

# SAIL AMERICA NEWS

Monthly News for  
Sail America Members



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## WAYPOINTS COVER STORY



Margaret Bonds Podlich is the president of BoatU.S., the nation's largest group of boaters, with more than half a million members. Podlich started her career at BoatU.S. in 1994 as the director of the BoatU.S. Clean Water Trust, where she developed clean boating and clean marina programs. As that nonprofit was merged into the BoatU.S.

Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water in 2000, she also worked on boating safety topics, and in 2005 became BoatU.S. VP of government affairs. In that position, she worked on boating-friendly policies through state and federal lobbying, including the successful passage of the 2008 Clean Boating Act.

Raised as a sailor and daughter of former US Sailing executive director John Bonds, Podlich raced in college and competed in a wide range of national and international events and was named "one to watch" by the *Capital Gazette* in Annapolis in the 1990s. She was on the 2006/2007 US Sailing Team, racing the Yngling alongside Olympian Carol Cronin and Kim Couranz, has steered and crewed many Rolex Women's Keelboats Champs, and is currently active in Laser Masters regattas, team racing in J22s, and paddleboarding.

**Sail America:** You've been a member of the BoatUS team since 1994. What are some shifts you've seen in the past two decades?

**Margaret Bonds Podlich:** On the positive side, boats are being better built, and there is a wider array of accessories for boats, including some beautiful and affordable electronics. Maintaining access—both to the water and on the water—is much more front-of-mind within the boating industry.

On the negative side, the number and frequency of hassles for boaters has grown. It's difficult for many to find the chunks of time for boating, and the push/pull of double income couples, and nights and weekends full of kid and alternative activities, as well as costs of boat ownership, have impacted the growth of boat ownership.

But the passion that so many people have for the water is unchanging. We just need to introduce new people to it, and work harder to keep current boaters in boating.

**SA:** You've been president for three years now. What are you working on these days, what are you focusing on, and what are some of your goals?

**MBP:** Well it's always interesting to evolve your personal emphasis from organizing and running programs to the more umbrella role of running an organization and people. Just like everyone within Sail America, we're trying to take really good care of our current customers, while looking for new customers and growing the business. The best part is that I get to talk to a lot of boaters and learn about their boating, what's bugging them, and what's working for them, and how we are doing. I think that reality check is vital for any business leader.

I'm focused on what BoatU.S. can do for boaters, both now and in the future. I see boats, and boaters getting older, and as an industry, we're not doing a great job of filling the future funnel with 10–40 year olds who will work boating into their busy lives. The world is a different place than it was in the '80s and '90s, and with this new reality, the economics (money/time/energy/hassles) of boating have changed. We're all working to get our hands around how those factors will influence our businesses, and how we can better work within those evolving realities.

**SA:** You started at BoatU.S. as the director of the BoatU.S. Clean Water Trust, now the BoatU.S. Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water. BoatU.S. is known for promoting safe and clean boating. What are some advancements you've seen in clean water initiatives and what do you see happening as we move forward?

**MBP:** When I came to BoatU.S. the concept of boaters as stewards of the water—of clean boaters—was really new. It was cool to help figure out what could constitute a clean marina, and help develop ideas and programs that are now mainstream.

For years we worked on “Help Stop the Drops” to help folks prevent fuel spills while refueling. Fuel docks now have more signage, absorbents, and how-to information. New advancements in fuel systems including carbon canisters, should go a long way in the future to reduce the long-problematic challenge of fuel “burping” while filling up the boat. Now that's progress!

There is more infrastructure to help boaters too. Pumpouts are much more available, thanks to Clean Vessel Act funds. Products to help minimize our impacts are more mainstream as well—for example, the alternative bottom paints with lower metals, which you can find in nearly every boat store. Marinas have recycling bins, people carry their reusable water bottles. You didn't see those things 20 years ago.

In terms of looking forward, invasive species remain a problem, and a challenge for boating. There are an estimated 180 non-native species in the Great Lakes alone.

Our wonderful world economy means that whether it's the swine flu or the sea lamprey, we can move bad things to new places fast.

And on the positive side, our nonprofit BoatU.S. Foundation has just launched a free online Clean Boating Course—first of its kind—available to all at [boat.us/courses](http://boat.us/courses).

