

The Daily Sail

THE RACING SAILOR'S HOMEPAGE

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A 'no-excuses' campaign

We speak to Sarah Ayton and coach Paul Brotherton about the British route to Yngling Gold



Photo: Carlo Borlenghi/www.carloborlenghi.com

While she, Sarah Webb and Pippa Wilson were the first to land a Gold Medal in sailing for Team GBR at this Olympics Sarah Ayton hasn't begun to party hard just yet. Fiancé Nick Dempsey, who she is marrying in two months' time, is himself perilously close to landing himself a medal in the RS:X medal race tomorrow and the big party will only happen once that is done and dusted.

The Team GBR Yngling campaign for Beijing was of course born of Shirley Robertson's Athens campaign where both Sarahs had won Gold with Robertson. Since then Ayton had taken over the helm with Sarah Webb in the middle and they recruited talented youth sailing star Pippa Wilson at the pointy end.

So how was their campaign different this time compared to the one they mounted for Athens? "There were lots of things that were different, but it was the same goals," says Sarah Ayton of their quest for a second Olympic Gold. "Where I thought we needed to make gains was different to last time. Last time the program was very technically driven while this time it was more just about being the best sailors: not looking for the edge on the speed, but more what we do around the race track.

"The Yngling is a boat where the speed differences are very very small. Where we got to last time, the equipment in the boat that we had was the best it could be and that was the case this time. And the rest of it comes down to what you do on the water and the decisions that you make. And that is where we excel and working with Paul [Brotherton, their coach] has really helped, especially in Qingdao where the tide is massive."

In a regatta that statistically was likely to be a light affair, the prospect of having as much as two knots of tide under you was always going to be a big deal. "It doesn't matter how fast you go because if you get the tide wrong you are going nowhere fast. It can equate to 10 or 15 boat lengths a minute," warns Ayton.

While there is less tide on the course they spent most of their time racing on, on Course A where their first day was spent and subsequently their medal race, it was stronger and there was also a tidal gradient across the course. "The 49ers have what they describe as their 'magic carpet'," describes Ayton. "If you get a big billboard and another board lined up that's when you hit the magic carpet where the tide flows a bit faster. And then it is a light wind regatta, so it is shifty as well, so you have to weigh up whether the shift is outweighing the tide. And I guess that's why the program is so different – you have to be so on top of tide and shift and team work is absolutely fundamental. In Athens tide wasn't an issue."

To get to know the venue the team spent around 60 days on the water off Qingdao in the build-up to the Games this year but have been spending time sailing on the Olympic race course on and off for the last three years. "It is pretty much home from home now," says Ayton, although she admits she can't wait to get home.

Despite it being light, so light at times that in most circumstances anywhere else in the world there would have been no chance of races being started, the races still turned out to be viable affairs, no doubt due to the skill and experience of their veteran PRO Peter Reggio. "He didn't push us off when it was too shifty," claims Ayton. "But just the nature of light wind sailing – puff and patch – it is about being patient and managing the risk. Because for sure you are on the right hand side and the breeze comes in from the left, you just have to make the best of that. It was light wind sailing and as we all know that is tough, but it was good fair regatta."

As to the weed issue, Ayton says this didn't present any problems for them during the regatta. "I think the Chinese have done an absolutely amazing job. When we left here at the end of June after our first camp we couldn't sail for here for five minutes without having to be towed into a weed-free piece of water. I can't believe that they managed to clean it up - the weed was no problem at all."

Previously weed would get caught between the rudder and the hull and before the start of the regatta there was much discussion about the Yngling class' rule prohibiting a weed stick from being carried on board. "It would have been a bit of an issue if we'd had bad weed, but it wasn't a problem," says Ayton.

Impressively given all the issues with the venue they were able to put in a textbook 'consistent' regatta, never winning a race (until the medal race) but equally having a 7th as their discard, finishing with an impressively low score of just 24 points net from eight races and the medal race. And yet they didn't secure Gold in quite the resounding way they had in Athens. In fact it was scarily close, a two horse race with the Dutch, who were trailing them by just one point going into the medal race.



Photo: Richard Langdon/www.oceanimages.co.uk

The Dutch team was unique as they operated a squad of nine Yngling sailors and their line-up chopped and changed between boats from regatta to regatta, only finalising the Olympic crew at the last minute, a month out from the Games. "They did well," admits Ayton. "Nine girls, three boats - so a hell of a lot of resource. Their aim was to get the best team in the boat and they had their best team. They put a really good program together and gave us a bit of a hard time."

