

Sailing Towards Olympic Dreams

By Richard Shrubb

In early May, Debbie Capronel began possibly the most important sailing regatta of her life in Weymouth, England. If her team came first among the four American competitors in the regatta, she would get into the Olympics. If they lost? Ever-riding coach worked for over the last four years would be for nothing.



Three of the top six crews in the world, racing Elloré & meier team racing boats, are in Team USA. The competition was going so close, as only the top 30 teams in the world get to race at the Weymouth games. Standing on the deck in the drizzle before the race, Capronel of Bayport was cautiously confident. "We're well prepared," she said. "We should qualify."



There are 17 sailors racing for the United States in the Olympics this year (there's also a 23 member support team - like a swim looking general above the water while there's a lot going on, unseen). Dean Broune, Chair of the U.S. Olympic Sailing Committee, focuses on the overall quality of the team, advising, "The team is at least as strong as we were in the China Olympics. This is about self-coaching, however, and people we don't expect to do well may do well. People we expect to do well may not."

If you're going to be an Olympic star, you have to start at an early age. Amanda Clark of Shelter Island is about to compete in her second Olympics in the women's 470 class. She started sailing with her family on their Herreshoff 12.5 around the Long Island Sound, where Clark caught the sailing bug. "My sister was learning to sail Optimists when I was six, and I wanted to learn like her," she shares.



Erik Speerk, from Huntington, also got his feet wet at the age of six, and would meet Clark on the national racing circuit when he was 10. "Amanda was a couple of years older than me when we met on the Cow Harbor Optimist Sailing Team. I looked up to her," recounts Speerk, who loves tight competition. "I've been racing them for eight years and I'm still on a steep learning curve. When it gets windy it never gets boring - the competition is so tight, it is down to quick thinking and tactical decision making."

Clark's 470 vessel is smaller and lighter than the 49er but will still sail great speeds, and Capronel is racing the Elliott & Meier match racing boat. She describes it as being "like speedo." It accelerates well. With the gymanzee kite, it is perfect for match racing.

Much of a world-be Olympic sailor's life is spent far from home. All three experience a constant rush to and from international tournaments, and onshore physical fitness and tactical training. Clark says, "The time I have at home is very special. I enjoy the peacefulness of life at home with my husband - when I get it."





Of the three Long Island teammates, only Storck is competing for his first Olympics. He was selected at the World Championships in Perth last year when, midway through the regatta, the other boat didn't make the cut. He enthuses, "Getting on the team took some time to sink in!"

As the Olympics are touted as celebrating the youth of the world, Long Island's elite sailors are happy to give advice to those who wish to follow in their Sperry Topsider footwear and compete with the best.

Capozzi says, "You've got to commit to it. 80% commitment won't do - only 100%. If you do, and you're very good, you've got a pretty good shot!"

When not competing, Capozzi describes her routine as, "In the morning you're in the gym for 90 minutes. You then get changed, and after a pre-training meeting, you're on the water for three-and-a-half to five hours, and then a debrief. You do this for five days on, one day off for three weeks a month, unless you're in a competition."

When you see sailors standing on the side of the boat with a wire attached to the top of the mast, holding them to the boat, they are on a so-called trapeze. This holds the boat flat to the water in a good wind, and makes it go faster. Storck says that with his relatively slim build, he needs to work hard on his upper body bulk for extra weight out on the trapeze. "Muscle is heavier than fat, so I have to work especially hard on building up my chest muscles to get more weight further out the boat when on the wire."

Clark cautions that, "it is hard work, but if you love it, see what you can achieve and enjoy the life lessons. I've learned lessons that will never leave me!"

You must love sailing to do it day in, day out as a career. Storck's advice to keen young sailors? "You've got to enjoy it. I've sailed against so many talented sailors who burned out because they lost their love of the sport. Enjoy it - and the rest will come." ⚓

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Photos courtesy of Richard Shrubbs, Team USA Sailing, and Mick Anderson. Individual photos courtesy of Walter Cooper and Mick Anderson.

