Book Excerpt  • Coauthored with Dawn Riley

The arduous Whitbread Round-the-World Race—a 32,000-mile ocean marathon that circles the globe—draws only the toughest, most accomplished sailors in the sport. Taking the Helm is the nonfiction account of American sailor Dawn Riley, who captains an all-female crew in this grueling contest. After starting the Whitbread under different leadership, this female crew arrives in Uruguay after Leg 1 riven by dissent, financial problems and personal conflicts. Riley flies to Uruguay to save this young team from mutiny and to lead them through some of the most dangerous stretches of the ocean to the finish line. The book was published by Little, Brown and Company. This excerpt is the opening section of chapter 1.

Taking the Helm

Chapter 1

I couldn’t sleep last night. The metal shutters on the apartment windows never stopped rattling: a constant fluttering of metal, sometimes slow and sometimes fast and frantic. It was the wind, the lulls and the high gusts that here, in this part of the world, they call the pam pero. It blasts onto the coast of Uruguay and funnels onto the streets of Punta del Este, shaking the restaurant canopies and the window shutters, snaking around the high-rise apartment buildings along the beach, making the boats at the pier dance on the water, turning this resort town into one giant wind tunnel.

Even if the wind had been calm, I still would not have slept. I haven’t slept well since I arrived in Uruguay a few days ago to get ready for this race. I’ve hardly eaten, except for a few chivitos (Uruguay’s answer to the steak sandwich) at the Yateste café and the spaghetti I cooked last night here in the apartment. It was left over from the last tenant, abandoned in the cupboard for a long time, and all I had for sauce was salt. But thank you, whoever you are who left it here. At least it was something in my stomach before I sail off in the land of freeze-dried food and icebergs.

As soon as I got out of bed this morning, I rushed over to the window, pushed open the shutters, and looked out at the sky and the sea. I had hoped for blue sky, sun, and a gentle breeze—just the way it was yesterday. The sky was gray. Rain was falling. And the wind whipped the wave crests on the sea into a froth of white.

A sunny day would have been better, for today, eleven women and I head out to sail across the Southern Ocean (the name used to refer to the waters surrounding Antarctica) in a sixty-four-foot boat that the crew calls the Old Red Bucket. I would feel better going on a boat called the Red Missile or the Red Warrior. Some powerful weapon to be reckoned with. But we have only this boat to take us across the Southern Ocean: a place with gale-force winds, icebergs, waves the size of city buildings, snowstorms, and the kind of cold that freezes your skin and creeps into your dreams.
Our crew, with the help of some of our competitors, finished working on the boat last night at eight o’clock. We have spent the last four days on our knees and contorted in small spaces, crawling over the boat, checking the engine, the systems, the keel bolts, the through-hull fittings. My back is stiff from hours of stooping over the boat engine, generator, and deck gear. My hands are sore from muscling boat parts into place. I have cuts that will someday join all the scars I’ve collected on boats. I am exhausted from four days on the boat: disassembling, assembling, rigging, rerigging, wiring, splicing, bolting, fiberglassing. It has been a never-ending reconnaissance mission down into the boat’s inner workings, then back to the work list that seemed to grow every time we came back to check off one most task. The List That Never Shrank: it is the subplot of our horror story.

The owners of this boat telephoned me just over one week ago. They asked me to come to South America and keep this boat and its all-female crew in the Whitbread Round-the-World Race, an ocean marathon sailed in six legs, as the new skipper. Key members of the crew mutinied after the boat completed the first six-thousand-mile leg of the race, from England to Uruguay, and the skipper announced the withdrawal of her boat from the race. Now the original skipper, who started the boat in the race when the fleet sailed from England two months ago, has already left for the States—not by boat, but by airplane, amidst circumstance that I am still unraveling. And here I am, a last-minute leader made out to be the lady mercenary of the high seas, hired to pull this boat and this crew together in what is an insane amount of time. Since the six-thousand-mile leg from England to Uruguay, our competitors have had nearly a month in port to get ready for the restart to Australia. We have had four days.

