

By Richard Shrubb

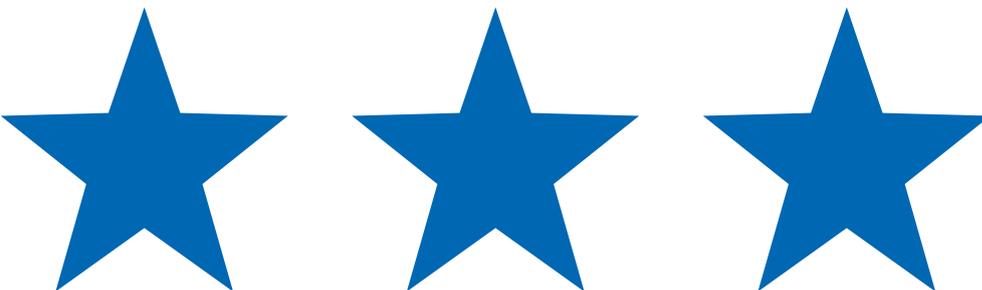
# TRUE GRIT

Dogged determination is the key to Paul Callahan's success in overcoming injury, saving a nonprofit organization and representing the U.S. at his second Paralympics

**P**aralympians overcome great adversity to compete, but few have dedicated their lives to helping other people with disabilities like U.S. sailor Paul Callahan.

Every sailor remembers a particular day on the water that sums up their love of sailing. For Paul Callahan, his moment was off Nantucket, Massachusetts, with a crew of disabled children on the former America's Cup 12-Meter *Easterner*. A high-functioning autistic boy was watching him steer using his special gear, luffing the jib and dipping the windward rail alternately to maintain a straight course.

"The child came and put his hands on mine and before too long I rested my arms and he was in full control," Callahan said. "He was facing aft but steering a straight course just by the feel of the wind."





Paralympian Paul Callahan steers his 12-Meter *Easterner* with a special system. The former America's Cup boat is optimized for sailors with disabilities to train on through the Sail to Prevail organization, previous page. Callahan concentrates on a mark rounding at the Miami Rolex OCR. Walter Cooper photo

Callahan was impressed and put the boy on the main wheel. A low-functioning autistic child joined him. “This time facing forward, the high-functioning child taught the low-functioning child what to do and between them they steered a straighter course than almost anyone of any standard I have seen.”

Where many people would gear their lives toward the Paralympic campaign, 55-year-old Callahan’s campaign in the three-person Sonar is part of a greater quest in life: to inspire people with disabilities to overcome adversity. He does this through the nonprofit organization Sail to Prevail out of Newport, Rhode Island, which will soon expand and set up offices in Florida.

In a letter, severely disabled 27-year-old Sean Feighan wrote of his experience at Sail to Prevail, “I experienced a connection with the world around me in a whole new way. I felt the power of the wind moving the boat and myself through the water with an ease that unified my senses.”

Paul’s wife Alisa explains how people automatically stigmatize Callahan just because he is quadriplegic. “People who don’t know

him look at us with pity as I feed him, not realizing I am the lucky one,” she said.

The couple met while Alisa, a finance professor at Edison State College in Florida, was volunteering at Sail to Prevail. They married in 2001 and have 9-year-old twins.

Callahan’s life changed course while he was a student at Harvard University in 1981. He slipped on a wet floor and broke his neck, leaving him a quadriplegic. Four years of recovery later he completed his course work and went into a career in real estate development before returning to Harvard—this time Harvard Business School—for an MBA and went on to a career at Goldman Sachs. He caught the sailing bug when he went for a sail while on vacation in Newport.

Dean Gestal, owner of carbon-fiber cycling components company Reynolds Cycling and board member of Callahan’s nonprofit Sail to Prevail, said Callahan was instrumental in helping set the course for the organization.

“Paul got involved in the organization, then called Shake-a-Leg, to help it survive. In order to keep it going we had to make big



changes to the board and narrowed what it did, in turn broadening its reach.” At the time Shake-a-Leg was focused on the rehabilitation of spinal injury survivors, but when Callahan took over, they opened it up to people of all disabilities and took the rehab side away, purely focusing on taking people sailing. Since then, the organization has taken more than 10,000 people out to sea.

Callahan says he quit his job at Goldman Sachs in 2000. “I enjoyed the team work and intelligence of my colleagues there, but wanted more from life,” he said. From being a high flyer at an international bank, he took the leap into helping other disabled people enjoy sailing.

He competed at the Sydney Paralympics that year. “I found that because I couldn’t move around the boat, we did well on the starboard tack with my weight to windward but fell back in the field with my weight to leeward.”

After Sydney, Callahan and garage engineer Keith Berhaus developed a tacking and steering mechanism allowing him to stay on the windward side and steer the boat. Over the years this has been refined, its latest iteration by naval architect Jim Gretscky.

Not being able to grip with his hands, Callahan wears a pair of modified in-line skating gloves that clip to the steering mechanism. In this way he uses the strength of his arms, which have some biceps function but no triceps function, to steer the boat.

