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## Issaquah paralympian makes U.S. Sailing Team for 2012 games

March 9, 2009

By Jeff Richards



Bob Jones, of Issaquah, sails with teammate Sarah Skeels at the Last Quadrinnium Training Camp on Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island in April 2006. Contributed

The whistle of wind blows past your ear, signaling the moment to ease the sheets on the sails. The smell of grass means the wind is coming from the direction of land.

Suddenly, the blast of wind eases from your nose to your cheek, and your gaze, set on the upcoming current, notices the slight shift in direction.

When being propelled by nature onboard a sailboat, one must use nearly all of the five senses, and for Issaquah's Bob Jones, 58, that is one of the driving forces for his love of sailing, something he's had since the beginning.

"The first time I stepped on the boat, I got the bug," he said. "It just felt natural.

"You're out sailing on the ocean, and it's not long before you run into a pod of killer whales. It's pretty magical actually."

After more than 30 years of sailing, and almost 20 years in competitive racing, Jones has reached the peak of his sport after qualifying for the 2009 U.S. Sailing Team at the Rolex Miami Olympic Classes Regatta Jan. 30 on Biscayne Bay, south of Miami.

The top three finishers among U.S. sailors at an Olympic-class regatta are invited to the U.S. team, and after several fourth-place finishes, Jones placed second in the Miami Regatta and fourth overall.

Finding funds is next

Now, he is faced with the task of competing for the next four years in international competition with the ultimate goal of making the Paralympics in 2012. But to do so, he will first need to raise funds.

“You earn the right and the prestige to compete on the U.S. Sailing Team, but to compete for four years is quite expensive,” he said.

In order to pay for travel costs for himself and a crew, and two sailboats along with other gear and expenses, Jones said he would need to raise approximately \$400,000 to \$450,000 for a two-person team.

Leading up to the Paralympics, he will have to keep his competitive edge before the U.S. Team Trials, which will decide who represents the U.S. in London.

“You have to hone your skills, get as fast and as competitive a team as you can, and it all boils down to one race,” he said. “I’m currently ranked second in my class, so I have to get better if I want to boat first.”

Jones competes in the SKUD-18 class of sailing, a two-person boat for athletes with disabilities. He has been a paraplegic since a car crash Dec. 5, 1981, took away the use of his legs.

Living in Issaquah at the time, he was driving home from a tennis tournament when he fell asleep at the wheel and drove over a 30-foot drop. The car landed upside down.

His vertebrae smashed into his spinal cord, and doctors gave him a 5-percent chance of walking again.

The accident came 90 days after he’d bought his first sailboat, a San Juan 28, and Jones said even in the hospital, faced with the prospect of never walking again, he thought about getting out on the open sea with his boat.

“There wasn’t any doubt that I would continue sailing when I got out of the hospital,” he said. “I hadn’t even left the hospital before I went on my first sail.”

Before his official discharge from the hospital, friends came by and took him on a trip aboard the San Juan 28. An active athlete before the accident, sailing would be the only sport Jones would continue afterward.

A level playing field

Being able to modify a sailboat to adapt to disabilities helps the disabled compete with the able-bodied, said Ken Kelly, a fellow sailor and longtime friend.

Kelly, also a paraplegic, has competed with Jones at several regattas.

“It’s a different sport, because you’re able to compete against nondisabled people,” he said. “The sailboat levels the playing field.”

Kelly participated in the 1996 and 2004 Paralympics representing Canada. In 2005, Jones and he sailed together for a Canadian national championship, which they won, competing against able-bodied people.

The Paralympics began in 1960 and are held alongside the Olympics every four years. As a member of the U.S. Sailing Team, made up of both disabled and able-bodied people, Jones gains the training and resources afforded to members of the team, but he is not guaranteed a spot on the Paralympics roster.

While anybody may compete at the U.S. Time Trials, held several months before the Paralympics, Jones said he

would need consistent competition at the international level to be ready, including regattas all over the world.

‘Putting in the time’

“If things fall into place for him, he finds the right crew, gets the financing, he should do fine,” Kelly said. “The more time that you put in, the better you will do. It’s just a matter of putting in the time.”

Up next for Jones is the U.S. Sailing training camp. He will officially become a member of the team upon gaining a doctor’s clearance March 15. From there, he must prepare both physically and financially for the close to 40 competitions he plans to enter in the next three years.

“It’s not just about jumping in a boat and sailing hard and fast,” he said. “It would be nice if I could just forget all that and just compete.”

Throughout the years, sailing has been the one way he can express his competitive nature, Jones said.

On a national stage, in London in 2012, would certainly be the largest competitive event of his life. But no matter what happens, he’ll be doing what he loves, riding the fastest current and soaring with the wind on the open sea.

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Written by Jeff Richards · Filed Under [Sports](#), [Sports News](#)

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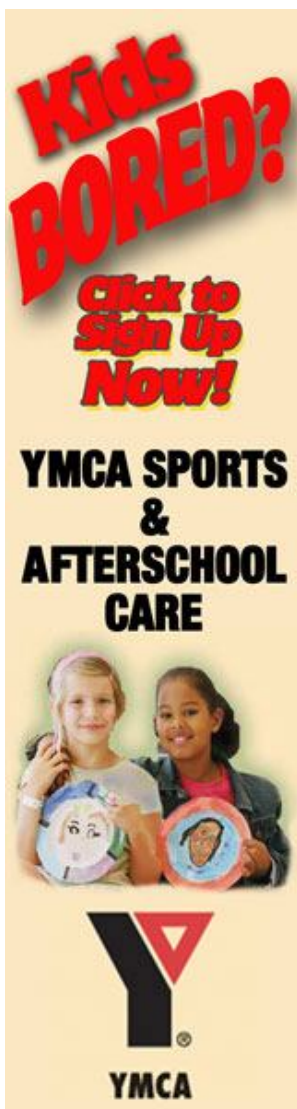
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