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An Olympic Dream, Claimed by 2 Women



Rick Roberts

Farrah Hall, right, was stripped of a possible Olympic spot when a race jury's ruling helped Nancy Rios win the windsurfing trials. Hall is challenging the ruling.

By CHRIS MUSELER
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Two of the top Americans in women's windsurfing are packing their wetsuits this week and traveling to New Zealand to compete in the RS:X world championships as part of their training for the Beijing Summer Olympic Games.

This is not unusual for athletes preparing for the Games, but only one of the women, Nancy Rios, is slated to represent the United States next summer. The other woman, Farrah Hall, is disputing the results of the team-selection trials in October. She contends that the results of an arbitration hearing in the winter will have her, not Rios, walking in the opening ceremony.

To complicate matters, the women's windsurfing class is the only Olympic slot in sailing that the United States has yet to qualify for. There are 15 countries vying for seven open slots in the Games. If Hall's case fails, she could be competing to earn Rios a spot in the Games.

The disputed incident at the windsurfing trials involved a collision at the start of the hotly contested last race. Rios and Hall were close on points and had begun racing when another competitor, who did not have the right of way, crashed into them.

Hall, 26, faltered but was able to resume sailing and went on to win the race. Rios, 19, was knocked into the water and her sail sustained an 8- to 10-inch tear. She had one of her worst finishes.

After the race, a tearful Rios filed a request for redress, asking a race jury to award her a better finish. The jury found in her favor, giving her fewer points than Hall and first place over all.

"I was in the shower completely excited after realizing something I had been working so hard for," Hall said. "They pulled me out of the shower and told me I needed to hear a decision from the jury."

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Shortly after the trials, Hall filed a grievance with US Sailing, the national governing body of the sport. It was dismissed last week. Now she is awaiting the results of an arbitration hearing.

Hall said in a telephone interview Monday that she had been training full time. She returned last week after three weeks with the Polish Olympic team, considered the best in the world. She leaves Saturday for the world championships, which begin Jan. 10.

Rios said she had tried to put the hearing out of her mind. "I have just been focusing on the worlds and trying to continue my training," she said in a phone interview from Miami on Sunday.

"We believe that our process was correct," said Jim Capron, president of US Sailing, in a telephone interview Sunday about Hall's case. "If we made a mistake, though, we need to fix it."

Hall said that because she was not a part of the jury hearing at the trials, she was unfairly removed from the team. She also contends that Rios should not have been awarded redress.

Hall also plans on filing a complaint with the [United States Olympic Committee](#), saying that the trials were unfair because they did not allow for appeals of jury decisions. The Olympic Committee's bylaws allow for the elimination of appeals in a selection process, but Hall's position is that the organizers of the trials did not receive approval to change the rules.

It is not unusual for athletes to contest positions on Olympic teams.

"Often these are two very deserving people for only one spot on a team," said John Ruger, the U.S.O.C.'s athlete ombudsman, in a telephone interview Monday from Colorado. "When an athlete challenges for one of those positions it becomes a bit of a zero-sum game. It quickly becomes athlete against athlete."

Ruger said that athletes who have a dispute were encouraged to first request a hearing before their sport's national governing body. They can also file a complaint with the U.S.O.C. and seek independent arbitration.

"Athletes don't have to exhaust each step before they move on to the next," Ruger said. "But we encourage athletes to take it one step at a time because conflicts resolved at the N.G.B. level are far less stressful than at the U.S.O.C. level."

The majority of athletes coming to Ruger have questions about a team-selection process, doping cases or their rights regarding endorsements.

Ruger became the U.S.O.C.'s first athlete ombudsman in 1999. He said he received about 500 inquiries a year, and so far there have been three arbitrations contesting spots for the 2008 Games. Besides Hall's case, there is a pending hearing in rowing and one that was dismissed for tae kwon do.

In her case, Hall said she contacted Ruger after consulting with John Bertrand of Annapolis, Md., a top professional sailor who went through his own arbitration before winning a silver medal in the 1984 Games.

"She is a very inspiring person," Bertrand said in a telephone interview Sunday. "We all talk about the lonely road, but she is really leading a nomadic life."

When he heard about the jury's decision at the trials, Bertrand said he called a friend and put together a legal team to help Hall navigate the grievance process.

Hall said her fight was nothing personal against Rios.

"I'm not out to punish Nancy at the worlds," Hall said.

She added that no matter what happened, she would continue her campaign.

When asked about the possibility of her helping Rios qualify for the Games, Hall was

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unmoved. "I haven't thought of that," she said. "I know in my heart of hearts it will be me going to the Olympics."

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