

Voyage to Paralympics begins for Qingdao

► International regatta a prelude to upcoming sailing competition

By Wei Zhihui

The 2008 International Association for Disabled Sailing (IFDS) Qingdao International Regatta, the largest of its kind in Asia, concluded yesterday at Qingdao Olympic Sailing Center.

Sixty-seven sailors from 16 countries including sailing powerhouses Britain, France and the United States competed from May 8 to 15 in the regatta that featured all the three 2008 Paralympic sailing events — one-person 2.4-m keelboat, two-person SKUD18 keelboat and three-person Sonar keelboat.

Six Chinese sailors participated in the three sailing events.

Skippers from the Great Britain and Australia, both

known for their sailing prowess, had good performance in the races.

British team scored two championships with Niki Birrell and Alexandra Rickham in SKUD18, and John Robertson, Stephen Thomas and Hannah Stodel in Sonar.

China's skipper achieved the 5th place in SKUD18 event.

Su Li, the coach of China team, said "it is already a very good achievement for them because they had been trained for only a little more than two years".

Despite capricious weather including big winds, rain and dropping temperatures, sailors overcame difficulties to complete the races.

Most sailors agreed that a key element for race is the judgment of the wind.

"Because the weather is very complicated on the sea, you need to have an acute sense of wind direction," said Paul Tingley, a 2.4-m skipper from Canada.

"It is very important for sailors to be in a good state. You don't have to take the first place in every race but you will be a winner if you keep yourself in your game," said Alphonsus Doerr, a Sonar skipper from the United States.

Advanced sports facilities and considerate services also helped athletes enjoy the races.

Phil Vardy, a technical representative of IFDS, said "the facilities here are the best I've ever seen for disabled sailors, and the skippers' performances are very inspiring".

Service standards set for the international regatta are all in line with those for 2008 Paralympic Sailing Competition, which will be held in Qingdao in September, making the con-

cluded competition a successful tuneup for this autumn's sailing gala.



British sailors Niki Birrell and Alexandra Rickham celebrate their SKUD18 championship with their coach.

Photos by Ju Chuanjiang



Accompanied by Qingdao Vice-Mayor Zang Aimin (left), Constantine (middle) from Greece, ISAF President of Honor, and David Kellett, vice president of ISAF inspect the Qingdao sailing center.

ISAF delegation 'amazed' by sailing venue

By Zhang Ying

With fantastic facilities at its venue, Qingdao is a perfect choice for the 2008 Olympic sailing competition, said Goran Petersson, president of the International Sailing Federation (ISAF).

"Through playing host to a series of international yachting events, the city has won a worldwide reputation," he noted.

"It is quite competitive to win the bid to host big sailing events that ISAF plans to launch after this year's Olympics," he said.

Petersson made the remarks during the 2008 ISAF mid-year meeting that was held in Qingdao from May 8 to 12 with 95 delegates from around the world in attendance.

Delegates visited the Olympic village, the media center, the spectator jetty and other facilities in the Olympic Sailing Center in the company of Zang Aimin, vice-mayor of the city and vice-chairperson of the Qingdao Olympic Sailing Committee.

They were impressed with Qingdao's favorable climate, sports facilities and the performance of volunteers.

"The host city's preparation for the Olympic sailing competition is outstanding and I am sure that all the involved athletes will be satisfied," said Constantine from Greece, ISAF president of honor and honorary chairman of the ISAF Sailing Hall of Fame.

"Why do we need to give further advice since everything here is so perfect?" he added.

Pointing with interest at the street lights lining the spectator jetty that use wind energy, he noted they "are convincing evidence for the favorable wind condition here in Qingdao, which is very important for sailing".

Constantine himself was Olympic athlete. At the age of 20 he competed in the 1960 Olympics in Rome and won a gold medal in sailing, the first gold medal Greece won in 50 years of participation in the modern Olympics.

Adrienne Greenwood from New Zealand used three "amazings" to express her high praise to the Olympic village. "I have been to Barcelona, Sydney and some other host cities for the Olympic sailing competition, and Qingdao's venue facilities can be regarded as the best of the best."

Paralympic champion eyes another gold

By Xue Xiaoying

Damien Seguin, 28-year old French gold medalist in the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games, does not think he is different than the able-bodied. He refers to the Paralympic Games as the Olympic Games.

Seguin got the first place in the 2.4-meter R class in the just concluded 2008 International Association for Disabled Sailing (IFDS) Qingdao International Regatta held between May 8 and 15.

"For me sailing is a very great and beautiful experience. When you are on the sea, you are away from your problems," Seguin told China Daily.

The sailor took up sailing when he was only 10. Though he was born disabled, his

sanguine spirit and formidable sailing experience helped him win a gold medal at the 2004 Paralympics, which he considers the biggest achievement of his sailing career.

Already qualified for the coming Paralympics to be held in Beijing in September, Seguin said his goal is to win another gold medal.

"I can not say I will win, but I will do my best."

He said the secret of his success "is because of my sail and mast, which are specially designed and help me hold the wind better — I like wind, whether light or strong".

Three years ago Seguin himself designed the equipment on his computer and had it made by manufacturers.

"To compete in international games, you have to get good equipment that should adapt

to different environments," he said.

"For example, the race here in Qingdao is quite different from that in Europe. The winds and currents are so different. So far I have adjusted the equipment over 10 times."

Although already a Paralympic champion himself, Seguin also has his own idol, Eric Tabarly — a former officer in the French navy who is often considered the father of French yachting.

"He is a great sailor and made sailing a really beautiful experience."

