LIFE

They are the Skipjack Divas

Brice Stump DelmarvaNow

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The Helen Virginia returns to the Chesapeake Bay to dredge oysters this week, after years of being dry docked. That's history-making news after months of reconstruction, yet the Helen Virginia recently made waves that sets it apart from all other skipjacks.

When nine ladies stepped aboard the Helen Virginia during the 55th annual Labor Day Skipjack Race, they grabbed the ropes, hoisted the sails and suddenly found themselves making maritime history as the first all-female crew to sail a skipjack. In just two hours and 15 minutes, the Helen Virginia, captained by part-owner Katarina Ennerfelt, was within reach of the finish line of the almost 10-mile course off Deal Island.

> *Four of us shared one water bottle because we were afraid to leave [our post] and then something wrong would happen.*
>
> CREW MEMBER CARRIE WEBSTER-DAY

The Helen Virginia had only been in the water 10 days before the race. The crew was formed and began training, part time, just five weeks earlier.

Several on board admitted to being overcome with emotion as the bow of the boat crossed the line that made them the first-place winner.

The crew of the skipjack Helen Virginia gets in position before the start of the 55th Annual Skipjack Races in Deal Island. They were the first all-female skipjack crew both to sail the race and to win the race. *Staff Photo By Laura Emmons*

"No one wants to be the cause for losing, that's for sure," said Carrie Webster Day. "So we didn't want to move from our post during the race. Four of us shared one water bottle because we were afraid to leave and then something wrong would happen."

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Though they knew many spectators were rooting for them, the all-female crew was also aware that the majority of people probably thought they wouldn't win.

"I know we did some things wrong, but Katarina had patience and confidence in us and encouraged us," said April Hall. "When we started training, I admit, I had my doubts because of some discouraging things that happened."

Those doubts came after a series of unnerving incidents some might have construed as bad omens. The weekend before the race, the ladies lost their tow boat during practice, the new rigging in the Helen Virginia became tangled and the center board hadswelled and wouldn't go down.

Dawn Whitelock lost her cellphone overboard.

There were trying moments, too, for the Swedish-born captain.

"We didn't have any problems following her until she got frustrated and started talking in Swedish," said Sara Gleason, which brought a roar of laughter from fellow crew members.

All in all, they spent just 30 hours total in Skipjack Training 101, and some of that time was spent painting the Helen Virginia just before it was put in the water at Scott's Cove Marina in Chance.

The crew of the skipjack Helen Virginia, owned by Harold "Stoney" Whitelock and Captain Katarina Ennerfelt, second from left, won the 55th Annual Skipjack Races in Deal Island. *Staff Photo By Laura Emmons*

"We couldn't sail on her until the Friday before the Monday morning of the race," said Ennerfelt.

When the Helen Virginia left the dock and headed into open water, wind filled her sails. In that moment, each crew member knew in their heart they had conquered their doubts.

"It was cool, so cool," Ennerfelt said. And in a voice still holding an element of the magic of the moment, she added "it was awesome."

"We knew then," said Gleason, softly, "this (winning) could really happen."

At the moment of victory on the day of the race, the tension burst into exhilaration.

"When we crossed the finish line we were hugging and crying," said April Benton.

"We were sissies," Carrie Day said, as the others laughed.

> *When we crossed the finish line we were hugging and crying.*
>
> **CREW MEMBER APRIL BENTON**

Nine women sailed into history as the first all-female skipjack crew, competing in a sport dominated by males for 54 years.

The captain tried to generate "noise" on the Internet. She wanted to set the electronic social media network on fire to generate interest in skipjacks. With a first female crew, she has succeeded beyond her highest hopes for publicity.

The on-land spectators also made a first-ever gesture of goodwill when they rose to their feet and applauded as the Helen Virginia and her crew returned to shore.

With a gracious touch of class representing all the crew members, Ennerfelt donated the first-place prize of $1,000 back to the Deal Island-Chance Lions Club, which sponsored the race.

It was the perfect compliment to a perfect, history-making day.

An all-female crew made history winning the 55th Annual Skipjack Races in Deal Island. Captain Katarina Ennerfelt talks about the race they also ran to get the boat in the water and ready the crew. *video by Laura Emmons*

APRIL HALL

April Hall of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

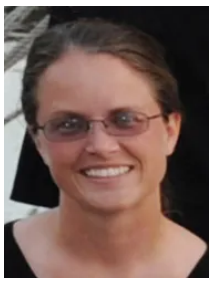
April Hall, 38, is an administrative assistant at Delmarva Heart in Salisbury. She has a 13-daughter, Cassidy.

"I'm from Chance, and skipjack races have been a part of my life, but I never sailed on one," she said, laughing. "I have no background in sailing."

Though excited by the challenge of being a crew member, she had her reservations.

"I debated confidence, but Katarina had confidence in us and she kept saying we could do it. I was so excited when we won," Hall said. "I didn't think we would win. I just wanted us to be safe and make it through and not go overboard."

SARAH GLEASON



Sarah Gleason of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

Sarah Gleason, 30, is a program director at Dove Point in Salisbury. She has a step-daughter, Jadyn, age 11.

Gleason was one of the few among the crew members who was proficient at sailing.

"My husband, Kevin, was the one who insisted I participate in this project. He knew how much sailing meant to me, because I have a background in sailing. He told me this is a once in a lifetime opportunity that I shouldn't pass up. Kevin threatened to disown me if I didn't do it," she said with a smile.

