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Farrah Hall tilts her sail for London

By Elaine K. Howley

As Farrah Hall, 30, of Annapolis, Md., pursues an Olympic berth in the RS:X women's windsurfing she faces a distinct disadvantage: She's American.

That might not be the typical storyline for an athlete hailing from the land of opportunity, but in the sport of windsurfing, the rest of the world is well ahead of the U.S. in terms of international rankings and youth development leagues. Many Americans do not even know that windsurfing is an Olympic sport, which it has been since 1984, grouped under sailing's umbrella of events. While the U.S. may lag behind other countries in producing top sailors, Hall is driving hard toward the 2012 Games in London.

Hall came to the sport of windsurfing, also called boardsailing, while attending St. Mary's College of Maryland -- relatively late compared with her competitors overseas, she said. She had tried windsurfing a few times in high school, but after a summer on Martha's Vineyard, Mass., she got serious about the sport. She founded a windsurfing club, and a visit from four-time Olympic windsurfer Mike Gebhardt further fueled her passion for international competition. "He came to my college to speak, fresh from the 2000 Sydney Games, and inspired me to start racing the Olympic-class sailboard, the RS:X," Hall said.

The RS:X is a highly maneuverable and versatile vehicle that sailors can manage in winds from 3 to 30 knots, making competition possible in virtually all conditions. It is also easily transported on commercial airlines, which makes it easier for athletes to travel to far-flung regatta venues.

With financial support from Compass Marketing in Annapolis, Hall is now a full-time sailor. In addition to spending as much training time on the water as she can, Hall runs, cycles, swims and lifts weights to cross-train for strength and endurance. "I have to balance the physical training with the sailing, because it's very easy to overtrain; I have to be really careful with recovery," she said, noting that the extensive travel involved in getting to competition sites adds another wrinkle of stress, exhaustion and jet lag.

To prepare mentally, Hall focuses largely on relaxation techniques. "I'm pretty intense by nature. Because of my penchant for hard training, I monitor my mental state for fatigue -- it's easy to become brain-dead and start sailing poorly." She also visualizes her races to relaxing music to help keep calm and focused on specific goals for each event.

Hall speaks from experience in preparing for Olympic trial races. As one of the top U.S. windsurfers leading up to the 2008 Olympics, Hall actually qualified for the Games in the final selection regatta in Long Beach, Calif., in October 2007. But that victory was short-lived. Before Hall had even finished showering, officials from U.S. Sailing informed her that the outcome had been protested and the ending rewritten. A crash on the course during the last run of the regatta had left Nancy Rios of Coconut Grove, Fla., with a torn sail. Hall's better finish had vaulted her ahead of Rios for the Olympic berth, but because of the crash and tear to her sail, Rios successfully protested the result and won the trip to China instead of Hall.

Hall was devastated, but she didn't take the loss lying down; she fought it through formal litigation, and in so

doing forced U.S. Sailing to change the way it handles protests from athletes to comply with U.S. Olympic Committee rules. U.S. Sailing had not given Hall an opportunity to protest Rios' claims, but rather unilaterally decided to overturn the on-the-water results at Rios' request, which was in violation of USOC guidelines. U.S. Sailing subsequently changed the way it hears protest cases.

Three years later, Hall called the conflict and resolution -- which was in her favor but still too late for her to participate in the 2008 Games -- "a blessing in a way. It forced me to grow in self-confidence and stand up for what was right." In hindsight, she said, "I don't really regret missing out on an Olympic Games because at the time, no American boardsailor was ready to compete." All of the American contenders "were good on a national level, but we were beginners on an international level," Hall said. Rios finished 26th out of 27 sailors in the 2008 Games.

Hall's spirit and fight just may take her all the way to London next summer. She is currently the top-ranked women's windsurfer in the U.S. She will learn in December at the world championships in Perth, Australia, whether she will earn a berth for the U.S. and herself for the 2012 Games. The U.S. does not automatically qualify for a place in Olympic windsurfing, so Hall must finish in the top 28 boats in Perth against the best in the world to earn the U.S. an Olympic berth. In addition, to ensure that she will represent the U.S., she must also maintain her status as the top U.S. windsurfer.

Despite the few hoops left to jump through, Hall is confident that she'll be competing in England next summer. "Barring serious injury, I fully expect to qualify for the Olympics. I'm currently head and shoulders above my American competition and confident about my chances to qualify the United States for the Olympics at the world championships."

Hall finished in 24th place in last week's Weymouth and Portland International Regatta, an Olympic test event held at the 2012 sailing venue in Weymouth, U.K. Her placement indicates she likely will qualify for the Games, pending the outcome of the world championships in Perth, Australia, Dec. 3-18.