Seguin is a school teacher who coaches children aged 10 to 19 in almost every kind of sport.

He also founded the Des Pieds et des Mains — Feet and Hands — Association to promote equal opportunities

for disabled people, raise awareness of related issues and raise resources to compete in the world's leading offshore races.

"It is the most important for me that the disabled and the able-bodied can sail together."

And he is often deeply touched by other disabled sailors.

"The sailor from Sweden is so great. He has no arms but only hands (directly on his shoulder) and his legs cannot move, yet he can sail like me. It is really amazing."

"I've been to Qingdao for training before and this is the third time that I came to the beautiful city and I can see all people here are happy to welcome the Olympics."

"Last time I trained with Chinese sailors here. They are

nice guys. As newcomers in sailing, they don't have much experience but they tried their best and made progress."

Seguin said the coming Beijing Paralympics will be the last Olympic event in which he will participate.

The biggest challenge for him will then be racing in the Vendee Globe, a round-the-world single-handed yacht competition, sailing non-stop and without assistance, he said.

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Chinese sailors in race

Disabled yachtsman grows stronger through yachting

By Du Shu

"Sailing has changed me, making me stronger and more confident," China's wheelchair-bound sailor Li Ke told China Daily in a recent interview.

Li and his teammates managed eighth place in the Sonar class during the 2008 International Association for Disabled Sailing (IFDS) Qingdao International Regatta that just ended yesterday.

"It is not easy for them to get this result only after two years of training," said Su Li, head of the Chinese disabled sailing team.

After five days of competing with the world's top sailors, the 34-year-old Li realized his own shortcomings.

"Compared with them, we lack competition experience.

We should do more training setting sail and judging winds and currents," Li noted.

Sailing was totally alien to Li before he began training in 2005. His only link to the sport, his future career, was that he is a good swimmer — if that can be counted.

His love of swimming helped him become an advanced swimmer in 2001 though he is disabled. He later turned to wheelchair racing and won a silver medal in an international marathon held in Dalian in 2002.

Sailing, however, "is not easy at the beginning", he said. "I had learnt much about sailing, like how to sail with wind and current."

Through the effort, he gradually began to enjoy the new sport. Due to his outstanding performance, he was selected to

be a Sonar keelboat skipper.

In addition to gaining sailing expertise, Li has another task — writing Chinese characters for two hours every day.

His coach Su said it helps develop concentration.

Now Li is eager to qualify for the 2008 Paralympic Sailing Competition to be held in Qingdao in September. "I will work harder to realize that goal."

The luckiest thing for him in 2008 is to participate in the Qingdao leg of the Olympic torch relay as a torch bearer in July, he said.

"I couldn't believe my ears when I heard the news. I have never thought I could be so lucky to be chosen as an Olympic torch bearer."

"I am really looking forward to the torch relay and wish it success," he added.

IFDS head gives thumb's up to international regatta

By Zhao Ruixue

Serge Jorgensen, president of the International Association for Disabled Sailing (IFDS), heaped praise on the successful organization of 2008 IFDS Qingdao International Regatta held from May 8 to 15, and gave a thumbs up to the barrier-free environment of the sailing center in Qingdao.

"The venue is absolutely fantastic. It is probably the best sailing base in the world," Jorgensen said.

Jorgensen highlighted the convenience brought by the barrier-free facilities in line with the international standards.

"I am very impressed with center facilities. They are amazing. Everyone can use them easily."

Bearing the "people's Olympics" in mind, the city

government has undertaken wide ranging work to build a barrier-free environment.

Obstacle-free lifts and slopes and passages wider than 1.2 m have ensured physically challenged sailors an easy access to various functional buildings — the Administration Center, the Athlete Center, the Media Center, the Reception Center, the Olympic Village and competition sites.

Phone booths, wash rooms and dressing rooms have been rebuilt to meet the needs of physically challenged people.

On the competition sites, three 60-m-long barrier-free pontoons fenced with wood edges and six suspension devices were specially outfitted for the regatta to help disabled sailors safely board their boats.

Besides the convenience in the center, Jorgensen also noted the cultural elements of the event.

"Everything, from colors to such simple things as banners which read 'Transcendence, Equality, Integration', reflects a combination of Chinese culture with the Olympic spirit," he said.

"Volunteers are friendly. They are an important part of the event. Without them, our competition could not go smoothly," he noted.

Foreign athletes echoed Jorgensen's opinion. "Volunteers here are considerate and warm-hearted. Their performance is impressive," said Carl-Gustaf Fresk, a SKUD18 sailor from Sweden.

All volunteers working at the regatta received professional training including skills in operating facilities and good manners.

As a prelude to the 2008 Paralympic Sailing Competition, which will take place at

the same venue in September, the regatta provided a good opportunity to test facilities and conditions of the venue for the Paralympic event, Jorgensen said.

Jorgensen summed up the highlights of the upcoming 2008 Paralympic Sailing Competition in an exclusive interview, saying "there will be a lot of firsts here".

"All three sailing sports will take place for the first time in Paralympic history while in the past we only had two of them," he said.

In addition, "we will have the most athletes participating this session," he said.

Previous Paralympic sailing competitions only saw two sports — one-person and three-person keelboats. A new event boat known as SKUD 18 will be added for the 2008 Paralympic Sailing Competition.



SKUD 18, a new event that will be added for the 2008 Paralympic Sailing Competition, during the 2008 International Association for Disabled Sailing (IFDS) Qingdao International Regatta. The city's sailing facilities have impressed both athletes and IFDS officials.