So is the Dutch approach one we are likely to see other teams trying in future Olympics? Ayton reckons that we will to some extent, but doubts that it is a good idea to take the final selection right to the wire as the Dutch did this time.

Going into this Olympics, she believes there were three teams who were the strongest contenders. "Us, the Dutch and I think the Russians had complete control every day that we sailed in Qingdao. If we had our second boat, we had our training partners, Nick Cherry and Paul C-J [Campbell-James] helming our second boat. It is that fine tuning in the venue: when you have control over what you are doing, you can make steps forward. The Dutch were in that situation and have been for the last two years and that's why I believe they were up there."

Also significant are the nerves the Games understandably cause in its competitors for whom it represents the culmination of four years hard graft, immense effort and personal sacrifice. In this respect Ayton reckons that their previous experience in Athens helped greatly as she indicates it also was for Paul Goodison when he won Gold in the Laser this morning. With Ainslie and her Yngling crew securing the first Gold medals of the sailing event, is also perhaps contributing to a gold medal fever, a kind of confidence boost, that is spreading through the British camp. And this may bode well for Team GBR prospects in the four remaining events to be decided over the next two days.

Technical

While with Shirley Robertson they had one of the quickest Ynglings in Athens, considerable effort went into ensuring that they took their development program on from there.

According to their coach, Olympic veteran Paul Brotherton the biggest gear change they made was moving from North to a new slightly flatter mainsail made by Judd Smith at Doyle USA. "The North mainsail they were using was fine in an increasing breeze, but if it ever went from windy to light, it was just a little bit too full and too sticky. Other than that it was down to the usual thing of using that stuff better than anybody else."

Otherwise, Brotherton confirms what Ayton says: they developed their technique more than their gear: "Everytime we looked at changing a piece of equipment we always came back with 'well, maybe it makes a difference, or it doesn't, maybe it is a little stronger here and not quite so strong there' and the only clear advantages we got when we made a gain and not a loss in any other department was when we made a technique gain."

In this respect Brotherton says they worked hard on optimising the combined use of their sail controls. "The boat is really sensitive. You wouldn't believe the difference. If you change one thing by a very small amount the personality of the boat is completely altered. I think that particularly Sarah Ayton and I had a very good relationship on the water where she could tell me how the boat felt and I could tell her how it looked from the outside and between us we got to the right answer. That has been a strong feature and a real big confidence booster. To have that communication was really pivotal for the decisions that we inevitably had to make about which kit to use."

Sarah Ayton gives one example of their attention to detail. "We had a few things up our sleeve which we just pulled out and it really made a difference. Like making sure all the sheets were as light and as thin as they possibly could be and we could save weight where we could and be more aerodynamic where we could. So sailing with 2.5 or 3mm spinnaker sheets - it was things like that that made a difference. If you are going downwind in a couple of knots of wind with tide against, it is triple the amount of time on the beat - so you need to be quick."

They were fastidious in logging numbers and their calibration settings - where they put the mast, how they trimmed the sails, etc. As Brotherton says: "Bearing in mind by the closing stages of the campaign we had four boats, four masts and numerous amounts of sails - when you are changing bits of equipment to try and finalise which mast is going to go with which boat and which sails, you need to be absolutely accurate that you are using it to the best of its ability. The girls did a fantastic job of always calibrating everything and taking a really accurate record of what the settings were each day."



Photo: Richard Langdon/www.oceanimages.co.uk
Sarah Webb, Sarah Ayton and Pippa Wilson

Responsibility for this was largely taken up by new recruit Pippa Wilson. "The whole process has been really good for Pippa, because she came into it as a junior sailor, albeit a brilliant one," says Brotherton. "I've known for a long time that she was a very special talent, but I think what she has gained from the whole thing is that she has taken on a hugely responsible position and has risen to the challenge. With the help and assistance of the girls, she has grown and it has been great for me to see her to change from a junior sailor to an Olympic champion in two years." Here here.

The team also identified that performance downwind was going to be crucial ingredient to their campaign too. "We knew that we had to make a gain downwind," continues Brotherton. "We came away from the Pre-Olympics last year and it was absolutely apparent that it was going to be a downwind regatta. So all our winter program was on that - we did hours and hours and hours of spinnaker testing."

But in particular rather than going to one of the bigger sail lofts, they were keen to get an individual sailmaker to come on board, to take responsibility personally for their spinnaker development. "I was really keen for us not being enveloped into a process of someone designing the sails and someone who doesn't know what we're trying to do making the sails: it is the subtlety and the attention to detail that makes the different," says Brotherton. This individual came in the form of sailmaker Chris Owen.