**SA:** BoatU.S. is by all accounts a consumer group, but BoatU.S. does some heavy lifting when it comes to industry lobbying. What are some ways BoatU.S. is an advocate for the boating industry and/or how do BoatU.S.' efforts directly impact the industry?

**MBP:** Our lobbying work is designed to keep boaters in boating, which means they keep needing the products and the boats the industry is making. We want to make sure that boating is an affordable, accessible, and fun recreation. Those goals are beneficial for the industry as well, and 95% of the time we are in agreement on issues with the boating industry. Our collaborative efforts with NMMA really started in 2006 when it looked like every boat in every state was going to be required to have an operating permit. Looking back at what the luxury tax did for the boat business, can you imagine what this could have done? Working together, and leaning on each other's strengths, we were able to get the federal Clean Boating Act passed.

Now, we are very involved in the reform of the Renewable Fuel Standard—which is the federal mandate to put more ethanol into each gallon of gas. Most boaters have figured out how to work with 10% ethanol, but marine engines are not built for higher blends. We have to fix this.

**SA:** One major victory we saw this spring was the defeat of the so-called "Gonzalez Amendment," which was tacked onto a Florida Fish and Wildlife bill and severely restricted anchoring in Miami Dade and Broward Counties. Can you talk about what kind of effect that could have had on the industry and how BoatU.S. was able to help vote that down in such a short amount of time?

**MBP:** Wow, that was a close victory this spring, and an issue that continues to lurk—in fact there are Florida FWC meetings about anchoring taking place this week [*ed. note—early September*].

For years, anchoring rights have been contentious in Florida, fueled by legitimate concerns about truly derelict boats. BoatU.S. has actively worked to separate out the discussion about what to do about derelict boats from the discussion about active cruisers. In 2008, we spent a lot of time working to pass a state law that restricts the counties from restricting anchoring, and developed five pilot anchoring areas. The idea was to see what could work, and what wouldn't work for active cruisers.

The problem is that everyone has their own perspective on when/where/how someone should or shouldn't be able to put an anchor down. One person's tolerance is different than the next, and if you park your boat outside "Joe's backyard" and impede "Joe's view" and stay there with towels drying, for months on end, and then maybe leave your boat for a while, Joe might get tired of worrying about it, and in fact get pretty annoyed.

This spring, the Gonzalez Amendment was a result of someone deliberately annoying "Joe" and Joe decided to put up a very well funded legislative fight. And he nearly won. BoatU.S. pulled out the stops and let our cruising members know what was up, used our activist network and emailed a lot over the course of several days, worked the floors of the House and Senate with our state lobbyist, and tried to talk sense and use facts in this emotional fight. The voting—well it was way to close for comfort! And we are already in conversations regarding similar legislation that may be proposed next year.

Ultimately, it comes down to the idea that we all need to realize we aren't the only ones on the water, and we need to figure out how to peacefully coexist. BoatU.S. will continue to defend the right to have options on where to stay—on a hook, at a dock, on a mooring—and we'll all have to realize we need to play in the same sandbox together.

**SA:** What, in your opinion, are some of the biggest challenges facing the sailing industry today and what can the industry do to address those challenges? What are some ways the industry can stay competitive with other recreational sports that may be siphoning away some boating participants?

**MBP:** There are some shifts in outdoor recreation and participation, and we're part of that. Here are some interesting stats:

- In 2012, (only) half of all Americans participated in some form of outdoor recreation. Adolescent participation dropped and there is also less participation in outdoor recreation among minority populations. (The Outdoor Foundation)
- Overall golf participation fell in the US in the last 5 years. Millennial's golf participation (age 18–34) fell 13% in the last 5 years, and bowling declined as well, while yoga and jogging went up. (Wall Street Journal: 8/1/2014) In the last 4 years, participation in alpine skiing declined 24%, while snowboarding declined 1% and cross country declined 20%. (Snowsports Industries Association)

The takeaway—it's not just us.

The bottom line for sailing is that we need to make it easier and we need to introduce—and keep—more people in the sport. That first step towards entry into sailing can be a VERY tall step, with the high cost of entry and ownership. It's not

like you buy a tennis racket and a can of balls and go to the local free park and play a game of tennis. We need boats that are easy to maintain and easy to use, not boats where half the time you have is spent repairing a boat. We need to work on premier customer service, like a Lexus dealer, so that boats get fixed on time and on budget. I expect our customers to have less free time and less tolerance for the hassles of boating. We will all need to work harder to get them and keep them in boating as their preferred recreational activity.

