



To Sail a Wheelchair on the San Francisco Bay



By Gilbert Wright, MD

THAT'S NOT AS DIFFICULT as you would think. The Bay Area Association of Disabled Sailors (BAADS) has a sailing team in which the skipper and jib trimmer are quadriplegic and paraplegic, respectively. With a crew of three or four, we sail a Sonar Class 23-foot keel boat.

The Sonar is the official boat of Paraplegic Olympic competition that follows the regular Olympics every four years. I am the boson (team manager) and owner of our boat. We are based at the Treasure Island Sailing Club.

Like the smaller and better known Laser, the Sonar was designed by Bruce Kieby. Both boats have similar flat hull designs. Many describe the Sonar as a large Laser with a keel. The keel weighs 2,000 pounds and provides stability and some lift when sailing against the wind. We have the first and only Sonar racer on the bay so we named her "Alpha."

All disabled people are not equal, so a unique aspect of Olympic Paraplegic competition is that the crew must be evaluated as to degree of limitation, must be rated, or handicapped - as in handicapping the handicapped.

My personal involvement began after a meeting at BAADS with an experienced racer, a quadriplegic sailor who was forming a team. After finding out I was an amputation surgeon, he asked, "Can you get me a one-legged amputee?"

That's because Paralympics rules require a team disability of 14 points or less. Individuals are rated by experienced examiners by their performance on specific sailing skills, such as speed and strength in handling sail control lines, and mobility for weight transfer to balance the boat.

On a scale of 1 to 7, a quadriplegic individual will rate 1 or 2, and a paraplegic 2 or 3. A unilateral amputee can rate as high as 7. Motor and visual disabilities will rate somewhere in between these values.

I located an amputee for my friend and soon became involved with the program. I subsequently bought a Sonar sailboat and formed a team. We race on San Francisco Bay and hope to qualify some day for the Paralympics.

A Sonar can be sailed entirely from a seated position. The principle problem for a paraplegic after getting into the boat is shifting sides when the boat comes about (or changes directions; therefore, the wind comes from the opposite side).

Proper placement of crew weight is a key element of good sailing technique. The "driver" (who manages the tiller to steer the boat) must move from the low to the high side as the wind direction changes with respect to the boat.

Some paraplegics need a mechanical assist. Others settle for a seat in the midline or even stay on the "low" side while the rest of the crew shifts. A bench may make it easier for crew to shift while seated.

Trimming the jib sheets (ropes) can require a lot of strength in some situations, so the Sonar has a compound pulley system. The spinnaker is a large parachute-like sail that can be used to pull the boat forward when sailing down (with) the wind.

This can increase sail area by 150 percent but also increases the chance of capsizing or foundering by a factor of 10 or more. Therefore, the spinnaker is not normally allowed in paraplegic racing; instead, the jib is rigged with an udder strut (a whisker pole) to allow it to function as spinnaker when sailing downwind.

The host club for BAADS is the South Beach Yacht Club. We have raced in regattas there against able-bodied crews, and been competitive. To qualify for the Olympics is a remote possibility; however, we will continue to try.

Paraplegic racing for Sonar class has not yet arrived on the west coast. For our trial, we had to trailer Alpha to St. Petersburg, Florida.



We would like to bring some competition to the Bay. The sailing club at Treasure Island has held qualifying events for the Olympics many times.

gibwright@yahoo.com

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved