

Florida Sailors Compete in Paralympic Games

By Richard Shrubb

Four sailors from Florida are competing in this year's Paralympic Games in Weymouth, England, Sept. 1-6. To a person, their journeys have been amazing, from severe adversity that would challenge even the strongest in this world to competing for Gold on a world stage.



Jen French and JP Creignou sailing in the SKUD 18 at the Sail for Gold in Weymouth, England, in June. French is on the left (aft) and Creignou is on the right (forward). This is Creignou's second Paralympic campaign. In 2004, he got Bronze in the Sonars at Athens. For French, this is her first Games. Photo by Mick Anderson/US SAILING.

The Two-Person SKUD 18 Team

Jen French and JP Creignou, both from St. Petersburg, travelled two separate journeys and have come together in the last two years to race the SKUD 18 for this year's Paralympics in Weymouth. French is a wheelchair-bound paraplegic, and Creignou is legally blind.

The SKUD 18 is a high-performance racing yacht, and the crews must be a pair, one severely disabled and the other less so. Many resent that they cannot "hike out" on the boat to keep it flat in higher winds and make the boat go faster; the pair must be sitting down.

Many able-bodied people race this class of boat for the speed and exhilaration. JP Creignou points out, "Sailing is a great sport for disabled people, as you aren't always in a specific disabled class, and you race head-to-head with able-bodied people," which drives up the standard for all. Most sailboat racing doesn't consider a disability a disadvantage in competition and is one of the few sports where people of all physical abilities will race against each other regularly.

French adds, "It is all about the creativity of adaptations on your boat to help you sail it." This is shown at its greatest among the teams with the contraption that Sonar skipper Paul Callahan—one of the other Florida Paralympic sailors competing—sits in. Callahan, from Cape Coral, FL, cannot move his hands or legs. He sits in a mechanism that can be moved from side to side to keep the boat flat, and steers the boat using his arms, with his hands clipped to bicycle pedals that are attached via a mechanism to the rudder.

All have been active throughout their lives, loving the competition and teamwork involved. French was a competitive windsurfer while at college in Ohio. Her journey toward Paralympic glory began on Friday 13, 2002, with a snowboarding accident. "I came off a 40-foot embankment on my snowboard and broke my back." She laughingly points out it was a full moon that night, as she was rushed to the hospital and started her fight back.

"Recovery was a test of character. In fighting depression and despair, you really learn about yourself," says Jen of the beginning of her journey. In all the stories here, learning to overcome an injury that would defeat most people was as much a battle of the mind as a battle of the body to get fit again.

Creignou's story of debilitation began as a youngster and is still on the slide—he was born with a degenerative eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa. "My eyesight only really started getting bad in my 30s and 40s when I had to

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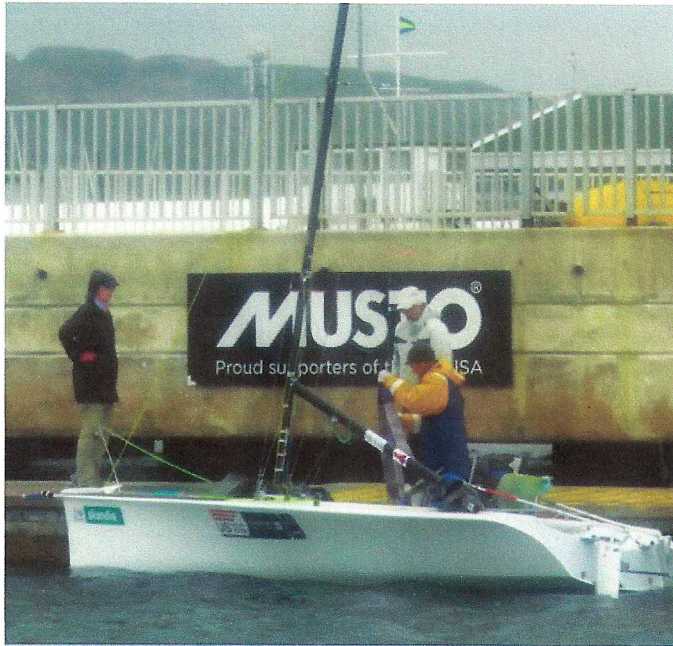
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The Skud 18. The SKUD-18 is a high-performance racing yacht, and the crews must be a pair, one severely disabled and the other less so. Many resent that they cannot "hike out" on the boat to keep it flat in higher winds and make the boat go faster; the pair must be sitting down. Photo by Richard Shrubb.



Paul Callahan being readied at the dock before boarding the Sonar by crewmate Tom Brown. Photo by Richard Shrubb.

stop driving and playing tennis because I couldn't see." Born in France, Creignou had been sailing at an amateur competitive level most of his life. It was only when he became legally blind that he started competing at a national level. By then he was based in St. Petersburg, FL.

Both had been competing in Sonars when they came together and began their campaign for this Paralympics in 2010. "In January this year, we raced the International Federation of Disabled Sailors World Championships and won Gold, so we've a fighting chance at the Paralympics," suggests French.