"This was an empowering experience, but for three days after the race every muscle in our bodies was sore."

APRIL BENTON

April Benton of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

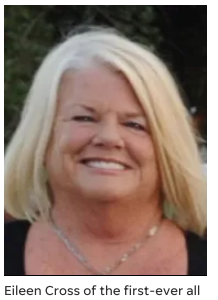
April, Benton, 35, is employed as a program technician by the United States Department of Agriculture in Princess Anne. She and her husband, Mark Benton Jr., have three boys, Brett, 14, Ashton, 9, and Parker, 5.

She had no sailing experience. Her position during the race was handling the main sail on the Helen Virginia.

"It was a lot of work, especially toward the end," she said. "It was demanding coming down to Chance to train and work on the boat with three kids and a husband at home waiting for dinner."

As race day approached, Benton was surprised to hear so many watermen encouraging her and the crew. "They wanted us to win, people were excited for us," she said. "It was hard work, but I hope I can do this again next year."

EILEEN CROSS



Eileen Cross of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

Eileen Cross, 63, operates a kayak rental tour service in Chance and works part time for the Maryland Department of Social Services. She has one son, Bob.

She helped raise and lower the main sail and the centerboard on the day of the race.

"I heard the girls talking about the possibility of forming an all-female crew this past January and I told Dawn I'd like to be a member," she said. "I was thrilled — so excited I could be part of the crew."

While her age could have become an issue, it wasn't, she said, thanks to the support of the crew.

"My age wasn't considered," she said. "Because of the support of the team, we shared and helped each other. Maybe it could have been a problem, but it wasn't.

"We worked so well together and made friendships. We had a carpool thing going when we traveled to Tilghman Island and Cambridge, that's when we really bonded."

THE CAPTAIN, KATARINA ENNERFELT

Capt. Katarina Ennerfelt led the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

Swedish-born Katarina Ennerfelt, 52, has one daughter, Filippa.

Ennerfelt is president of the family-owned Toroid Corp. and Acron Welding in Salisbury.

She is part-owner of the Helen Virginia, along with partners Harold "Stoney" Whitelock, Richard Long and Frank Antes.

She grew up sailing, yet even she was challenged by the demands of preparing for her role as captain of the Helen Virginia.

"During our training on the Nathan, we were each paired with a crew member, and in my case, it was the captain," she said. "He had me to 'come about' at the wheel and I had to have my eyes closed. I will never forget that. I was sailing her with my eyes closed. The captain wanted me to determine what direction the wind was coming from. I was scared."

In 2013 she served as the first female captain of the Hilda Willing.

CARRIE DAY

Carrie Webster-Day of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

Carrie Day, 37, is director of quality assurance at the Holly Center in Salisbury. She and her husband, Dennis, have a 12-year-old daughter, Mariana.

Like the others, she began training five weeks before the Labor Day races.

"I never sailed a skipjack before. We practiced on dry land, learning how to tie and burn ropes and paint and parts of the boat and parts of the sails while the Helen Virginia was under construction. Went out with Wade Murphy aboard his skipjack at Tilghman Island, but primarily our training came with the volunteer crew of the Nathan in Cambridge. We went out three times with them, each one of us was assigned a partner."

"If you can follow directions, you'll be OK. Katarina is a great captain," Day said. "She gave the commands and we just followed them. We were ecstatic. I hope to be part of the crew next year."

The experience has changed her life, opening new doors.

"My husband and I are helping a couple restore a sailboat and are hoping next year to really lean how to sail," she said

DAWN WHITELOCK

Dawn Whitelock, 40, is an administrator for the Hertrich family in Seaford.

She has three children, Hannah, 10, Emily, 6, and Harvey, 2. Her husband, David, is the former owner of skipjack Hilda Willing and will be dredging on the Helen Virginia this oyster season.

Dawn Whitelock of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

Though she did sail on the Helen Virginia during the Choptank Heritage Skipjack Race later in September, filling in for April Benton, she did not sail with the crew during the Labor Day race.

"I'd like to be on the crew next year," she said. "I have been around skipjacks for the past 24 years, but never sailed as a crew member. Sailing with the crew of the Helen Virginia was a lot of fun. I just hope I didn't make many mistakes."

MELISSA BAILEY-DESCOTEAUX

Melissa Bailey-Descoteaux, 52, is an award-winning jewelry designer at Bailey Jewelers, a Princess Anne business she has owned for 29 years. She has two sons, Jonathan and Joel Bailey.

Sailing since she was 15, she is the owner of a 33-foot sailboat.

"My business has been a supporter of the Skipjack Foundation. For the past 25 years we set up a booth during the Labor Day races, and after the Helen Virginia got back, I went right back to work at the booth."

Melissa Bailey Descoteaux of the first-ever all female skipjack crew of the Helen Virginia. *Staff Photo By Brice Stump*

During the Labor Day race, the Helen Virginia was competing for first place with the Somerset, on which her husband, Michael Descoteaux, was serving as a crew member. When the Helen Virginia took the lead, the Somerset's captain, Walt Benton, yelled to his crew: "I ain't never goin' to catch her."

The rest is history.

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Read more at: Women make history at Skipjack Race and Hail to the crew of the Helen Virginia

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