

RACING



LESSONS ON THE OLYMPIC PATH

By Charlie Buckingham

Charlie Buckingham,
1st as an OPEN (M)
Laser U.S. Nationals

The final months of my senior year at Georgetown University brought a whirlwind of events that marked a serious transitional phase in my life. In addition to the added stress that academics, final exams, graduation, and spending time with close friends puts on any graduating senior, I had two weeks of intense college sailing practice followed by the ICSA national championship week in Cascade Locks, Oregon. From there, I flew straight to Weymouth, England for the annual Skandia Sail for Gold regatta. Seeing as this event is contested annually on the 2012 Olympic sailing venue and was also the first round of the US Olympic team trials this year, it was an event I couldn't miss. Two days before the event, I got back in the Laser for the first time in nearly five months and then jumped straight into five days of racing in persistently strong winds of 15-25 knots against a field of trained professionals. Needless to say, my result was less than ideal and I flew home after the regatta for some much needed rest and time at home. After running on adrenaline and having countless distractions for nearly three months straight, I was finally able to collect my thoughts and ask myself the scary question that every college graduate has to tackle at one point or another: what now?

Let me rewind to January of 2011, when I thought I had a solid plan. The Miami Olympic Classes Regatta takes place during the last week of January

each year and because this regatta is an ISAF world cup event that brings world-class competition to North American soil, it is a must-do for any aspiring US Olympic sailor. In recent years, the event has also become a US Sailing team selection event, making it of even more importance. This year, my goal was to have a good event at OCR and qualify for the US Sailing team, which would then springboard me into possibly taking time off from school to do European events in the spring in pursuit of qualification for the 2012 Olympics. In hindsight, it was an extremely lofty goal but I remained positive at the time and thought it was a possibility.

After spending nearly no time in the Laser during the fall semester, I planned two training trips for the winter that I hoped would shake the rust off for a good performance in Miami. I spent ten days training in a Laser with Juan Maegli and Cy Thompson out of Juan's house on lake Atitlan in Guatemala. Juan is a former Olympian and is currently campaigning full time for the 2012 Olympics while Cy is an extremely talented sailor with many accomplishments and is also 2012 Olympic hopeful in the Laser. Nevertheless, training with these guys was a great opportunity and we had a great ten days of training together.

After training on the lake, I flew to the Dominican Republic to compete in the annual Caribbean Midwinter regatta in Cabarete, which I thought would give

me some much needed racing practice before OCR. I left the Midwinters with a second place trophy against some solid competition and was feeling pretty good about my preparation going into OCR.

The week of OCR came and went anti-climactically and I neither qualified for the US sailing team nor met their performance expectations I had had before the event. In fact, quite the opposite happened and I ended up being very far away from qualifying for the team and my performance was way below my expectations. This outcome caused a lot of confusion and negativity about my sailing immediately after the regatta. I couldn't stop thinking about the whole thing and kept asking myself, what happened? Why did I do so poorly? A couple of weeks after the regatta had finished, I finally was able to think about the whole thing rationally. Despite the fact that it had been both a very frustrating week of sailing and a disappointing result to swallow, it may have been one of the more important events of my life because it forced me to do some serious thinking.

The re-evaluation I did after OCR helped me think about things more realistically. At the very base, the Olympic games features the world's best in sport. Regardless of natural ability, aspiring Olympic athletes train and compete year-round to make the dream of achieving gold into a reality. There are no short cuts or free tickets.



Throughout each quadrennium, the pursuit for gold demands every ounce of energy from the athlete and they make big sacrifices in doing so.

