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RECON IN RIO

OLYMPIC HOPEFULS
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THEMSELVES AND THE
COMPETITION

FOIL TECHNOLOGY

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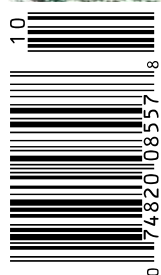


FROM NEW BUILD
TO UNBEATABLE,
THE *INTERLODGE*
STORY



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TESTING

While authorities focus on the tainted racecourses of Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay, top contenders at the Aquece Rio Test Event concentrate on the task at hand — acclimating themselves to the Olympic experience.

THE

By Lisa Gabrielson
Photography By
Onne van der Wal

WATERS

“The venue is the venue no matter where we are. We just have to be ready for what the venue gives us — swell, current, pollution. We just have to take it as it comes.”

— Annie Haeger,
US Sailing Team
Sperry Women's
470 skipper



Provancha expect to get the nod. At the Aquece Rio Test Event, they have an opportunity to get to know the race committee — a valuable resource if they do make it to the Games. For example, on the final day before medal racing, the 470s are slated to sail on Rio's ocean courses, but the race committee is unable to set a course in large swells and 5 knots of wind (the class wind limit is 4 knots), and sends them into Guanabara Bay.

“It's great to learn what the race

On a hot morning in August, the air is still at the Marina da Glória. Rio de Janeiro's hum is drowned out by the distinctive sounds of an Olympic boat park: hushed conversations in many languages, crisp new sails snapping, dinghies squeaking in their dollies. It's business as usual for the athletes as they prepare for the day, well-aware of the hazard lurking in the waters into which they'll soon slip their boats. They can't escape it, and every reporter has the same burning question: “What about the pollution?”

It's a valid question. Today a coach with a smartphone is recording alleged raw sewage pouring into the harbor, a stone's throw from the Olympic launch ramp.

Rio's water quality commands the spotlight at this final test event designed to allow sailors, coaches, officials and organizers to experience the real thing, or as close as possible to it, before next August. It's a test, and only a test, and as organizers step up their testing of the waters — both literally and figuratively — so do the sailors, experimenting with new techniques, gathering intel on currents and wind, and acclimating their minds and bodies to the race-courses, the culture and, yes, even the fetid water.

“The venue is the venue no matter where we are,” says US Sailing Team Sperry Women's 470 skipper Annie Haeger. “We just have to be ready for what the venue gives us — swell, current, pollution. We just have to take it as it comes.”

The US team's top medal prospects are in Rio. “The floodgates are open for us,” says Haeger. “We [she and crew Briana Provancha] both quit our jobs and are fully focused. We're on the road for over 200 days next year, and we're committed to the campaign.”

While the US Sailing team is qualified in the Women's 470, it has yet to select which athletes will represent, though Haeger and



committee's limits are,” says Haeger. “We now know what kind of conditions we'll be sailing in and can train for it.”

Provancha is pragmatic. “Be ready for anything,” she says. “Every day is something different. You have to be able to adapt to what Christ [the Redeemer statue] sends down from above.”

The Redeemer is indeed looking down on the two women in the regatta's final medal race. The contest for gold is between the Americans and Great Britain's Hannah Mills and Saskia Clark, the 2012 silver medalists, but the Brits get a penalty on the starting line, suddenly simplifying Haeger and Provancha's strategy.

“Our communication was super crisp all week,” says Haeger. “Everything fell into place. Downwind has always been our strong leg, but we found some upwind speed as well. Instead of reaching the top mark in eighth and finishing in fourth, we'd reach the top mark in fifth and finish in second.”

Haeger and Provancha are testing the competition and courses, but also sampling some of the local flavor. “Briana and I are trying to embrace the culture of the Rio experience,” says Haeger. “We'll have a caipirinha on our nights off, take a samba class, and really make Rio our home.”

While an Olympic test event is primarily about casing the venue, it's also an opportunity for sailors to toe the line with eagle-eyed international judges who dole out on-the-water penalties for Rule 42 (propulsion) infractions. This unpredictable and contentious cat-and-mouse game between athletes and officials has a profound impact on the races, and one who knows this all too well is Paige Railey, the American hopeful of the Laser Radial class.

The test event is Railey's return



Rio's outside courses gave Stuart McNay and David Hughes a chance to practice in the big waves they'll likely see in 2016. Annie Haeger and Briana Provancha (opposite) hope their test-event gold will help them win the US Sailing Team Sperry's selection.



to the Olympic stage following a bike accident in August 2014 that left her with a fractured spine, severe hand injuries, nerve damage and a facial contusion. When she began to compete again in early 2015, she was not only competing against sailors at the top of their game, but also against her own continuing recovery. Her return has been triumphant: At the Pan American Games, her first peak event since her accident, she won gold.

Having arrived in Rio on a roll, she intends to sail conservatively. "When you go into a big event, it's one foot in front of the other," she says. In the first race, she scores a 13 but retains the composure of a veteran campaigner to string together top finishes. The approach pays off, putting her in medal contention.

