

Questions and answers with Zach Railey - USA Finn representative

Zach Railey (USA) is one of the very few sailors in the Finn class event in Qingdao to earn his place through a closed one-off national trials event. At the age of 24 he is also one of the youngest Finn sailors competing in China and has made steady progress in the class since he first stepped into the heavyweight singlehander as a junior in 2005. Over the past year though, his results have improved considerably as the training started to pay off and he has placed in the top ten at most major regattas so far this year.

Was it important for you to have the US trials as a one off event?

I think that the one off trials event was not that important to me. I think it is a great event and I learned a lot from it, but there is a huge risk with the system of not sending the sailor who can compete the best against top international competition. I hope that the USA will have a trials system next quad that incorporates maybe one or two international events, plus a closed US Trials.

What sort of support have you had from your National Authority?

The US Sailing system has had a complete revamp over the past four years and will continue to get better in the future. We have had a tremendous amount of support including coaching, weather information, funding and logistics. Dean Brenner, Katie Kelly and Gary Bodie and the rest of the US Sailing Team staff have made our program so much better for everyone and have built a great system that we can rely on and have confidence in for the future. Of course, we are still responsible for personal fundraising and other costs, and that is a good thing because it gives you ownership of your campaign and really makes you invest in it. The US Team as a whole has come a long way over the last four years and will get better each year as we move forward.

What special preparations have you been doing in preparation for this regatta?

I have dropped a bit of weight in anticipation of the light air in China. But we have been sailing with the same set-up and sails for about eight months and feel confident in my equipment selection. We have spent a lot of time in China over the last few months training and getting to know the venue. There are not many places in the World like Qingdao so being over here has been important.

We have also been sailing a lot more in light air than we usually do. On days that before the Olympics were assigned to China we would not go sailing, now we are excited to go sailing and get the practice in for the Olympics. At first, a lot of sailors were not thrilled about the venue, but we have all embraced the fact that it will be light air in general and we have just had to adapt our training to it.

I have spent a total of about six weeks in China this year so far, as well as being here in August of 2006 and 2007 for the Olympic Test Events. We did two weeks training in Qingdao in June and then came back at the end of July.

We looked at the tide tables and tried to sail at the same tides we will experience in the Olympic Games so that is why we chose the dates we did in June and July. Also, we wanted to focus our sailing time on the outer course area when we were at the training location since it was closer. Now that we are in the venue we have spent the last six days since arrival in the village on course A where the first day of racing and the medal race will take place.

The venue is amazing and it is by far more than could be expected. Past Olympians have said it is the best they have seen from top to bottom. I think that as far as facilities go all future Olympics will have a lot to live up to.

There have been a lot of sailors reducing weight and trying different things ready for China. How have you responded to this?

I have lost some weight and will be racing in the lower end of the 90 kg spectrum. We have all tried and tested everything possible, but I do not think anyone has found a new magical set-up for the light air. It is still going to come down to who can go the fastest and in the right direction.

What about gear selection?

My trials in the USA were in a light air venue so once that was done in October we have only really made one switch on a sail, but haven't made any major changes since then. We did look at a lot of different cloths and sail shapes. This was mostly before the USA trials and some after that event. I have been using the same boat and mast numbers and have only really had a look at the sails. I think that you can get too involved in the technical side of things, but I think we have covered all our bases and have what we think is the best set-up for me at the Olympics.

How do you normally feel before a big regatta? Relaxed? Nervous? Excited?

I have all of those feelings because you are nervous about the event and getting started and really wanting to know what is going to happen. You are excited also because it is such a big event and you have waited for it and trained for it for so long. Finally, you train yourself to take all of that excitement and nervousness and relax and concentrate on racing. I think that having all three are very important before an event, you just have to control each one effectively.

But how do you maintain focus amid all the hype that is going on around you?

