

Onboard

By Margaret Pommert

Sistership: Pat Nolan

Recently, I led a group of Pacific Northwesters to the sunny British Virgin Islands (BVI) to teach them catamaran bareboat cruising. While there, I caught up with my friend and mentor Captain Pat Nolan, who runs Sistership, her own sailing school business in the BVI that offers courses for women, couples, and families.

For over 30 years, Pat has been empowering women and helping couples and families learn to sail. She is an Instructor Evaluator and on the Standards Committee for the American Sailing Association (ASA). She is also a longtime legend in the Pacific Northwest where she worked at Fisheries Supply, was an active racer on Puget Sound, and the leader of Seattle Women's Sailing Association. "Pat's the best sailing instructor out there," says John Padgett, president of Renton Sailing Club. Padgett learned to sail under Pat's instruction with his wife Rebekah and the couple has wind in their sails, thanks to Pat. "Rebekah and I are now both basic keelboat instructors and recently did an ocean crossing across the Pacific from San Diego to the Marquesas!"

As an instructor who teaches many women how to sail, I asked Pat to share some of her insights. "Having grown up a sailor, it was clear that the balance between men and women in boating was way off," Pat shared. "When I saw more women in Seattle showing an interest in sailing, it was great! They loved it, worked well together, and were great crew mates. Women are in it for the same reason as men. You make wonderful friends, you work together as a team, and have a lot fun!"

We both agree that the best way for a woman (or men) to improve their sailing skills is to go racing. When Pat was in Seattle, she and her sister had a bright red J/24 and raced five nights a week during the summer. "It's hard to go cruising five times a week, but really easy to go racing," she says. "It gives you that critical time on the water, where you are constantly thinking about sail trim, boat heel, right-of-way rules, weather, etc., and this helps you develop sailing skills really quickly!"

When asked about the benefits of women-focused instruction and instructors, she had this to say; "I can't tell you how many times one of my women students have shared that the week of sailing with me had changed their lives! They felt empowered and developed self-confidence and overcame their fears. Seeing a woman at the helm who is hesitant and tentative on her first day and then later at the end of the week with confidence and a huge smile on her face – that's what keeps me going."

Last winter, Pat invited me to join her and a married couple for one of her weeklong classes. The husband was the more experienced sailor who wanted his wife Heather to learn the ropes. Under Pat's tutelage, she did just that! I love this picture of the three of us at the end of the week near the famous Baths at Virgin Gorda. The confident smile on Heather's face is in sharp contrast to the woman who had stepped on board at the start of the week!

Pat and I agree that women sailing instructors are naturally better at teaching women than men. Since we're both avid racers, we laughed about teaching women how to pee on a race boat, the many buckets that have been lost overboard, and the etiquette for both male and female crew on board. While that's a small example, the need to teach men as well as women about how to make sailing a more inclusive environment is essential.

"In my experience, men seem more willing to jump in and try something without a lot of specific instruction," Pat observed. "Many of my women students value clear communication that breaks down a task into workable parts, or step-by-step instructions followed by time for

questions." Whether it's starting a dinghy motor, setting an anchor, or putting in a reef, being able to break it down so it can be clearly and quickly understood is key.

As an Instructor Evaluator, Pat describes how she has seen many male instructors struggle with this. "From my experience, it's not that they don't know how to do the task. But to explain it to someone in a way that is completely clear is harder. I see many male students being quite willing to jump in and try something even without clear instruction first. This causes many women to hesitate, so then the men push in and do it, and the women start to get left behind."

These critical communication skills are one of the biggest differences I see between male and female instructors. In our society, girls are encouraged from a very young age to be good communicators and to read other people well. Those are important skills for an instructor to have!"

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Left to Right: Pat, Margaret and Heather at the Baths of Virgin Gorda in the BVI.



Margaret Pommert is a Puget Sound native who started sailing as a teenager and is now a licensed captain and certified sail and power boating instructor. She's a leader in the Pacific NW community of women who sail and powerboat, a leader with the International Offshore Safety at Sea with Hands-On, Training Organizer for The Sailing Foundation, and co-leader of the annual Waggoner Guide Inside Passage flotilla to SE Alaska.