Bowskill sailing away in Rio

Whitby athlete in Brazil preparing for this summer's Olympics

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Metroland File Photo

TORONTO -- Brenda Bowskill, right, from Whitby, is shown here competing at the 2015 Pan Am Games. She will make her Olympic debut at the 2016 Rio Games.

WHITBY — Realizing her Olympic dream six years after she set sail toward it has changed Whitby's Brenda Bowskill in ways she is still having trouble comprehending.

In fact, despite being eloquent most of the time, she was at a loss for words when informed she had made the Canadian sailing team for the 2016 Rio Summer Games.

"I felt kind of bad for the guy on the phone who told me because all I could really muster up was, 'Oh that's great news, thanks,'" Bowskill recalled of learning the news May 6. "At first I didn't really understand the magnitude of what it actually meant."

She's coming closer to understanding that now, and was relieved when the news became public a few days later so she could discuss it with her friends.

But, while she has already left for Rio for a three-week training session, she did so still trying to wrap her head around it all.

"I still can't even really believe what that means, going to the Olympics," she said just prior to her flight south. "I remember many years ago saying I wanted to go to the Olympics and at the time it was just this unimaginable dream and I had no idea how to get there, what I needed to do, or the type of work that it required."

Bowskill, who turned 24 in April, started sailing at six at the Queen City Yacht Club on the Toronto Islands, spending summers learning the sport with her sister while their parents worked in the city. She completed her levels at several yacht clubs, including the Whitby and Frenchman's Bay clubs locally, and is now a member of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club.

She began seriously pursuing the Olympics six years ago when she joined the national team, and worked hard towards it under the guidance of another Whitby native, Chris Cook, who went to the Olympics himself in 2008.

Competing in the laser radial class, Bowskill finished eighth last summer at the Pan Am Games in Toronto, but has progressed even further under new coach Chris Dold, with whom she has been working since December.

Bowskill has consistently performed as top Canadian radial sailor over the course of the Olympic trials, including a 10th place finish at the 2016 Radial World Championships in Vallarta, Mexico in April.

"I think having this little different coaching style, new perspective, new guidance, has really allowed me to have a breakthrough in my performance," she said, adding that Dold has experience competing in the same class. "We went towards more specific things on how to sail the laser."

Bowskill is in Brazil for one of two three-week training blocks, where she will try to get familiar with everything about Rio, especially the courses she'll be racing, and the current and wind trends there.

Although she is a little behind in that regard compared to some of her competition, she's excited about an opportunity extended to her to train with Paige Railey of the United States and Denmark's Anne-Marie Rindom, two medallists in her class at the world championships.

"I think I'm on a very steep upward trend," she said when asked about her goals for Rio. "I made a huge jump at the world championships, so if I can keep that up and with the new opportunities I have ahead of me in the next three months, training with medallists at the world championships, and with my own coach who can now focus more time on me as an Olympic rep, I think a medal is very achievable."

Bowskill's focus will be squarely on the Olympics between now and the Aug. 8-18 sailing events, but her vision extends well beyond that, and she hopes to also represent Canada at the 2020 Tokyo Games.

The sporting success has opened her eyes to new possibilities outside the dinghy, as well, where she has put her undergraduate studies at Ryerson on hold for now, but will be attacking them with the same type of ferocity soon enough.

"It's funny because once I accepted the goal six years ago to go to the Olympics and I finally did it, when it happened I was like, I can do this for anything," said Bowskill, who had been thinking of become a nurse practitioner, but may take it a step further. "If I want to be a doctor, I can go and be a doctor. It's going to take me six or eight or 12 years to do it, but it gave me the idea that whatever I set my mind to, and if I'm willing to put in the work, anything is achievable."

Oshawa Sports Hall of Fame induction next Wednesday

Ex-Gen Eric Lindros headlines class of 2016

OSHAWA — The Oshawa Sports Hall of Fame will welcome a Hart Trophy winner and an Olympic champion among its five new inductees on Wednesday, May 25 at the Generals Motors Centre.

Eric Lindros, who won a Memorial Cup with the Oshawa Generals in 1990 and named the NHL's most valuable player in 1995, and Elena Davydov, a gold-medal gymnast at the 1980 Olympics, will be enshrined alongside motocross star Ron Keys, badminton builder Peter Stephenson and the late Gord Garrison, a local broadcasting legend.

The 31st annual ceremony will begin with a 5.30 p.m. reception and a 6:30 p.m. dinner, followed by the induction ceremony.

Tickets for the full event are available for $65 by calling Ross Jones at 905-723-4159. The induction ceremony alone is free and open to the public.

Dr. Douglas Smith
Guest columnist

Psyching up for the big game

I am often asked by the media how players and teams prepare to cope with the playoffs in professional sports and the Olympics.

My response to this is that it's easy to get nervous and overwhelmed by the hype and hoopla of big game competitions. However, the real champions are able to kick into their mental 'A' game to propel them to a higher performance level.

Controlling the mental ups and downs of the game and the emotions that accompany these mood swings is critical. This psychological training isn't just a quick fix and a last-minute job. It begins in practices, training and regular games during the season.

The emphasis is not about trying to play perfect through the whole performance, as that only intensifies the emotional chemistry and causes havoc with fluid play and quick thinking.

The following mental strategies will help manage the highs and lows of critical games.

Champions learn to focus on the can-do factors. They recall and visualize past good games, plays and practices.

They learn from bad games, mistakes and poor performances and incorporate that knowledge into future games.

They do this by preparing for every eventuality. They don't just rely on their superior physical skills and abilities to carry them through. They have a plan to never give up no matter what happens to the very last second.

They realize that every player on the team has an equal opportunity to give a personal best performance and thereby lessen the pressure from the stars to carry the game. Each player needs to realize he or she is just as important to the process as the star performers.

Another huge part of the mental preparation is to get a good sleep and be refreshed, positive, relaxed and let go of mistakes on the spot.

When mistakes occur, deep abdominal breathing and reminding self to focus on energizing words like "attack", "power up" and "you can do it" help get the athlete and team back on track.

The athletes who are able to follow the above strategies will be better able to block out distractions and nervousness and focus like a laser beam on the relevant variables and maintain their energy throughout the whole game.

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