You really have to just not let anything outside of making your boat go fast and in the right direction get in the way. It is hard at times, but you have to focus and keep the goal in mind. There is nothing that should get in the way of reaching your goal. After the competition you can worry about the other stuff.

Who do you think will be your main threats in Qingdao?

Ben is obviously the favourite going into China. Sailors like Jonas, Ivan, PJ, Emilios and Chris all have their strengths. But what I think is really great about the Finn class is that there are going to be 26 boats at the Olympics and I think that about 12 of those 26 have a real chance of winning a medal.

I think the difference between who wins a medal and who does not will be in your ability to stay calm in the trying conditions we are expecting. This is a very hard place to sail and consistency is going to be the key to a good result. The racing is going to be very exciting to watch.

What keeps you focused and dedicated and inspired to keep going at this level?

I think that for me if I do anything I want to do it at the highest level. For me in sailing I want to be racing against the best in the world. In the Finn, that means racing at Olympic level. Knowing that you can represent your country and compete against the best is an honour in itself, but the ultimate goal is being on the podium and knowing that you went up against the best and came out on top.

Just being here and to win an Olympic medal means everything to me. I take great pride in being able to represent my country and compete to win a medal for the United States. Winning a medal is the ultimate goal, and having that time on the podium will allow all the years of training and sacrifice to be celebrated. It is what each and everyone of us dream about everyday we wake up in the morning.

How do you feel about the recent debates over events and classes? Do you think is it actually important to use new and fast classes instead of older and slower?

Fast does not necessarily mean good sailing. We as a sport have to decide what we want. Do we want to protect the history and racing of the sport, or do we want to have big speed, wipeouts and crashes. I personally think that a combination of the two is what suits the sport the best, and then we cover all aspects of the sport for every possible audience member to enjoy.

What are your hopes for the future of the Olympic regatta?

I think that if sailing really wants to stay in the Olympic regatta we will have to advance the sport. Not so much in the equipment that we use for racing, but the format of the racing. It is going to have to become much more spectator friendly and will have to be shorter and easier for the general non-sailing population to follow. How we as a sport are going to go about this is still a question to be answered.

Personally, I think we could come up with a system where we have ten disciplines that test your overall sailing skills. For example one of the 10 disciplines is an upwind race only. You line up and start and have one upwind leg and finish at the top. 1st, 2nd and 3rd in the race get medals of the 'upwind race, then your finishing position in the race counts toward your total. At the end of the 10 disciplines you have 1st, 2nd, 3rd Overall Champions. These would be shorter races, easy to understand and could be promoted more to the general public. I know this is different, but it is something that could perhaps work.

You recently became Vice-President Development for the International Finn Association. What kind of initiatives are you hoping to establish during your time in office and can a full time sailor really get involved in class development to make a difference?

My first main project will be on youth development for the Finn Class. It is a fantastic boat and I would like to get more countries and youth involved in the class. We are going to run a pilot program in the United States in 2009 where a youth sailor receives a Finn from the class for one year to race. I think that full-time sailors can and should get involved in the class. We are the ones that know what is going on and what the class wants or needs. You have to have that type of connection to the class within the organisation, so that the sailors can tell us what is going on and what they want. That's one of the great things about the Finn class – we all like to be involved with what is happening in the past, present and future.

The class has pioneered some technology such as on board cameras in recent years. What kind of things do you think we are likely to see in the near future?

I think the Finn will continue to be a class that pushes the onboard camera and video broadcast side of the sport. One of the other projects we are going to work on in 2009 is a mast mounted camera and instant download to be broadcast over the internet, together with interviews and tracking of the days racing. Keep your eye out for it because it will be a very interesting way to follow the racing from home.

What's next after the Olympic Games?

First, I am going to take about two months off. Then I will start to look for sponsors and funding for 2012 and will kick off my Olympic Campaign for the Olympic Games in London. I want to continue to sail the Finn for 2012 – for a guy my size the Finn is really my only option to sail at the Olympic level and that is why it is such a perfect boat for the Olympic Games.

