

Ken Legler

May 31, 2024



MEDFORD, MA (June 3, 2024) – Ken Legler, head coach of the nationally-renowned Tufts University sailing program for 43 years and a member of the Intercollegiate Sailing Association (ICSA) Hall of Fame, passed away peacefully with his family by his side late Friday night (May 31) following a courageous battle with cancer. He was 70.

Legler had retired from Tufts last June following a career that reached far and wide in the sport. After taking over the storied Jumbo program in 1980, he guided Tufts teams to a combined 20 national championships across all of the college sailing disciplines. He coached three College Sailor of the Year honorees and 86 All-Americans, including four who become Olympians and many who won world sailing championships.

"This is such a significant loss for the entire Tufts Athletics family," said Tufts Director of Athletics John Morris. "Ken was so dedicated to all the sailors he coached and mentored, and for over 40 years, he poured his heart and soul into giving our Jumbo sailors the best possible student-athlete experience. His joy for sailing was infectious, and his contributions to the sailing community and to Tufts University are immeasurable. Ken was a wonderful colleague and friend who will be dearly missed, but his spirit and legacy will be woven into the fabric of Tufts Sailing forever."

A 2019 inductee into the ICSA Hall of Fame, his significance in the sport was underlined not only by his teams' success, but also by the sportsmanship they displayed while winning.

At the time of his retirement, Fran Charles, a 1980 Tufts graduate who was a sailing team member and went on to a coaching career that included 31 years at MIT, said, "Ken is a legend. He's worked tirelessly for Tufts, but also it's really important to say that the Tufts sailors always reflected his great ethical values on the race course. Even though they were fiercely competitive, the Tufts kids were also the nicest competitors on the race course."

Legler had twice beaten throat cancer over the last 20 years, but it had recently recurred. In an email exchange on May 13, he still displayed the same spirit for life that he exhibited all those years at Tufts. He was planning on running the recent College National Championships on the Charles River in late May. And he was still planning on inducting Tufts sailor Betsy Alison into the Tufts University Athletics Hall of Fame on June 7. In true Ken Legler style, he wrote, "I'm optimistic I can still make it June 7, but there is no way I can drive and I'll need a helluva microphone/amp for my voice."

In May 2023 more than 350 alumni and friends gathered for "Ken's Epic Retirement Tribute" on the Tufts campus. Among the gifts he received, it was announced that the trophy for the New England Women's Team Racing Championship was named in his honor. He was also gifted a trip to Hawaii from the sailing alumni, which he and his partner Lisa Goldsmith recently enjoyed.

At the University of Rhode Island, Legler was an All-American who won dingy and team racing national championships. During his undergraduate years he took over as coach and was running the team. Upon graduation, he was already prepared for a coaching career. Following a stint as an assistant coach at Navy, Legler earned his first head coach job at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (Kings Point). He immediately guided the Mariners to the national championship in 1979. Legler then took over for fellow legend Joe Duplin as the Tufts coach and carried on what became known as the Tufts Sailing mystique.

Competing against larger schools such as the U.S. Naval Academy and other traditional Division I teams, Tufts as a comparably small school become a national power. After the Jumbos had won the 1980 Co-ed National Championship in Duplin's final season, Legler in his first year as coach led the team to a second straight national championship with a new group of starters in 1981. Legler's Tufts teams would go on to win two more co-ed titles along with eight women's, five team racing, two men's single-handed, one women's single-handed and one match racing national championship.

"Ken was a fierce competitor sailing for URI," said Bruce Burton, a 1977 Tufts graduate, a member of the sailing team and co-founder of the Friends of Tufts Sailing. "Tufts and URI had tied for the 1977 Dinghy National Championship, and URI won on a tie-breaker. So many Jumbos of the 1970s knew that our team would be in great hands with Ken at the helm of our program, and it was for decades and decades. Intercollegiate sailing has lost one of the most dedicated, talented and influential coaches in its history."

Beyond his ability to teach the Jumbos how to win on the water, he also shared his pure joy for sailing with the team. Throughout his career he coached upwards of 1,000 sailors at Tufts. The number of regattas that the team competed at each year was the most of any college team in the world. Though cutting the number of competitions would have lessened the administrative work that the busy schedule created for him, Legler strongly thought doing so would not have been in the team's best interest.

"We could have had a smaller team and offered it to less people," Legler said, "but that's not an improvement in my mind. Why give this benefit to only half as many people? To me that would be a terrible thing."

In 2013, Legler helped the University design and open the Bacow Sailing Pavilion on Upper Mystic Lake in Medford. The three-floor facility greatly aided the team's performance, providing the ability to store and repair the team's fleet along with space for the team to meet after practice which had never existed previously.

It was always about the students for Legler. In 2006 when he was being treated for stage four throat cancer, he showed up at Tufts' annual Captains Luncheon while he was in the middle of radiation treatment. It was a display of courage and support for his athletes that did not go unnoticed by many in attendance. Through a second bout with cancer, which impaired his speech and ability to eat, and then a mild stroke in 2020, Legler persevered and returned to coaching as soon as possible.

"Ken instilled a true love of the sport in all of us," said Senet Bischoff, the 1996 national College Sailor of the Year and co-founder of the Friends of Tufts Sailing. "As a result, we never prioritized individual achievement over making the team better. And so many Jumbos continue to compete at the highest levels of the sport years and years after graduating."

Legler's achievements in coaching extended far beyond the Tufts campus. In the early 1980s he coached the US Sailing team part-time, and also coached at a number of international events such as the 1981 (France) and 1984 (New Zealand) 470 class world championships and the 1983 Pan Am Games (Venezuela). He was also an award-winning race officer and was active as a judge, umpire, photographer and race commentator. Legler also found the time to volunteer as a sighted guide for blind sailors, and competed at Blind Sailing World Championships in Italy (2002) and Newport (2006). At his Hall of Fame induction, the ICSA honored him with the Campbell Family Award for Lifetime Service.

"When they do a Mount Rushmore for college sailors, Ken Legler will be there," Josh Adams, a three-time All-American for the Jumbos and later director of US Olympic Sailing, said in a *Sailing World* tribute article. "As a coach, he's more philosopher than technician. What he's good at is getting sailors on the water to learn from being on the water. When you graduate Tufts and look back, you realize that all those practice days and all those practice races were led by an exceptional PRO. He's made a difference in race management in America."

In *Sailing World's* appreciation piece upon Legler's retirement, Kimball Livingston wrote, "Ken Legler has inhabited the sailing world, pumped it through his veins and made a difference."

So many Jumbos benefited from that commitment.

"No one loved sailing more than Ken and he spent his life spreading that love and appreciation of the sport far and wide, not only as the Tufts sailing coach, but in his tireless work with adaptive sailing," said Lisa Keith, a 2001 Tufts graduate and team member. "Ken was a champion of all sailors, and at Tufts, he fought to have a large and inclusive team, often marveling at having the largest roster of sailors who attended the most events on any given weekend. Ramsay Key, class of 1998, summed up Ken's legacy best, stating, "His best contribution may have been fostering an environment that created a sisterhood and brotherhood that spans generations. Very unique in sailing and in any sport for that matter." Thank you Ken from all of us for all of the passion and life lessons you bestowed upon each and every one of us Jumbo sailors. Hope to see you again on the water someday."

--JUMBOS--

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