



A Legacy of Learning

For more than 50 years, Steve and Doris Colgate and their Offshore Sailing School have set the standard for excellence in all aspects of the sport.

By Elaine Lembo

Amazing. That's the word Doris Colgate says comes up again and again when students fill out evaluation forms after completing any one of a variety of instructional or vacation programs at Offshore Sailing School, the celebrated institution that she and her husband, Steve Colgate, founded more than 50 years ago.

Amazing is also the word that easily comes to mind when one considers the Colgates themselves, a dynamic, youthful duo whose game-changing accomplishments, unique personal bests and diverse generosity would put them at the top of the Fortune 500 of sailing, if such a list existed.

Last summer, on a perfect afternoon,

there was no better occasion than the eve of Steve's 80th birthday, and no better place than Harbour Court, the New York Yacht Club station on the waterfront of Newport, Rhode Island, to take stock of the many milestones. Each was a notable waypoint attained en route to helping more than 130,000 people become sailors, and each was recalled and reminisced upon over lunch with the couple and Tripp Alyn, who worked as an Offshore instructor from 1971 to 1975.

"The good habits I've learned have been like a legacy," Tripp said. "Every time I show someone how to belay a line or tie a stopper knot, the lessons I learned and taught for Steve and Doris are still with me."



Steve and Doris Colgate are still going strong. Their Colgate 26 trainer (top) has taught countless students the ropes.

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It's lunchtime aboard Sleuth. For years the Colgates campaigned their 54-foot ocean racer in high-profile grand prix events.

"So we hired him to be here," Doris said with a laugh, flashing her brilliant smile.

Bribes are clearly not part of the Colgate DNA, but hard work is. The couple's long history of involvement with sailing is nothing less than remarkable. Let's look back.

Steve, who started out on Atlantic-class sailboats and Lightnings on Long Island Sound at the age of 9, graduated from Yale University in 1957 and served two years as a U.S. Air Force officer. He started Offshore Sailing School in 1964 while also immersing himself in a grand prix yachting career that spanned six decades and included the Olympics, the America's Cup, the Fastnet Race, 20 Newport Bermuda Races and countless other major racing events, including six transatlantics. Together, Steve and Doris campaigned their own 54-foot Frers-designed ocean racer, *Sleuth*, from 1978 to 1980.

Students at the school's first location in City Island, New York, learned aboard a yawl. Later, with a \$6,000 loan from his mother (which he and Doris paid back in full), Steve purchased two Solings, then continued to use Solings as the teaching platform until working with marine architect Jim Taylor to design

the award-winning Colgate 26 in 1996. Today, the Colgate 26 is used as a training tool by the U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Maine Maritime Academy and the United Kingdom Sailing Academy, among others.

"I went around to a bunch of manufacturers and showed them three single-spaced typewritten pages of parameters for a training boat," Steve recalled. "They'd say they had 26-foot sailboats they'd adapt to what we wanted. I said, 'No, we have to start from scratch to make this right.' No one wanted to do this. Doris and I sat down and decided to see if we could do it ourselves."

The Offshore curriculum offered at eight campuses located in Florida, the British Virgin Islands and New York carries heft: Its courses get the stamp of approval for continuing education from the American Council on Education. Offshore also qualifies students not just for its own certification program, but to test at six different levels for US Sailing or US Powerboating certification, administered by US Sailing, the national governing body for the sport. Steve was head of the training committee of US Sailing when its curriculum and certification system were developed. "A lot of it came from what we'd been doing at

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Offshore,” he noted. The Colgates’ three-pronged strategy lets students learn by combining three reinforcing methods: visual (reading), auditory (classroom) and tactile (onboard).

Starting with textbooks produced on mimeographed sheets of paper at a time when no instructional sailing manuals existed, the Colgates ultimately pub-

lished textbooks that distinguish their enterprise as the only U.S. sailing school to use books written by its founders. The critically acclaimed books are widely circulated today.

In sailing social circles it’s well known that Doris, who worked in the advertising department of *Yachting* magazine in New York from 1967 to 1970, met Steve

after taking his course in 1967. What’s not so well known is that she started working for Steve while she kept the *Yachting* job, moonlighting at the Offshore offices on her lunch breaks to help with the paperwork. While Steve was at the Olympics in 1968, Doris took over the office. They married in 1969. In 1970, Doris joined the business full time as vice president. She rose to president in 1978, and became president and CEO in 2001. Steve is founder and chairman.

Doris was also the first *Yachting* employee to disrupt fashion and gender norms by walking into work one morning in an orange knit pantsuit. The publication’s controller, a woman, took one look at her and said, “Go home and change.” These were also the years when, as part of her job at *Yachting*, Doris would have to deliver documents to the New York Yacht Club for commodore Henry Hill “Harry” Anderson




Today, the Colgates’ Offshore Sailing School has eight locations and has taught over 130,000 students how to sail.

Jr., on behalf of her boss, by going in the back door after 4 p.m.

With such experiences in her wake, Doris used her position at Offshore to help women discover sailing and gain skills to boost confidence onboard and beyond. In 1990, she founded the National Women’s Sailing Association and introduced You Can Sail Escapes to provide all-women training programs through Offshore Sailing School.


While running the school, expanding the course offerings, opening new campuses and leading nearly 100 flotillas, the Colgates also found time for charitable efforts beyond Doris’ work with women sailors and at-risk girls. As a national sponsor of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, Offshore has run two Leukemia Cup Regattas and four Fantasy Sail events, and has donated more than



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\$140,000 to the national organization. Offshore also donates courses worth \$20,000 at auctions held at various Leukemia Cup regattas, and gives donations and provides sailing opportunities to the American Heart Association and the Wounded Veteran Retreat Program. For these and other outstanding contributions to the sport, this year Steve was

inducted into the National Sailing Hall of Fame.

When taking into account such an impressive — yet incomplete — list, one naturally wonders: What is the secret behind the couple who've succeeded so phenomenally over decades at marriage and business?

"What's the 'it'?" Doris asked.

"She took the course," Steve said. "She recognizes quality."

Kidding aside, it seems there's no easy answer. While Steve favored similarities, Doris acknowledged differences.

"I'm very forceful, you're very reserved," she said to her husband. "We're opposite that way. I'm a Taurus, he's a Cancer."

"She's a perfectionist and I'm looser," Steve replied, adding, "You're the president and CEO."

"He's a founder," Doris countered, adding with a laugh, "and I'm in charge. You're right."



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At sea and in business, Doris and Steve have always been, and remain, side by side.

The midafternoon breeze filled and sailboats skidded past in Newport Harbor. Thoughts turned to ordering more wine and plans for Steve's birthday party.

I had one more question: Are the Colgates slowing down now? The president, CEO and co-owner didn't miss a beat.

"Who, me?" Doris said, smiling. "Not on the business."

"But no more races," added the founder, chairman and co-owner. "We'll cruise in January in the BVI with friends aboard a cat from The Moorings."

And that, for the couple who started off more than 50 years ago living in a one-room apartment at 251 E. 51st Street, teaching students aboard a yawl with help from mimeographed sheets of paper, sounded like a lovely busman's holiday indeed — and perfectly in line with the Colgate DNA.

CW editor-at-large Elaine Lembo covers chartering and is the seminar manager for the International Boatbuilders' Exhibition and Conference (IBEX).