked for the boys is the 2014 Buzzards Bay Regatta (BBR), which took place in August. A large multi-class regatta, BBR is a national competition, drawing Laser sailors of all ages (and hundreds of sailors of other boats, according to the Buzzards Bay Regatta website). Of the 60 competitors in my class of boats, 11 were female, as reported by the Regatta Network site, where the results for BBR are listed. I was one of them, and I watched as boys passed me simply because they were stronger. The top five finishers were all male. Four were teenage boys; one was a man in his twenties.

After I finished tenth from the back of the fleet in one race, my dad, who was on a motorboat watching me, waved me over. I began to complain about my performance, and he interrupted me.

"Rachel, look," he said. "You just beat some 18-year-old boys."

He will testify that I still acted down about my performance, but I'd like to think that boosted my confidence a little.

Another example of this was the District 11 2014 Laser Championship in Maryland also in August. According to the website for Laser District 11, four of the 11 competitors were female. The top four finishers were male, and the top two were 15-year-old boys.

One final example is the LEHYC Fall Classic, which took place in October 2014. Two of the 13 radial competitors were female, and the top girl finished in seventh, four places above me. That



A typical large fleet start
(yachtsandyachting)

particular regatta involved 25 knot, or 29 mph, wind conditions.

It's tough on the girls. But we keep going, because, as my friend Maddie Nystrom said, "How you place doesn't matter that much, what matters is how hard you tried." We like being the underdogs, because when we beat the boys we've accomplished something pretty awesome. And it's socially acceptable in the sailing community for a girl to do badly; in fact, it's expected. Most boys will hold off yelling at us about a rule infraction or attempting to ruin a race for us, because we're not the serious competitors they worry about.

But when you lose every single time, how do you keep going?



Me at 11 - Just learning in an Opti!
(Family Photo)

I didn't always want to. When I first began learning to sail at just 10 years old, the sport terrified me, although I sailed a very safe, slow boat called an Opti. Even after I switched over to the Laser Radial, I shied away from competition, especially the craziness of a start. At the start of a race, the boats line up side by side in order to be able to accelerate quickly off the line. The boats are in very close proximity with each other, and fouling each other – a rule infraction – is common. There is often shouting involved if someone does something wrong. It was understandable that I would fear this sort of conflict.

But this summer I began to enjoy the thrill of the competition. I began to love sliding my boat into a tiny lane, defined by the small space between two boats, and pulling my sail in quickly to speed over the starting line. Now, I firmly believe that there is nothing like the thrill of coming off the line with clear air and speed.

I'm not a winner, and for the longest time I felt ashamed of my sailing performance, convinced that no one in the sailing community was friends with me because I performed so badly. But recently

I've realized that it doesn't work that way. Now that I've made it into my teen years, I'm discovering that sailors are nicer and more mature. While boys still judge each other based on their performance, like they always have and probably always will, we female sailors are exempt from that harsh system. I'm friends with some of the top teenage boy sailors. Sure, I don't place anywhere near them, but that doesn't mean I'm a loser.

As a sailing coach once told me, "You guys are so lucky to be able to sail."

She was right.

I guess that's why I strained just a few inches further to grab the edge of my boat. I guess because I love the sport, I was able to pull myself back into my boat and keep going. And now, a few months later, that moment is the one I remember most vividly from BBR, and the one I describe most often to my friends and family. It's just one of those moments that you always want to remember, even though it wasn't all that pretty at the time.



[A start at the 2014 District 11 Laser Championships \(facebook\)](#)

Without a doubt, girls *can* make it in sailing.

And it's not just winning that matters to me. I'm learning to enjoy being with the people around me, even when I've messed up.

As Joel Labuzetta, the sailing director of Annapolis Yacht Club, said, "I've seen many girls benefit from the 'life skills' they take away from their competitive sailing."

Yes, I'm a girl in a boy's sport, but I don't plan on letting that stop me.