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G FORCE

Paralympian Paul Callahan sails for gold

By Jessica Teich | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | AUGUST 17, 2012

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Paul Callahan with his family (from left) Mitchell, Alisa, and Justin.

WHO

Paul Callahan

WHAT

More than three decades ago, while studying at Harvard, Callahan slipped on a wet floor and broke his neck, rendering him a quadriplegic with limited use of his hands. He completed his education at Harvard and pursued a business career at Goldman Sachs — until his first sailing experience revealed a deeper passion. Callahan, 56, is now the CEO for Sail to Prevail, a nonprofit organization based in Newport, R.I., that uses sailing to help disabled children overcome adversity. The Rehoboth native heads for London this month for the [2012 Paralympics](#), where he will compete against 42 other disabled sailors from 14 countries.

Q. Tell me about your first sailing experience.

A. While I was vacationing in Newport, someone asked if I wanted to go sailing. I'm a fairly adventurous person, so I said, 'Sure, why not.' We left the dock, and I looked back and [realized] I was out of the wheelchair for the first time. It was a very liberating feeling, and that cascaded into self-esteem and a unique sense of independence which I hadn't experienced in nearly 20 years. I was in control of something other than my wheelchair, which happened to be a sailboat. From that day, I haven't looked back.

Q. How do you control the boat?

A. I drive the boat with upside-down bicycle pedals that are connected through a series of lines and pulleys to the regular tiller of the boat, so it functions just the same as an able-bodied person who'd drive the boat with their hand. Because I have very little movement in my fingers, I drive it with rollerblading gloves that turn the boat.

Q. What do you hope to achieve with [Sail to Prevail](#)?

A. Nine out of 10 disabled children that come through Sail to Prevail say they have an easier time overcoming challenges having come into the program. We create opportunities to instill positive data points and confidence in these children, so that the world is not so hard for them. When a parent can tell me that a child is doing something in their life that they've never done before because of the experience they had at Sail to Prevail, that's the pinnacle of results.

Q. You're married with twin 9-year-old boys. How do you balance work, travel, and family?

A. It's a constant struggle. The good part is that my passion for sharing with others in sailing happened to line up with my competitive streak, and I have a very supportive family who understands that. One golden rule is that I make sure I take enough time to put the family first, ahead of the other things.

Q. What motivates you?

A. We've all been given a lot of breaks in our lives, and we have a responsibility to do the same for other people. For me, it was time to take the superb education and work experience I had, and share it with other people. I look at it as the ultimate definition of leveraging the journey for the benefit of others. That's what primarily motivates me to race in the [Paralympics]: because I know that I can have an enormous impact on the thousands of disabled children, able-bodied children, and Sail to Prevail. I don't think I would do one without the other.

Q. What's your goal for this year's Paralympics?

A. Win the gold medal and then share it with as many disabled and able children as possible. It doesn't make sense for me to wait until you've accomplished these lofty goals, and then turn around and give back. What makes much more sense to me is to share that journey along the way, so others can get the benefit of what it takes to accomplish the largest goals possible in life. We can all achieve more than we think is possible by an enormous margin.