



Dan Ljungsvik photo

Addicted to Adrenaline

The fast-growing sport of women's match racing is spreading worldwide and setting its sights on the Olympic Games

By Betsy Crowfoot with photography by Sean Downey

Considering their stellar start—shutting out six opponents in a row on the first day of the 2007 Mayor's Cup—Liz Baylis and her San Francisco Women's Match Race Team found themselves in a predicament on Day Three. By their last race of the last day, Baylis and crew were in the crosshairs of Sandy Hayes, an equally tenacious, compact, East Coast sailor, whose team had clawed its way up the ladder to trail Baylis by just one point.

With light winds delaying the day's races, the prospect for semi-final and final matches were dwindling with the breeze. The competing skippers, who included five of the top 25 female match racers in the world, were hoping merely to complete the double round-robins sailed in Catalina 37s.

In the course of the competition thus far, Hayes had ominously handed Baylis one of only two losses the San Francisco sailor would suffer. For Baylis, with 11 wins and two losses, and Hayes, standing at 10-3, it would come down to this last duel. A win for Hayes would mean the Cup, because in match racing, the tie-breaker goes to whoever won their most recent match.

"My mom always said 'Win early and often,'" Baylis said. "And in match racing it's more true than anywhere else; so you're always in the catbird seat if something happens."

The 2007 Mayor's Cup had attracted a talented field of domestic and international competitors, not only because it is a Grade Two event, where women sailors earn points toward their international rankings, garnering invitations to more worldwide events, but also because in three short years the Mayor's Cup had earned a reputation for generous hospitality, smooth race management, and parties galore, in a cosmopolitan Southern California setting.

That's no surprise. The event was founded by the folks at Long Beach Yacht Club, which has run the Congressional Cup since 1965, and laid the foundation for match racing as it is known today.

Sailing has probably been around since our predecessors stuck a palm frond in a hollow log, but match racing didn't really get established until the 1930 America's Cup, when two J-class yachts raced boat-for-boat, without time allowances. The Bermuda Gold Cup and



Liz Baylis steers around the leeward mark during the Mayor's Cup, above, and earlier this year she competed in the Lysekil Women's Match Race in Sweden, top.

Congressional Cup followed, perfecting the art of the duel between two identical boats.

Aside from the boat-for-boat aspect, match racing also has its own precise set of rules. The racing begins in a meticulously timed and orchestrated pre-start session, during which the two rival boats must enter the engagement zone from opposite, designated sides of the course, and then take on their opponents in a battle to gain the most advantageous route to the mark, while luring the opponent into a penalty-inducing foul.

"It's intimidating," confessed hometown skipper Claudia Wainer. "You've got to fight the butterflies before you enter the box."

In fact it's this bittersweet mix of "butterflies" and "a blast," as Wainer describes match racing, that makes it so intoxicating.

"I love the thrill of the pre-start, the tactical game and sailing defensively. I might be addicted to adrenaline, I guess," said Caroline Béjar, a physician from Niterói, Brazil.