Railey is poised for the podium on the final downwind leg of the medal race. She's already carrying one yellow flag from a pre-start penalty, and all she has to do to snag bronze is pass one boat. In what her coach, Mark Littlejohn, describes as a "micro-infringement," Railey rocks twice with no movement of her boat's tiller. The judges nail her with another penalty, and she's done.

Littlejohn explains that only in medal races are the athletes under such intense scrutiny, specifically in regard to Rule 42. Railey is far from the only sailor flagged: There are 25 infractions in the Radial fleet before the medal round, and 58 across the entire event. At this level, the athletes must push the envelope with

New Zealand's 49erFX helmswoman Alexandra Maloney and her crew Molly Meech finished the test event in fourth overall. Martine Grae and Kahena Kunze (opposite) came from behind for a memorable win on their home waters.



“It’s a risk-and-reward evaluation... doing something different from the rest of the fleet, and when you’re pushing harder, you will stand out. That’s what will draw the judges’ eye.”

— David Dellenbaugh,
US Sailing Team
Sperry tactical coach
and rules advisor



their kinetics.

"It's a risk-and-reward evaluation," says David Dellenbaugh, US Sailing Team Sperry tactical coach and rules advisor. "Paige tested the limits and thought that pushing it would be worth the risk to catch one more boat. What's risky is doing something different from the rest of the fleet, and when you're pushing harder, you will stand out. That's what will draw the judges' eye."

Railey is optimistic about the

learning opportunity the test event provides. "I'm becoming more and more comfortable with my tactics and choices in Rio," she says, referring to the challenging currents and windshifts seen on the Olympic courses.

Though not ultimately on the podium, US Men's 470 sailors Stu McNay and David Hughes have still learned valuable lessons in the test event. Their campaign is on a roll, and they are heavily favored to medal in 2016. They wear the leader bibs for two days of racing, but a number of tactical decisions deny the veteran sailors a win. Hughes rationalizes the outcome as merely a dress rehearsal for the main event.

"We test equipment, get a feeling for how the courses are managed, and grow our own Rio knowledge," he says. "It's a valuable learning regatta for which we didn't have to pay a big price for finishing off the podium. Of course, we still want to win every competition we enter, but this isn't a points or trials situation."

Another payoff of the Rio test event is experiencing big waves and shifty breeze, conditions expected at the 470 World Championships in October, where Hughes and McNay will continue their hunt for medals.

"If you're not medaling in your class a year before the Olympics, it's a long shot to medal at the Games," says Hughes.

The 2016 Olympics will be the first competition to include the Women's 49erFX. The field is fairly open, but a betting man will keep tabs on Brazilians Martine Grae and Kahena Kunze. Accustomed to winning, especially on their own turf, these childhood friends won their first gold at the 2009 ISAF Sailing World Championship in Buzios, Brazil, sailing the International 420. They started their 49erFX campaign in 2012, so in terms of "veterans" of the new class, they certainly rank at the top.

Fulfilling their roles as hometown heroines, they come from behind in the test event's medal race to beat their Italian rivals. Italian skipper Giulia Conti later describes the race as a tactical challenge in which the Brazilians prevailed. "We were still in

control of the two boats we needed to be in control of until the last upwind, and [the Swedish and Brazilians] split and we made a tactical mistake," says Conti. "We decided to stay with the Swedish and the rest of the fleet. It meant that the only way we could lose was from the Brazilians, as she could gain boats."

"We got a chance on the last downwind, so we took it," says Grae. "It was quite a tricky race. I don't think it could have ended better."

Though it's also the Nacra 17 class's Olympic debut, a familiar name on the multihull scene continues to stand out: The Waterhouse family has fostered generations of internationally successful beach-cat sailors, and in Rio, it's 24-year-old Australian skipper Jason Waterhouse and his cousin Lisa Darmanin who perform the best.

"Sometimes we came in after a day of racing and we still couldn't tell you which way on the course was the right way to go," says Darmanin. "It's a very complex place. We didn't know what to expect, but we handled ourselves very well. I think we impressed ourselves."

The cousins first teamed up at the Nacra youth worlds in 2009, and were in the right place at the right time when multihulls not only returned to the Olympic roster, but as a mixed-gender discipline. "When we heard it might be coming back, we made sure to sail as many multihulls as we could to stay on top of it," says Darmanin. "We knew we were meant to do it."

The challenges ahead for the young Australians pale in comparison to those that face the organizers of the Olympic regatta. Even as the coaches, support staff and spectators line the Marina da Glória to applaud the great sporting efforts of the athletes, influence continues to tarnish the Olympic waters. Having tested the venue and their competitors, the sailors themselves have a far better understanding of what needs to be done to fulfill their individual aspirations. Each of them has less than a year to make good on their goals and potential.

So, too, does Rio. ●