

DEE'S TRIUMPH

THE END OF A PROFESSIONAL SAILING CAREER AS HE KNEW IT WAS THE START OF AN UNEXPECTED PARALYMPIC JOURNEY.

BY LISA GABRIELSON

Dee Smith is tired. He's collapsed on a leather couch at New York YC's 44th Street Clubhouse, pulling uncomfortably at his official US Sailing Olympic Team Sperry necktie. He's found a moment to sit down between a fundraiser and a 10-hour meeting marathon with the team management. His flight to Garda, Italy, the location of his next International 2.4mR event, embarks in 20 hours. Smith has been on the go since he joined the U.S. Paralympic sailing program less than two years ago, and while for the most part he has easily beaten other Americans vying for the 2.4mR berth at the Rio Paralympics this summer, it's the international fleet that's proving harder to conquer.

"I've sailed against, and beat, the best in the world," says Smith matter-of-factly. "The truth is, I'm really having trouble with the top six guys in this Paralympic class."

Smith has enjoyed a long and successful sailing career, and his skills and temper are the stuff of legend. Today, however, he's subdued. Gone are the days of shouting tactics from the stern of a Farr 40 or mini-maxi, or competing in the Volvo Race and

America's Cup. Instead he's now focused on what he can do alone: compete, and hopefully medal, at the 2016 Paralympic Games.

His transition from the apex of professional racing to Paralympic sailing began while Smith was in Valencia, Spain, for the America's Cup in 2007. He was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer, which spread into his back. Treatment was successful, but the cancer left his spine in need of surgical

repair. He continued to advise sailing teams in less physical roles, including with Emirates Team New Zealand. During the 35th America's Cup, in San Francisco, he would ride his bike to the top of the headland and observe wind patterns for the support team below. It was in San Francisco that Smith was clipped by a car while riding his bike. "It wasn't a really bad crash, but since my back was already ruined, it just crumbled,"

he says. He tried to recover, but doctors recommended a spinal fusion.

Unable to turn his neck or back, and with limited use of one leg, Smith saw his sailing career screech to a halt. He took on projects here and there, but his body limited his options. Smith approached US Sailing Team technical director Grant Spanhake to offer his tactical talent. "He told me instead of coaching, if I really wanted to help the US Sailing Team, I should sail," says Smith. "I thought, yeah right, I can't even walk properly. I'd never thought of myself as disabled when he first suggested Paralympic sailing."

At Spanhake's urging, Smith went to Hyeres, France, to be evaluated. To ensure compliance with Paralympic regulations, a panel of doctors assesses each athlete's abilities and rates the sailors on a scale of 1 to 7. The higher the number, the higher the severity of disability. At evaluation, Smith discovered his disability rating was two levels above the minimum requirement for the 2.4mR class. The report left him conflicted. "On the one hand, the good news was that I could still sail," he says. "The bad news was that it was the first time that I really had to admit to myself — I mean, I now had paperwork — that I was disabled."

Smith started competing against the other American Paralympic hopefuls in the 2.4mR. "It wasn't fun at all," he says. "I was trying to help the other guys, to teach them some things that they didn't know, since many of them were new to sailing entirely, but in the boat I was out-learning them really fast."

Smith sailed 25 domestic races, winning all but one. Bored with the class, he wasn't sure if he'd continue. When he entered the 2015 World Cup in Hyeres and placed 10th overall, well behind some of the world's best Paralympic sailors, he had renewed motivation. "I realized this would actually be a sailing challenge," says Smith. "That's what I had been looking for. I decided to jump in."

As he emerged as a front-runner for the U.S. Paralympic team's selection for the 2.4mR, so did scathing opinions about his perceived lack of disability and qualification. "The people claiming that my campaign is a farce are uneducated about the system," says Smith. "They make assumptions based on my appearance. Sure, I have two hands and two legs, but I can't turn around, my shoulder doesn't work, and I still fall down a lot."

While the measurement process for Paralympic qualification was a wake-up call, it also was a vindication — one that Smith has

fallen back on repeatedly as his campaign has been questioned in the court of public opinion. Smith points out that he measures two levels of disability higher than the required minimum for the 2.4mR class. "I didn't want to be borderline, because I didn't want to create havoc," he says. Unfortunately, the vitriol continued anyway. "I used to care about what they were saying about me at the start of this campaign," he says, shaking his head. "Now I tune it all out."

Smith says that while he's faster around the marks because of his fully functional

failures. Before the start of the Sailing World Cup Miami, he and his team made major adjustments to his boat, but he says they ran out of time to test the changes. On the third day of racing, his boat dismasted, and the next day, both bilge pumps failed, swamping him. Three points behind in the trials, he spent three months before the final event repairing and improving his 2.4mR, named *Kanaloa*. It was in Hyeres, France, that he won the Olympic berth and turned his sights to Rio.

The 2016 Games will be the last appearance for sailing as a Paralympic discipline, but



appendages, he can't read the wind well because the 2.4mR is so low to the water, and he's unable to turn his neck to see other parts of the course. "It's interesting to see how different limitations play out on the water," he says. "I get jumped downwind because of my situation, but I'm better upwind because I can trim more easily."

During the first event of the US Sailing Team trials, Smith was plagued by equipment

Dee Smith was a top pro sailor before cancer and a bike accident left him disabled. The 2.4mR and a legitimate shot at an Olympic medal gave him a new competitive outlet.

Photo: US Sailing Team Sperry/Jen Edney

Smith isn't concerned — with that, or with any future plans. "Listen, I'm 63 years old," he says. "They're keeping the class in the World Cup, so I might keep sailing. Or maybe I'll get back into big boats. Maybe I'll retire."

In a venue where conditions are much like those in his home waters of San Francisco Bay, Smith hopes to do well in Rio, but the naive confidence he had when entering the class has dissipated. When he started sailing the 2.4mR, everyone told him he would medal, he says, but he now knows it won't be easy. He will have to fight to win, just as he did with his cancer and crash recovery — and that's precisely what he plans to do.