Olympic sailing is no exception to this and I realized I was kidding myself when I thought I could achieve success at a high level with such little preparation. Despite the fact that success in our sport relies heavily upon tactics, strategy, and good decision-making on the racecourse, success at the Olympic level is a different story. At that level, athleticism, strength, and endurance are just as critical as the mental aspect of the game. I always knew how important practice and training were, especially given my background in high school and college sailing, but seeing the level of the athletes who competed on the Olympic circuit firsthand was a clear indication that their training and preparation was at a whole different level. These days, the people taking the time to compete on the circuit are full-time professionals who are not only great sailors, but also incredible athletes in peak condition. Additionally, as government federations and sponsors increase their support of Olympic sailors with each passing year, the level is only getting higher.

All of this, coupled with the fact that I was entering the spring semester of my senior year, made me realize that the 2012 Olympics were outside my grasp. Academics and college sailing would surely take over my life in the spring and leave no time to prepare for the first round of the Olympic trials in the beginning of June. At first, it was hard for me to face this reality so close to both the trials and Olympics. Going to the Olympics has always been a goal of mine and as a youngster I looked up to athletes like Ben Ainslie and Robert Scheidt, who both achieved Olympic success at a relatively young age.

However, I realized that my circumstances are much different than

theirs were at my age and accepted it.

With 2012 no longer in the picture, I was able re-focus my priorities and take things one-step at a time. I was no longer juggling multiple daunting tasks at once and therefore my results became better in the few things I concentrated on. Academics-wise, the second semester of my senior year was one of the best semesters of my college career. College sailing-wise, my team and I achieved many successes throughout the year and I left my senior year completely satisfied, knowing that I had left no stone unturned. Some of the competitive highlights included winning the singlehanded nationals, A division at both the nationals semi-finals and dinghy nationals, and

Laser U.S. Nationals



Kieran Chung, 7th –
(2nd JUNIOR (M))



Chris Barnard,
5th as an OPEN (M)



Michael Madigan, 23rd –
(9th JUNIOR (M))

finally, being named College Sailor of the Year. Looking back at everything, I can comfortably say I made the most of my college experience and graduated with no regrets or what-ifs. I'm happy I made the choices I did.

So, what now? Although 2012 is out of the question, I finally have the ability to focus my energy toward the 2016 Olympics. What's even better is that in the lead up to 2016, the 2011-2012 season presents a unique opportunity for me. This season, the level of Olympic sailing will be as high as ever since athletes training for the 2012 Olympics are quickly approaching peak performance for August of 2012. I have the advantage of being able to train and compete alongside these guys, which will undoubtedly kick-start my campaign and keep my learning curve high early in the game. It's hard for me to express in words how psyched I am to be able to have this opportunity.

I guess you can call the summer of 2011 the "official" start to my 2016 Olympic campaign. In an effort to create a good foundation to build upon once the season ramps up heavily in the fall, I followed a grassroots training effort near home, which included putting valuable hours of time in the boat up in Long Beach and working on my fitness through cross training in the gym and doing other outdoor activities. I was also able to compete in the Laser North Americans, Laser US Nationals, and World University Games where I ended up finishing 7th, 1st, and 6th respectively. I'm happy with the results, but more importantly, I was able to take valuable lessons away from these events and there are plenty of

things on the docket for me to work on this year. This fall and winter, I will be doing tons of on and off the water training and two smaller events before the first major event of my campaign, the ISAF combined Olympic Classes World Championships in Perth, Australia. In the coming months,

I will also be launching a website (URL yet to be determined) where anyone interested in the lifestyle of an aspiring Olympic athlete can track my progress. I'm looking forward to everything and am proud to be representing the Newport Harbor Yacht Club.

Before I stop writing, I want to take this opportunity to thank several people. First, I would like to thank all of my Non-Calm coaches growing up, especially Nate Dunham. All of you guys instilled a love for sailing and competition that has undoubtedly brought me to where I am today. Next, I'd like to thank the Newport Harbor Sailing Foundation, especially Warren Person, for generously supporting my sailing endeavors and helping me with the financial aspect of my campaign. Finally, I'd like to thank my family, especially my parents, for their unwavering support. My Mom and Dad are inspiring people and I'm lucky to have them as mentors. See you all soon!