This is Creignou's second Paralympic campaign. In 2004, he got Bronze in the Sonars at Athens. For French, this is her first Games. She says of her selection, "It is an incredible experience, but we have to keep our head about ourselves and stay focused."

The Sonar Team

The other Florida team at the Paralympics is the Sonar boat, led by Paul Callahan. His team, which includes Tom Brown from Northeast Harbor, ME, and Bradley Johnston, from Pompano Beach, FL, make for a fiercely competitive trio.

The Sonar is a three-crewed racing yacht. It doesn't plane like the SKUD 18—it is a "displacement boat" with a heavy keel for stability. They will still compete in up to 25 knots of wind, which isn't unusual in Weymouth. During the Sail for Gold regatta in which I met the crew in June, hurricane-force winds blasted the harbor for two days, shortening the regatta for the Paralympic crews.

Tom Brown had cancer in his shin when a youngster and had one leg amputated below the knee. He had to take two years off school after the amputation for chemotherapy. Even with the disability, Brown was still a serious contender for the U.S. Olympic team at the 2000 Sydney Games. Thanks to his disability, he had trialed for the Paralympic Team the week

before, so, failing to make the cut for the Olympics, he was going to Sydney anyway. He is on his third campaign with 16 years of top level competition under his belt.

Pompano Beach lawyer Bradley Johnston recounts his life-changing experience. "I was driving home from college on the highway, and my tires weren't so good, so I lost control and slammed into the crash barrier. The car door took both my legs off." He recounts being totally calm and pain-free. "The doctors said if I was screaming and in distress, I would have died of blood loss because my heart would have pumped much harder. The fact I was so calm in the car wreck saved my life." A year and a day after losing his legs below the knee, he returned to college at the University of Florida and finished his degree.

The positivity of all these people is astounding to see. Callahan broke his neck in 1981 slipping on a wet floor at Harvard. His recovery took longer than most—five years—but he found his way via a career in real estate development. He received an MBA at Harvard Business School and then worked at Goldman Sachs. "I wanted a job that fulfilled me spiritually, so I quit my job at the bank and took over a non-profit in Newport, RI, that teaches disabled children sailing".

Johnston was looking for a sport that kept him active, so he took up disabled volleyball. He competed for Team USA at Sydney in 2000, but found that sailing challenged the mind as well as the body, so he took up the sport. In 2003, he joined JP Creignou and Ross Duggan on a Sonar, and they took Bronze at Athens.

Callahan says that disabled sailing at this level is now just as competitive as at the Olympic level. "When I started, it was very much an amateur sport—almost anyone could compete. Today you have to put almost as many hours in as the Olympians to have a chance." The bar being so high, the competitors are in a situation of survival of the fittest—a



Paul Callahan installed in his contraption aboard the Sonar, with crewmate Bradley Johnston readying the boat. The Sonar is a three-crewed racing yacht. It doesn't plane like the SKUD 18—it is a "displacement boat" with a heavy keel for stability. They will still compete in up to 25 knots of wind. Photo by Richard Shrubbs.



Callahan and crewmates sailing the Sonar at the Sail for Gold in Weymouth, England, in June. On the left (aft) on the rail is Tom Brown and on the right (forward) on the rail is Bradley Johnston. Callahan is in the middle of the boat (head showing). They came in eighth—missing Bronze by only five points. Photo by Mick Anderson/US SAILING.

harder job than for Olympic athletes, as profile and sponsorship is harder to find than, for example, the man who

wins Gold having run for just over 9 seconds in London.

Family and support networks are important for all of them. Those on the boat are really the tip of the iceberg of a large group of people, from physiotherapists to sport psychologists, as well as coaches. French's husband Tim is on the coach boat and is close by throughout her competition, giving words of advice and support. French says, "A solid team and solid support network are key to any campaign." Their recent success shows that Creignou and French have that in place. In Sail for Gold in Weymouth in June, they came in eighth—missing Bronze by only five points. Many of the rest of the team felt that if the weather hadn't intervened, they would have won a medal.

Callahan's drive is all about inspiring others. His non-profit, Sail to Prevail, is going to set up a new sail school in Pompano Beach next year. Currently based in Newport, RI, he has taken over 1,000 children of all disabilities sailing since he took it over in 1998. Callahan also plans to set up Paralympic programs for his protégés. "I choose to work so hard to represent the USA to show disabled children that they too can achieve great heights if presented with the opportunity."

French gives advice to those who are lying in their hospital bed right now, perhaps wondering if they could compete at Rio de Janeiro in 2016: "You have to have your eye on the podium—focus on that—but also remember to enjoy the sport!"

Johnston lights up anywhere he goes with his radiant positivity. He gives three points of advice to anyone in this position: "One, if you're an amputee, there's a possibility for you to try almost any sport if you're in good health. Two, if you're interested in sport, try them all until you find what you love. Three, start locally if possible—Miami and St Pete's programs are some of the best for disabled sailing in the U.S., so if sailing floats your boat, you're in the right place!"

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