Soon it will be time to walk out of this apartment and down to the dock where the fourteen boats in this round-the-world race are berthed. The boats will be flying huge battle flags from their rigging: the nautical version of war paint. The spectators will come down to the waterfront, to stand at the edge of Uruguay before it drops into the Atlantic Ocean and wave good-bye to the brave sailors. It is time to go, I keep telling myself, but somehow I don’t feel like myself this morning. I am not eager to compete, to fight, the find out who the best sailor is.

I take the last shower I will take for nearly a month. I pack what little clothing I have. My duffel bag, with all my cold-weather gear, was lost on the airplane trip from the States. By now my luggage is probably in Hong Kong or Tahiti. Someplace where a bag of thermal underwear, gloves, face masks, goggles, and hats are of no use to anyone but me. How I will survive the ice in sweatshirts and jeans, I don’t know. But there’s no time to worry about that now.

I pack my other tools of survival. My rigging knife goes into my pocket; I will keep this tool within easy reach from now on, in case one night I have to cut away lines or sails that endanger me or my crew. I strap my watch onto my wrist; it will stay on my body until I reach Australia. I put Gizmo—my stuffed gremlin who always travels with me, for luck and for company—in my duffel. I go through the logical, methodical, rote procedure of packing, but I don’t feel ready to leave yet, and I keep remembering all the “what ifs” that kept me awake last night.

What if my crew and I had months to prepare for this race around the world? We could stack the odds
in our favor. There would be time to build new sails, to overhaul the systems on board the boat, to make the rig and the deck gear like new again, to do brain surgery on the electronics, to learn to sail this fast racing machine better. Mostly we need time to learn to trust one another’s abilities as a crew, for few of us have sailed together before and this is a nine-month marathon: a 32,000-mile course through extreme ocean conditions from England, to Uruguay, to Australia, to New Zealand, back to Uruguay, to Florida, and back to England. In the first Whitbread race in 1973/74, two people had died by the time the fleet had reached Australia.

What will this four-day, patch-it-so-it’s-good-enough marathon cost us once we hit the extreme ice conditions of the Southern Ocean? What it, what if: a hundred of them go through my mind up here, in this apartment hanging high over the sea with the wind whipping by.

Over the last four days, the faxes have rolled in, from friends and fellow sailors. Tracy Edwards—skipper of Maiden, the first all-female entry ever sailed in the Whitbread, of which I was a part in 1989/90—faxed a huge “Well Done!” across the Atlantic, with a reminder to send many postcards home to her in England recounting our adventures. Eric Goetz, back in Rhode Island building America’s Cup boats, sent his wishes for speedy sailing. Friends from New Zealand sent words of wisdom from Eastern philosophers about great purposes and transcending limitations. Claire Warren, who had raced as the doctor onboard with Tracy and me on Maiden, was “jealous as hell” we were going without her, but she reported that support was strong in the United Kingdom and the British press was treating us fine.

Putting me onboard at the zero hour as the new skipper to strengthen the campaign makes a nice, neat storyline after the crew of the only all-female entry in this race nearly dissolved into mutiny. The truth is, after four days of nonstop work, sleepless nights, stress, tears, homesick moments, and little food, I know from the inside this is no fairy tale.

On the outside, I have worked like a machine to follow a logical plan of action in a very short time. Inside, everything is coming too fast. The deadline to leave is here. The journalists have questions about the all-female crew with the new skipper; there have been calls to return to New York and Miami and London from this place that feels like the edge of the world.

I still have questions of my own about this boat and this crew. But as of this morning, I cannot think of one good-enough reason why we should not set sail for Australia today.

It’s time to go. I zip my duffel shut, survey the apartment for any last remnants of four days that I hope will soon be a distant memory, and head out toward the stairwell, to the street, and down to the docks. The wind is still blowing and the sea is still white. The breeze whooshes the door shut with a thud—pushing me out of this high-rise apartment before I feel ready to leave.