"We did a lot of analysis of what we had and we decided on the changes we wanted to make and then Chris went away and he made them with passion and commitment," Brotherton continues. "Every spinnaker we got was just fantastic,

whereas in other situations we'd had, we'd buy 10 sails knowing that we'd be looking to sell nine and keep one – that is no exaggeration with some of the fore and sails, that was the sort of ratios we were looking at. But with the spinnakers, wherever we ended up with development we had to be sure that a) it was our spinnaker and no one else could get it and b) each one would be of the highest quality. You only need to look at the mark rounding results from the Olympics that we were very fortunate with that."

Over the duration of their campaign Brotherton reckons that they got through almost 100 sails.

While Qingdao was generally going to be a light weather venue, it was obviously important that the girls had all bases covered just in case the wind piped up, as it did for the medal race when it was blowing 20 knots.

"We had the option to change quite a few things to really profile the boat for light winds and we chose not to," says Brotherton. "I wanted to be in a situation where the girls could go to bed every night knowing that no matter what the forecast was they could go out and win the next day. We didn't need to be aggressive one way or the other. The only thing we did was over the period of the six months before the Olympics, they slowly but surely shifted 10kg of body weight between them. That was the only thing we did to profile ourselves for the regatta."

In terms of coaching in addition to Brotherton they were very fortunate to get some talented individuals to come along and offer advice. Trimmer extraordinaire, Andy Heming, most recently with Emirates Team New Zealand and previously Brotherton's 470 teammate from the 1992 Games, spent two days with them. "He was just brilliant," says Brotherton. "He threw in a couple of simple concepts, helped the girls get the right tempo, how to communicate the information and those couple of days were invaluable. I think it gave the girls a real confidence boost to get someone of that calibre in and divulge the information and get the girls to take it on."

In terms of their boat, they had four to choose from, the one they used for the games being a Petticrow. According to Brotherton when Shirley Robertson competed at the Worlds last year in Cascais she had upped her game and they believe that part of that was due to her sailing a newly acquired Petticrow boat. As a result they ordered two... "Then we chose the best one of those and then we sailed that against the boat that the girls won the Worlds in Miami and the pre-Olympics last year," recounts Brotherton. "We sailed those here in China for the whole of June and it wasn't clear at the end of that: it wasn't like one sailed off, it was still two Ynglings going very slowly through the water, but just every now and again, the Petticrow would pick up a little bit quicker and the boat just felt a little nicer and when the girls got in it they said they felt like going off and winning a Gold medal."

They subsequently used the boat at the Europeans and proved the point by winning. "One of the pre-requisites for any equipment we were going to use at the Olympics was that it had to have won a major championship," continues Brotherton. "So that put on a lot of pressure, after the girls got selected because we only had the Worlds and Europeans to test stuff. And we ended up missing the Worlds, so that eliminated one of the boats. But we tested the two Petticrows in Europe, we picked the one we preferred, we took that to the Europeans and it won that. And then we said 'Is that good enough to go to China?' And the obvious answer was 'yes' and then we sent that with the boat that won in China last year to make sure we were always grounded and we had something to measure ourselves against."

With two boats in China they were able to get other sailors across from the UK to spar with. In particular they used Nick Cherry and Paul Campbell-James for this, but also match racing world champion Ian Williams and Graham Bailey. "We had a few hints and tips from him, one of which was an absolute beauty, which I can't tell you about," says Brotherton of Bailey's input. "And that single thing that Graham came and delivered in those two hours was probably worth 10 points at this regatta."

In summary Brotherton says: "From my perspective, the girls were 100% committed to being totally prepared. There was nothing going to be left unattended to. If there was anything that needed doing they just did it - and that is very brave. Because if you don't prepare properly, and if you do leave a few things undone, you can always lean on them as an excuse for not delivering. It is very brave to take that on and do a 'no-excuses program' and from there to go and execute an almost faultless regatta is testament to how well the three of them work under pressure. It is draw dropping and spine tingling to watch. In the environment we were facing this week you were only ever one slightly aggressive decision away from disaster. The girls were very cautious and super safe and put themselves in a position where they could use the advantages that they had got."

From here the Sarahs and Pippa Wilson will take time out and then, according to what is announced at the ISAF Conference in November, will start genning up on their match racing rules.



Photo: Richard Langdon/www.oceanimages.co.uk