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Rios secures spot, but who will race?

Wed Jan 23, 2008 By Dave Ungrady / Universal Sports

USA Sailing felt a breeze of relief Sunday at the RS:X world championships when American Nancy Rios finished in 60th place. On the surface, that result does not seem overly impressive.

But factor in the the goals of the U.S. sailboarders at the world championships in New Zealand, and Rios' final position prompts a more positive reaction.

Thirteen countries at the championships, including the United States, competed for the final seven qualifying spots at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. When Rios finished sixth among those 13 countries, securing a U.S. spot for the games, she helped maintain a cherished streak for U.S. sailing, which has qualified an athlete in every Olympic discipline since sailing has been featured at the games.

Rios won the U.S. Olympic trials in sailing in October but was unsure about her Olympic fate until Sunday.

"There was a lot of pressure because you don't know who the other sailors are," said Rios, 19. "You're just going for a really good race, but you're distracted. The entire time you're focusing on the countries you have to beat. From the first day I was counting countries. I should not have done that."

Rios and teammate Farrah Hall, who finished second to Rios at the trials, battled closely throughout the 11-race regatta. After six races, Hall led the U.S. women in sixth place among athletes contending for the final positions and was 60th overall. Rios was two spots back in eighth place and 62nd overall.

But light winds over the next few races favored Rios' style over Hall's and helped Rios move ahead of her U.S. teammate by as many as 21 points. A strong final race by Hall reduced the final deficit to nine points.

Hall was happy with her effort in New Zealand. "I made some breakthroughs with my start, they're 100 percent better now," Hall said by phone. "I even won a few starts. I was making intelligent decisions and kept a clear head. My racing was probably never better."

The battle for the top U.S. spot is not over for Rios and Hall. Hall initially won the Olympic trials in October but lost the title on appeal from Rios after she nearly fell into the water and damaged her sail when another racer crashed into Hall and Rios during the 16th and final race.

Based in part on her second place average in previous trials races, a race jury awarded Rios a second-place finish in the final race although she crossed the line in fourth place. Rios was awarded the trials title by one point and, for now, is the U.S. qualifier for Beijing.

The decision prompted Hall to file an appeal to the American Arbitration Association, which is expected to hear the case by the end of February.

The appeal affected both sailors in New Zealand. "It was in the back of my head the entire time," said Rios. "I had to deal with the fact that if I qualify for Beijing, I come home to arbitration and my position could be taken away. But I feel really confident I will win. I don't feel I did anything wrong."

Hall said her primary focus at the world championships was qualifying the United States for Beijing, and the pending hearing absorbed some mental energy. "It is always in the back of my mind a little bit," she said. "But I can't say it affected my performance at the worlds. It's been a little bit of a distraction."

Hall understands why Rios appealed the race finish at the trials. "We were both sailing very hard and she wanted to save her regatta," Hall said. "We're not hissing and spitting at each other. We're not focused on destroying each other."

"There's no animosity," Rios said. "She feels like something's been done wrong and she has an opportunity to fight for

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