The steering system is simply a stock set of bicycle pedals turned upside-down with a frame that was manufactured to fit on top of a base that pivots 170 degrees. When pedals are turned right over left, the boat will turn to the right, and when the pedals are turned left over right, the boat will turn to the left. When Callahan tacks or jibes, the steering moves with him. He can choose to turn in the boat or not as the seat is rotates from one side of the boat to the other.

“The seat slides on a track that is bent to 170 degrees, and is activated by one of my teammates pulling a line and cleating it off when the turn is complete. Gravity is your friend here,” Callahan said.

His next campaign was for Athens but as they competed for qualification in 2003, he developed pressure sores and rather than Paralympic glory won a place in bed for two years. “From that time I well understand the challenges faced by people with mental

health issues,” he said. “Being stuck in bed for that time was one of the hardest battles I have ever had.”

Alisa said her husband has almost boundless positivity.

“In 2008 he told me he wanted to race a 12-Meter in the 2009 World Championship,” she said. “Despite the credit crunch taking place at the time he got the boat and raised \$300,000 to modify it for a disabled crew.”

That boat was *Easterner* and she won a race in the regatta with a crew made up primarily of sailors with disabilities. Throughout the summer, *Easterner* is used for the sail training programs at Sail to Prevail alongside their fleet of Sonars.

The organization has launched a program to train future Paralympic stars to Callahan’s world-class level. Sail to Prevail clients pay only what they can afford. Although the organization’s operating costs are about \$1 million a year, only 20% of families end up paying the full price to go sailing through the organization.

Gestal suggests that Callahan has always faced down his disability by helping others.

“In focusing his energies outward he somehow loses his disability,” Gestal said. “We first met on a pilgrimage to Lourdes in around 2000, and he spent his entire time helping others there. He sees himself as a 20-year-old undergraduate and All-American basketball player, not a quadriplegic sitting in a wheelchair.”

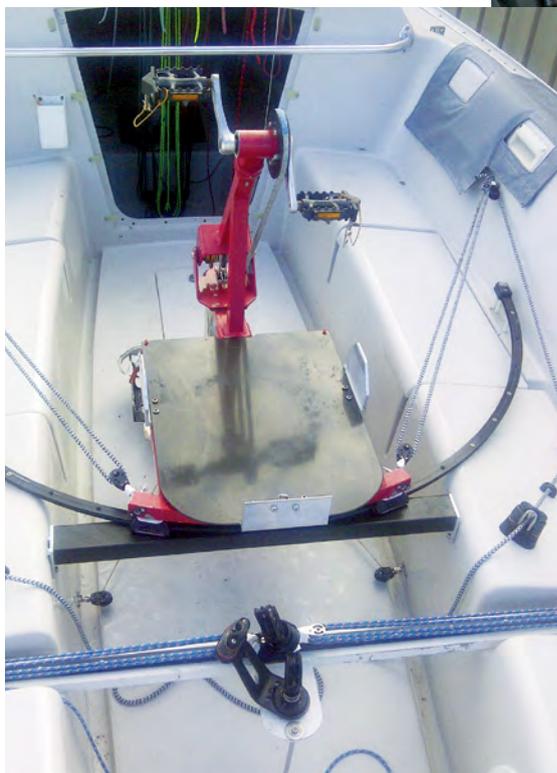
Of course, Callahan is no stranger to day-to-day difficulties. Just getting ready for work is a 90-minute process, Alisa said.

“He has endless patience and refers to such difficulties simply as ‘quad things’—difficulties only he faces and not something an able bodied man would face,” she said. “Paul was stuck in the groove of an elevator for 45 minutes once so spent his time waiting for rescue working through his e-mails with the door trying to close on his wheelchair and opening again.”

Callahan’s Paralympic crewmember, Tom Brown, is also on his third Games. Brown lost his lower leg to bone cancer as a child,



**Callahan’s Sonar steering system has been designed for his specific limitations.**



**Callahan’s special steering system on his Sonar includes a set of bike pedals he uses to steer and a rotating seat.**

and spent two years in chemotherapy while other kids were playing baseball and going through high school. Brown found sailing as an escape and he was one of the favorites to make it to the Sydney Games in 2000. Brown said he was ready to settle down and focus on family life and teach sailboat racing at Maine Maritime Academy when Callahan approached him about the 2012 Paralympic campaign.

Joining Callahan and Brown is Bradley Johnston, from Pompano Beach, Florida. Johnston’s game changer also happened in college when he lost both legs in a car crash. A year later he started year at the University of Florida and went onto a career as a lawyer. He’s on his third Paralympics—the first he did as part of the U.S. Volleyball Team, but is on his second sailing Paralympics. “I enjoyed the physicality of volleyball but sailing is a cerebral challenge as well,” he said.

Callahan, Brown and Johnston weren’t the favorites going into the final days of Paralympic selection for this year’s Games, but came through at the last. Although they will face a tough challenge to finish in the medals in August, the positivity and fierce competition in their blood might make it happen. With the huge obstacles Callahan and his team have faced individually and achievements that would confound all but a few in this world, nothing is impossible for this team. 