**SA:** Do you see a shifting focus from sailing to powerboating among people who choose to purchase new or even used boats?

**MBP:** Not necessarily. Some of the new boat categories that are selling well include powerboats that can tow, pontoon boats, and paddleboards. I know a lot of folks who are into sailing, but also have powerboats. In terms of introducing boating to new people, I think sailing already has some great infrastructure in place with learn-to-sail programs across the country. But the terminology, the moving parts, the complexity of getting a sailboat to move, can be a whole lot more daunting to the beginner if we don't help them along. Maybe we need to get people on a boat sooner in the learning process, so they then learn "boom" within the context of the experience of boating?

**SA:** Do you notice a shifting demographic amongst boat buyers overall? (For instance, do you see more women, fewer Baby Boomers, younger people, etc.)

**MBP:** I'm not as in direct touch with boat buyers as boat sellers are, so I might not be the right person to answer this question. But I still think we are behind the drastic demographic shift that is occurring—whether we embrace it or not—in this country. For example, 20% of the US adult population is Latino, ages 18–49, and their buying power is growing at 2x the rate of the non-Latino. We have got to do a better job of getting them into boats. An interesting sidebar is that an estimated 60% of Hispanic/Latino kids can't swim. What's the likelihood of someone who can't swim wanting to go to the water in their free time?

**SA:** You spoke at the Sail America Industry Conference this spring on a panel with Dawn Riley of Oakcliff Sailing (Waypoints subject, May 2014) about women as an emerging market in the sailing industry. In what ways can the sailing industry tap into that purchasing group?

**MBP:** Understand that women make or break most large consumer decisions in the household, as well as what the family is doing this weekend. Be attentive to what barriers they may feel, at any age, and address them.

According to the Census Bureau, in 2012, US Households by type:

- 20% married couples with children
- 29% married couples without children
- 18% other family households

- 15% women living alone
- 6% other non-family households.

There's a lot of potential customers in there for you.

I think it's important that each of us, as business owners, take a look at how we interact with all potential customers, whether it be a woman, an African-American, or a 20 year old. You don't have to dumb down the information being provided, but it is important to know more about your customer's needs. If the woman isn't a boater, what options do you have for them to learn (without the spouse)? Do you provide a boat orientation/lesson for the new boat-owning family—not just the man? Does your store/showroom have anything for the kids to do other than climb all over the boats? Do you have a diverse sales force? Once families are into boating, are the boat clubs/yacht clubs as open to the woman as the man? Some are, and some are (still) not.

Sailing provides such a getaway and such a huge potential for positive down time with family and friends. That's pretty scarce these days, and can be used to great advantage!

**SA:** What are some ways the sailing industry can get younger people or new people involved with sailing?

**MBP:** Create different event formats and get club/community sailing boats to make it easy, fun and cheap to participate. In the past year, I've started sailing in Friday night team racing and Monday night match racing—using club-owned boats that are ready and waiting at the dock when you blast in from work. These formats are really working, and we are getting 16–35 year olds out on the water. They are in a very different place than some of us older sailors—their conversations include topics like asking someone out, their upcoming marriage, and buying their first house.

From the financial side, we aren't requiring them to be boat owners to continue to be avid racers. And that may be the way that clubs keep the 20–40 year olds engaged. It's been great to have an array of ages on the race course, and afterwards "the kids" teach the older sailors this adrenaline-filled sailing discipline they did in college. It's great!

I've also seen some fun regattas that have a great racing element, but a substantial emphasis on the party side too—with racing right off the dock for good spectating, a live band in the parking lot, part of the proceeds going to charity, and everyone welcome, whether you are sailing or not.

I think we're going to have to think out of the box to see what works for different groups—what your average 60-year-old sailor is used to may not work for the 25 year old. Then again, they may be open to trying something new too!

We also need to remember that everyone, and every kid, doesn't fit into a racing program. As an industry (or just from our own experiences) are we too racing-focused to be as inclusive as possible?

I have a friend with a 10 year old who loves sailing, but who doesn't want to go back to sailing camp for the third summer. He is not a competitive kid, and the program he's involved with focuses on racing. Can we think about alternative programs that have a more widespread appeal to help kids become happy around the water—maybe with sailing, powerboating, paddling, without aspirations to be the next America's Cup skipper?