

Sparkle Girls

By Elizabeth T. Becker

Back in the 50's and 60's, Sparkle was known as "the boat to beat" in sailing circles in Southern California. Today, half a century later, Sparkle is known as "the boat to beat" in sailing circles here in Port Townsend. She has also retained another title after all these years. Sparkle is still known as "the babe magnet," as evidenced by the phenomenon affectionately referred to as the Sparkle Girls.

Sparkle was designed and built by a gentleman named Alex Irving in 1946, with help from friend and coworker Norman Schwartz. Both were aerodynamics engineers at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Southern California, doing work for NASA. Irving started building boats at a young age. His first was a 15' sailboat that he built while in high school. "I graduated from boat to boat," he recalls. "I built four boats that were at least 27' long, including a 28' schooner." Reminiscing about his younger days, Irving concluded, "I had a pretty keen life."

Part of that "keen life" included the way that Sparkle attracted young women to accompany the engineers on races and sailing trips. "We always seemed to have a boat full of women," chuckled Alex, now 94 years old and fondly reminiscing about the good old days.

Today, Sparkle is owned by Guy Hupy and Brian McGinn, diehard sailors and racers who have not only restored the boat but take her out on the water every chance they get. They take part in the evening races run by the Port Townsend Sailing Association on Fridays from spring through fall, and they also sail in the more casually organized Quimper Tars races each Wednesday. When McGinn took off for a voyage on his other boat, Bongo, last year, Hupy was a bit shorthanded in the crew department. Fortunately, his friend Heidi Eisenhower presented him with a solution.

"I used to work in the office right next to Guy's," explains Eisenhower, who is now the Executive Director of the Jefferson Land Trust, "and I always talked to him about getting out on the water. Last winter he was about to leave for an extended trip and challenged me to get together a group of women to start sailing in March." Heidi and her friend and former office mate Caroline Gibson, inspired by the promise of the use of Sparkle during the Wednesday night races, began making phone calls and pulling together a group of women with varying degrees of experience. When they recruited long-time Sparkle crewmember Symbolyn Sebastian, they were off and running.

For Hupy, the prospect of a boat full of attractive and fun women was naturally appealing, and he had confidence in their sailing skills. "I coached them for the first few weeks," says Hupy, "and then I handed the helm—and the boat--over to Sym. I

still go out with them once in awhile, but now I usually stay below and take a nap while they race.”

For Sebastian, the opportunity to skipper the boat has been rewarding, giving her a chance to hone her sailing and racing skills. And the added attraction of sailing with a group of women friends has been the highlight.

Eisenhour echoes that sentiment. Having grown up in Port Townsend, she sailed on *Adventuress* and with the Wooden Boat Foundation as a teen and has known crewmates Morrow and Kris Nelson since they were kids.

“Over the course of this season, I’ve gotten to sail with most of my favorite women,” she explains. “For me, it’s a great chance to spend more time with my friends, doing something physically active. We have an absolutely fabulous time.”

At least 28 different women have sailed on *Sparkle* this season, with as many as 14 aboard at one time. Some come once or twice; others are regulars. Some of the women who come to sail on *Sparkle* are veteran sailors, including Carol Hasse, Nora Petrich, Lisa Vizzini, and Kathy Grace. But some have never been on a boat, much less a racing crew.

While racing sailboats have a reputation for being intense and unforgiving environments, the *Sparkle Girls* have provided a nurturing and welcoming ambiance for novices and veterans to come aboard and learn from one another. And they are generous in showing their appreciation and support of their crewmembers.

“Any level of inexperience is welcome,” explains Eisenhour. “We have great teamwork and cooperation, and there’s no yelling. In fact, we use consensus-based decision making.”

“On one race,” she continues, “Sym actually asked ‘Are there any objections to tacking?’ (pause) ‘Hearing none, we shall tack.’”

“This is the most polite racing boat I’ve ever been on,” chimes in Hupy. “They even say ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you.’ And there’s no yelling.”

