

Ironman Sherry Smith catching sail

Ironman Sherry Smith excelling in multihull sailing races

By Michelle Slade, IJ correspondent

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Sherry Smith began her winter sailing season in Florida with the Fort Lauderdale to Key West Race, where she was named the top multihull navigator. This weekend, she's racing the Sarasota Bay Multihull Regatta and Corsair Nationals. She'll conclude February with the St. Petersburg–Habana Race. There's a smattering of Laser regattas in between, including the Florida Masters, to round out three months of winter racing. Not your typical snow bird, Smith's trip to the Southeastern United States has been all about sailing.

With southern sunshine and a plethora of racing opportunities awaiting her, Smith was not unhappy to leave her Tiburon-based live-aboard, a Beneteau 42-foot sailboat. She left Marin on Christmas Day, driving five days to Tampa, Florida, before continuing on to Key West. In Key West, Smith met up with crew members to prepare Peregrine, the Simpson 48 they raced to victory in the multihull division at mid-January's Fort Lauderdale to Key West Race.

"We beat two really gorgeous Gunboats," Smith said of the tough competition. "We were thrilled as Peregrine is basically a cruising cat ... although (it's) a tricked out one with a screacher and bowsprit, so it is pretty fun to race."

Smith's accomplishments on the water are even more admirable in that she only learned to sail in her mid-40s, some 10 years ago. Even then, that opportunity was serendipitous, and would not have happened without her first passion.

While working in Silicon Valley, Smith became an accomplished amateur triathlete, competing in hundreds of triathlons and four Ironman competitions. It wasn't unusual for her to put in 90-hour work weeks while simultaneously training for an Ironman.

Ultimately, Smith started a web design consulting business, [TriDigital](#), which she managed for 16 years. Running her own business allowed hiring and delegation, leaving more time for triathlon training and coaching.

While living aboard her boat in Redwood City's Westpoint Harbor, Smith used her connections to secure the area as the location for Stanford's annual triathlon, with the marina acting as the transition area for the event. Subsequently, Smith got to know members of the Sequoia Yacht Club, who encouraged her to try Wednesday night beer-can racing. Smith raced in 25 out of the 26 beer-can races that first season, her first foray into racing.

Getting into sailing at 45, Smith knew she had a lot of catching up to do. She never took formal lessons, but attended short seminars on aspects of sailing and racing that she found at local yacht clubs. Coming from an athletically competitive background, Smith found the learning curve wasn't too steep.

"I was mainly racing in the Express 27 fleet and everyone I raced with early on was really supportive, which made those first few years easy," Smith said. "The key was consistency, like 25 weeks in a row sailing on different boats with a lot of different people. I also asked a lot of questions."

The next level of sailing was not as straightforward.

“That was more difficult. When you start getting good and getting rides on better boats, there’s that element of being female and proving your worth — it’s just more competitive,” Smith said.

While Smith’s last decade has seen her with time on a variety of keel boats, she enjoys multihull racing most. Last year, she competed in the grueling 750-mile unsupported R2AK race that spans from Port Townsend, Washington, to Ketchikan, Alaska. Smith navigated for Team Sistership, an all-female team racing a F-27.

The role of navigator adds another aspect of sailing for Smith to learn and progress.

“I met with five top navigators, including Chris Lewis and Skip Allen, just so I could just pick their brains on navigation,” Smith said. “I learned a lot on that race — going over paper charts, tide and current information. I love navigation and being proficient helps me get decent rides.”

Mark Eastham, a multihull sailor from Novato who placed ninth overall in the race last year’s R2AK race, has great admiration for Smith’s self-confidence.

“I’ve sailed against Sherry in many races, including the R2AK, and sailed with her on my team once,” Eastham said. “She is prepared and enthusiastic and, even more, she’s a great natural sailor. She lives large in a very good and admirable way, and flat out does what most others can only consider.”

Ocean racing has also become a high priority for Smith. She’s sailed in the Pac Cup, Trans Pac, Fort Lauderdale to Key West, Cuba, Coastal Cup, as well as made many deliveries from Hawaii to San Francisco and up and down the California coast. She cites the 2011 Double-handed Farallones — on the Express 27 Dianne — as one of her favorite sailing experiences.

“I love ocean racing. I love the sky; sunrises, sunsets, clear blue skies,” Smith said. “Being out there without city lights, phone, internet ... it’s one of my favorite things.”

Being around fit, healthy people in that outdoor lifestyle has been a great source of inspiration as Smith’s ridden the highs and lows of the similar worlds of triathlon and high-end sailboat racing.

“There’s so much to learn in sailing and it’s very challenging, it’s what keeps me going,” Smith said. “I love the quote by Aldous Huxley, ‘Every ceiling, when reached, becomes a floor.’ For me, that says it all.”

Notes

- Dirk Rosen, founder and executive director of Marine Applied Research and Exploration will speak on “California’s Deepwater Ocean Wilderness” as a part of the Corinthian Yacht Club Speaker Series. 7 p.m., Thursday.
- Next midwinter races: Sausalito Yacht Club on Feb. 5, Corinthian Yacht Club on Feb. 18-19, Tiburon Yacht Club on March 4.
- Want to race in 2017? Head to the Golden Gate Yacht Club for the [Latitude 38 Crew List Party](#) on March 8.

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