

Sailing in Marin: San Rafael's Delmas finally gets her shot at competing in the Bull Ship regatta

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The Bull Ship Regatta starts off the Sausalito Yacht Club. (Richmond Yacht Club photo).



Sausalito's Gordie Nash is a veteran Bull shipper and a skilled El Toro sailor. (Richmond Yacht...

For more than 50 years, Cinde Lou Delmas hankered for the opportunity to squish herself into a tiny 8-foot sailboat to make the crossing from Sausalito to the San Francisco city front, with just a ping pong paddle and cut-off chlorox bottle for assistance.

On Saturday, Delmas will finally get that break as she competes in the 60th annual Bull Ship race for her first time, in an El Toro, along with some 40 other racers. The course runs from the starting line by the Sausalito Yacht Club to the finish line off the Golden Gate Yacht Club (GGYC) on the city front — competitors have a two-hour time limit to finish.

For most sailboats, this is not a particularly daunting



John Amen has sailed the Bull Ship race 18 times. He's won it once to go with numerous second- and third-place finishes. (Richmond Yacht Club photo).
crossing but in an 8-foot El Toro ... well ... anything could happen, says Bull Ship registrar Paul Flowerman.

"The boat that was designed by an amateur builder out of two sheets of plywood that does 3 knots, if that," said Flowerman, who lives in Lagunitas. "The windier it gets, the deeper the boat goes in the water and submarines — it's literally like that. The boats are technically stupid but the competition is usually very good."

As the story goes, the Bull Ship regatta was first conceived as a bet between a few guys, probably in a bar. A race was on. Back in the day after racing competitors would de-rig their El

Toros on the lawn area between the St. Francis Yacht Club and the GGYC where the prize giving would take place with famous North Beach stripper Tempest Storm awarding trophies while Irish coffees from the Buena Vista Café were served.

Not surprising, the trophies for this bizarre race take a bovine form, like the bull-in-a-cage trophy, the carved wooden bull and the big set of bull horns awarded to the first female. The last finisher gets the Tail End trophy — a real cow tail.

It's a popular race with familiar Marin sailors like Gordie Nash, whose mother was awarded the first women's Bull Ship trophy in the early days of the race, and Flowerman's long-time sailing buddy John Amen who will also be on the start. The two met when they were about 11 years old in the Sausalito Yacht Club junior program and have sailed together for the past 50 years. Amen's done the race for 18 years, often placing second or third, and winning once. He still holds the course record of 43½ minutes.

"They're a tricky little boat — you really have to pay attention all the time," Amen said, "but they're fun to sail."

The El Toro was a junior training boat designed and built prior to WWII, and while the boat has gone through many transformations, it still retains its original look and feel. Original wooden El Toros



Cinde Lou Delmas sharpens her El Toro skills in advance of the 60th annual Bull Ship race. (Richmond Yacht Club photo).

are still actively sailed and the newer versions have foam cored carbon hulls and carbon fiber masts.

Even Marin's famed America's Cup sailors John Kostecki and Paul Cayard started out in El Toros, and they're still a good boat to learn on says Flowerman.

Delmas, who lives in San Rafael, was too young to do the race when she owned her first El Toro, Buttercup, at age 7. She wanted to do the Bull Ship race so bad that her dad followed her in his sailboat while she did a "pretend" race. It's been a long time since Delmas has owned Buttercup but for the 60th annual Bull Ship, her friend Bill Moore drove to Oregon to retrieve the boat. The twist is that Moore, also a first-time 'Bull Shipper', will sail on Buttercup while Delmas will sail on a newer El Toro.

"It's a tiny boat but I love the fear of going over — you have to be careful," Delmas said.

Armed with 53 years of sailing experience, a ping pong paddle in the event the wind dies, and a cut off chlorox bottle for bailing if it's windy and wet, she's ready to go.

Capsizes aren't uncommon in the race and sailors do have to be rescued from time to time. Amen's been sucked out the gate twice on a big ebb tide and had to be towed in.

"A 6-knot ebb is really hard in an El Toro," Amen said. "I was half way to Point Bonita in an 8-foot boat."

Weight is a big factor in the Bull Ship, which is why there are different divisions including the Clydesdale for anybody over 200 pounds.

"Moving around in the boat at that size there's not too much room. I've seen some pretty big guts out there and sometimes they do well too," Amen said.

But, at the end of the day, he concedes that the race mostly depends on luck.

"There is some strategy involved depending on whether it's a flood or an ebb — but sometimes it can be just one tack from start to finish."