Each of the core group of sailors has found their own niche on board: Sym Sebastian (a physical therapist) as Skipper; Kris Nelson (owner of *Siren’s*) as “Ms. Cunningham” and Refreshment Specialist; Heidi Eisenhour as Crew Coordinator; Caroline Gibson (Communications Director for the Pacific Marine Conservation Council) as Fun Committee Chair; Tulip Morrow (a sailmaker at Port Townsend Sails) as Foredeck Lead, Start Timer, and Fashion Coordinator (the gals have matching black shirts with *Sparkle* emblazoned in gold, in two styles, of course); Sarah Katz (a physician’s assistant) as Tactician; and Sal Gray (adventurer and Australian retreat owner) as Bow Watch; and Kathy Grace (a nurse and skipper of her own boat, *Lotus*), as Teacher. Grace is particularly appreciated for her calmness and patience. “Kathy is so great,” says Nelson. “I’ve learned more from her than

from anyone else. And Sarah, our tactician, is so knowledgeable and always so calm. And they never yell."

It's apparent that fun and laughter are essential elements on board the boat. But the lighthearted approach to communication and teamwork shouldn't make anyone think that these women don't take things seriously. They are all intent on learning and are keen competitors.

"I love hanging off the rail when it's really windy," says Nelson. "And I love it that I don't feel like I have to know everything to be part of the crew. No one ever acts like you're stupid. And there's no yelling."

Nicole Brown, one of the newer sailors, chimes in: "When I first came aboard and asked them what the rules were, they just told me 'Don't fall off the boat!'"

The women are all grateful to Hupy for his generosity in sharing Sparkle with them. In turn, he finds fringe benefits to his all-female crew, especially when they travel to race at events in Victoria, Seattle, and the San Juan Islands. "When we go to the obligatory race dinner, the girls always dress to kill. They bring cocktail dresses and high heels and makeup and completely blow everyone away. And I get to be the envy of all the other guys there."

"This is the greatest group of women I've ever known," he continues on a more serious note. "Pure class. I'm really lucky to be able to hang out with them. Another skipper asked me how I get so many women to go sailing on Sparkle. I told him, 'You just give 'em the boat.'"

So what about the off season? The gals have committed to helping with the replanking project on Sparkle this winter and will join together again to sail in the spring. In the meantime, it's slumber parties, bonfires, potlucks, and fashion shows, sharing life's ups and downs, and enjoying the new and old friendships which have blossomed from their time together on the water. They'll even be helping crewmate Nelson serving beer at the Bar Harbor at the Wooden Boat Festival.

And the "magic boat" that is the center of the story will also be at the Festival. Stop by at the dock or look for Sparkle out on the water during the races. She's the 40' double ender with the black hull, the seriously fun crew, and quite often the lead.

And, of course, no yelling.

More on Sparkle:

Sparkle was launched in 1947 and started racing in San Pedro under the Cruising Club of America Ocean Racing Rules. She quickly proved herself to be a worthy competitor. With owner Alex Irving at the helm, and using borrowed sails, Sparkle

represented the Cabrillo Beach Yacht Club in the Sir Thomas Lipton Trophy Race at Newport, California, on March 27, 1949--and won, beating thirteen of the area's best racers. With the prestigious Lipton Cup under her belt, Sparkle would dominate the Southern California racing scene for the next twenty years, competing against such luminaries as Humphrey Bogart on his yacht, Santana.

"We were racing against boats with lots of money behind them," says Irving. "I was just a working guy." Of course, that "working guy" and his crew of seven coworkers all happened to be aerodynamics engineers, giving Sparkle the advantage of sailing with a "boat full of geniuses." Irving recalls that his crew was always looking for ways to go faster. "The fellows in my crew developed a lot of "go-fast" things such as traveler rollers and backstay tweekers. A lot of little goodies. These guys pretty much knew what made a boat go."

She might not be sailing at all today were it not for an impulsive purchase by current owner Brian McGinn, who saw her while sailing in Southern California aboard the Lady Washington in 1997. She was tied up to the dock in San Diego with a sign on the front that read, "For Sale: \$3500 plus a good car (or \$5000 cash)." The owner had purchased the boat, named Sparkle, at a Navy auction just six months before. "It leaked pretty badly," recalls McGinn, "but I was looking for a boat and the price was right." Back in Port Townsend, McGinn joined forces with Guy Hupy and together they got the boat back into condition to join the local racing circuit. She made her first appearance in the Port Townsend Wooden Boat Festival in 2001.