



# Sails pitch

Expecting a baby in May, current NSW and ACT Female Sailor of the Year Nina Curtis aims to quickly return to competitive SailGP racing.

Story by Rosamund Burton

In 2021, Nina Curtis became the first female athlete to win a Sail GP event when the Australian team won in Cadiz. Sail GP announced a Women's Pathway program for Season 2, which ran from April 2021 to March 2022, stating that the teams must have a female at each event. Great Britain ran multiple female athletes through their team, but Australia chose to have just one, and having proved herself at a selection camp, that honour fell to Nina.

"It was such a cool experience for me," the 34-year-old says, "it was a really brilliant immersive learning."

The Australian team went on to win in Sydney in December 2021, before winning the Sail GP season at the final event in San Francisco in early 2022.

"To be the first female athlete to ever win the SailGP overall was incredible."

Nina occupied the sixth sailor position, responsible for making sure there are no collisions, no rules incidents and that the boat sails within the course boundaries. Given the speed of these 50-foot foiling catamarans it is a crucial role.

"There are a few specialists who have done America's Cup campaigns and sailed boats of this size and foiling

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level... and then there's the rest of us humans," says Nina. "The boats are so fast and so technologically advanced and they are incredibly dangerous. It requires a skill set that I, and I would say every other female in sailing, haven't been exposed to, so we're playing catch up."

For Season 3 (May 2022 to May 2023) she is one of three women selected for the Australian Team, alongside Tash Bryant (who like Nina came through the Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club youth training program) and Lucy Copeland, who sailed Nacra 17s. Only one of them is on the boat when racing and always as the sixth sailor. But they are being trained for other positions – Tash Bryant to helm and Lucy Copeland for flight control, which is the control of the foil angle that determines how high out of the water the boat flies. Nina is being trained in wing trim.

"It's really fascinating the level of technology/software and programming that goes into how this wing operates. It's half coding and half what the trimmer is doing. Honestly, I could not have ever dreamed of being able to sail boats like this. It's an absolute dream

come true."

Nina, who won 2022 NSW & ACT Female Sailor of the Year, was on the boat for the Sail GP events in Chicago last June, in Copenhagen in August and Saint Tropez in September. She is expecting her first child in May, so will not be on the boat for the remaining three events of Season 3 to be held in Sydney, Auckland and San Francisco.

"The goal is to be back in the boat by Season 4, the first event of which is in Chicago in mid-June." Nina says the team have been incredibly supportive, especially as many of them are dads.

"A space needs to be made for female athletes to become mums as well. I feel I've got something to prove here. I've got a real hunger to return at a really strong level, and show that you can have a family as a female athlete in the sport of sailing."

Nina says her mantra has been to always say 'yes'. "Right through my career if an opportunity has come up I've dropped everything, dived in with gusto and figured it out along the way."

So she didn't hesitate to say yes to doing the Southern Ocean leg of the 2017/18 Volvo Ocean race, despite

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limited offshore sailing experience. She had done the 2007 and 2008 Sydney to Hobart races and some other East Coast races.

That year the Volvo Ocean race, wanting to include more females, stipulated that boats could either sail with seven males, or select to take one or two extra females. A boat could also have a 50:50 crew of five men, five women.

Nina was given the opportunity to sail on Team Brunel because a female trimmer, Annie Lush, was injured on the previous leg. The offer to Nina was as a trimmer for that leg only, but she so impressed the team that she stayed on the boat for remaining legs of the race and the boat finished third overall.

“The Southern Ocean is like another planet,” Nina says. “It’s nothing I’ve ever experienced – the sea state, the freezing temperatures and the relentlessness of the weather. It was extraordinary. I was tested physically and emotionally in every sense of the word, not just as a sailor, but as a human being.”

And the weather conditions were

extremely severe that year. Turn the Tide on Plastic broke its mast, MAPFRE’s mainsail was damaged and Team Sun Hung Kai/Scallywag lost overboard experienced yachtsman, 48-year-old John Fisher, in the horrific gale force conditions.

“Being the most inexperienced person in the whole fleet that absolutely rattled me. I really lost my confidence when I heard the news, and was falling over and unable to concentrate. We were in the same weather as that of the boat which had lost ‘Fish.’” She was fortunate to be guided by an experienced older crew member who told her, for her own safety, she needed to put this information aside, and fully focus on her next job.

Both Nina’s parents, Evelyn Harves and Robert Curtis, have a love of sailing. Nina tells me her father’s mother was a single parent, and unable to afford to buy one, built him a Manly Junior, bending the boards in the shower and sewing the sails. Her maternal grandfather used to strap her mother as a 10-year-old into the cockpit of his yacht and take her out in Southerly busters. Nina was seven

and her brother, Dean, only five, when they started racing a Manly Junior with the Bayview Yacht Racing Association (BYRA).

“I am so grateful to my parents for instilling that it was never about becoming a champion, or making a career in sailing, it was about really loving it. I couldn’t imagine a better time as a kid than being out on the water and having an adventure.”

Growing up at Bilgola Plateau and attending Bilgola Plateau PS and then Barrenjoey High, Nina continued to spend as much time as she could on the water sailing Flying 11s and 29ers. She was selected for the RPAYC’s youth development program at 15. Aged 19, she started competing in the Women’s Match Racing regattas, claiming a world title in 2009 and then silver medal at the 2012 London Olympic Games, trimming on a three-person Elliot 6 Metre.

When match racing was discontinued for the Rio Olympic Games, she threw herself into the mixed gender Nacra 17 catamaran racing and learnt to sail a

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Competing at the London 2012 Olympics; Moth Worlds in 2022; early boating on Pittwater; Sail GP Season Champions 2022; Taking the win on home waters, Sail GP, Sydney event 2022; Rounding Cape Horn in first place in the 2017/18 Volvo Ocean Race with Team Brunel; racing the MJ on Pittwater aged eight; Hobie World Championships (with now husband Pierre Ainscow) in Florida in 2019; at the wheel during the Volvo Ocean Race 2017/18.





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 49er (an Olympic skiff).  
 "I really did a double campaign over those two classes that Olympic cycle, upskilling in fleet racing, dinghy sailing, trapezing and multi-hulls."

Nina's brother Dean is a rigger, and worked on the 2017 America's Cup campaign in Bermuda. Nina was staying with him and doing some commentary work on the America's Cup racing when she met Pierre Ainscrow, an English physiotherapist working for the Swedish team. They chased each other around the world - he visited her in Washington DC, where she worked as a personal trainer between sailing events, he came to Australia, and Nina went to England, before she signed up for the Volvo Ocean race.

"He deserved a medal for keeping our relationship together in those early days. We didn't see each other much, but he came to all the stopovers, and I really knew he was the right person for me."

After the Volvo Ocean race, Pierre and Nina (who married in January 2022) decided to settle in Avalon. Eighteen months later COVID hit, and there were no sailing opportunities.

Nina had completed a degree in human movement studies before she started to train for the 2012 Olympics, so with her personal training skills and Pierre's physiotherapy background, they decided to start their own fitness business. Initially they did group training in the park, before they acquired their own studio gym. Now they have two studios and a team of 10 people - massage therapists, personal trainers and naturopaths.

"It's the humming health hub we dreamed that it could be."

Pierre is not a sailor, but Nina is teaching him, and he represented Australia with her several years ago at the Hobie 16 World Championships.

"He's not as passionate as I am about it, but he does love it," she says.

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