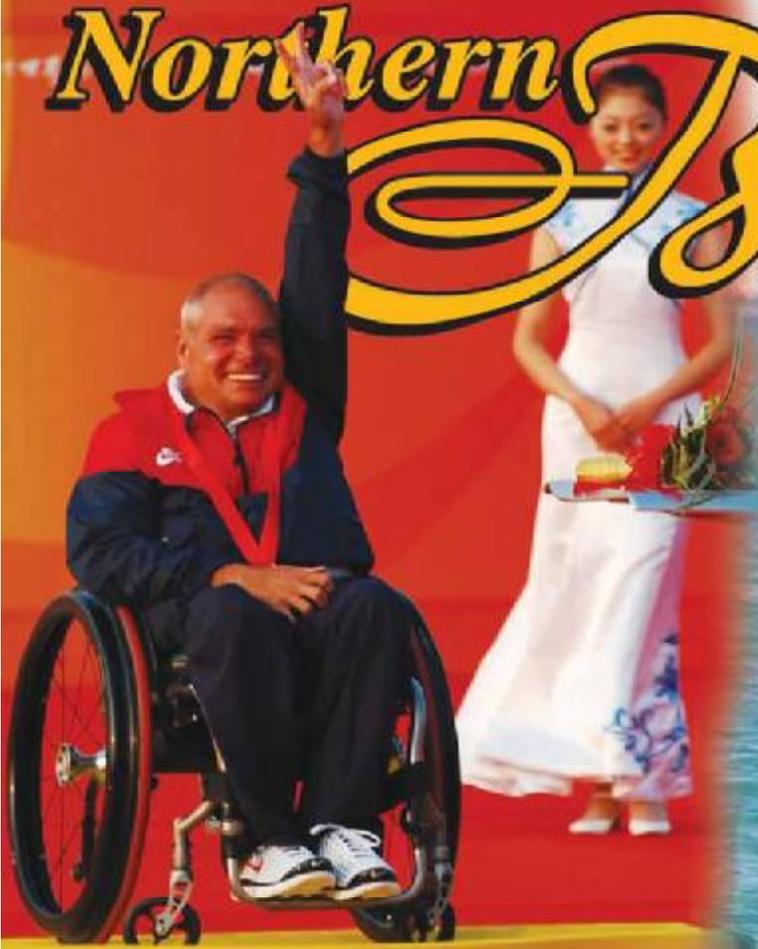


Northern Breezes

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**Wisconsin Sailor, John Ruf
Wins Bronze in
Beijing Paralympics**



Over 500 New and Used Boats



Minnesota Women Take On Worlds

By Anna Middleton

Last August, a team of four from the Minnesota Women's Sailing Team (MWST) trailered their boat, *SheMight*, to New York. Their goal: to compete in the J/22 World Championship Regatta.

The Rochester Yacht Club, one of the oldest yacht clubs in the United States, hosted the prestigious championship, and participants came from all over the globe. Some of the nations represented included the Netherlands, Canada, the Virgin Islands, South Africa, and France.

This year was only the second time a team from MWST had attended Worlds. Participating in such international competitions is part of MWST's continuing effort to foster leadership skills, encourage camaraderie, strengthen confidence, and increase skill levels of women sailors.

"Lois, Cait, Jenny, and I practiced together for a couple of months before going," says skipper Leah Willcutt. "We had all done regattas before, but never together, and practicing together and getting to know each other on the boat is essential to working together as a team."

Four days before they needed to leave for Worlds, however, the team was dealt a severe blow: one of their members started having serious back problems. She was in a lot of pain and in no condition to spend six days on a boat with three races per day. Although the team had trained so hard, it looked like they would never make it to their long-awaited goal.

In a last-minute stroke of luck, however, experienced trimmer Joni Berg happened to be available and willing to take the week off work. Berg hadn't trained with the rest of the team, but she leaped into the position with enthusiasm.

Together, the new MWST team drove the sixteen hours to Rochester in two days to be fresh and ready for a long week of sailing. That same evening the MWST team had their sails measured, their safety gear collected, and their boat weighed. The next day they put up the mast and cleaned and polished the hull.

"A few new decals on *SheMight* made a couple people say that they thought we had a completely different



boat! She was looking good and fast," says Willcutt. The entire team was optimistic.

The first day's practice was equally encouraging as the team powered their boat through the large, rolling waves on Lake Ontario. Although they started late, they still managed to catch a few competitors on the upwind leg and realized they had a real chance to be in the middle of the fleet.

"We certainly had moments of brilliance," remarks Berg, "and the teamwork and communication happening on the boat were phenomenal."

The first day of actual racing turned out to be the team's best finish. But sadly, it didn't count because the time limit expired.

"That was really frustrating for us because light air is our forte," says Willcutt. The race was postponed most of the day due to light wind, and even after the race finally began, the breeze remained so faint and capricious that over a third of the fleet failed to finish in time.

The next race day provided a very different challenge. The morning started with another light air postponement, but steadily the breeze built until white caps and chop harried the lake.

"On the second day, we were working hard to keep the boat going through Lake Ontario waves," explains foredeck-er Jenny Child. "We don't see waves like that at home, and we were pretty glad our host family had a hot tub for us to sit in that night!"

This was Caitrin Mullan's first world championship as jib trimmer, and keeping the boat moving through those steep waves during the upwind tacks was a new test for her.

"The first leg of each race was 1.7 nautical miles," points out Mullen, "so by

the end of a windy day that was a lot of trimming!"

The whole team joined the fight to keep the boat moving through the chop, but the continuous battle left them tired after the first race—and completely spent after the next two races.

"We never quite recovered our strength in the next couple days," says Willcutt. "Fortunately, it wasn't that windy again."

This was also Willcutt's first international race as skipper.

"I was pretty terrified of the starts at first, but in the end I decided that was the part I liked the most," she says. One of her favorite moments was maneuvering *SheMight* into her ideal starting position—and then finding that several sterling sailors had chosen exactly the same spot.

"I figured I was doing okay on the starting line when I looked below me and saw Greg Fisher [the regatta's ultimate winner] and Terry Flynn. If I picked the same spot they did, I must be doing something right!" Willcutt adds, "You have to celebrate the small successes when you're competing against 104 of the top J/22s in the world."

Obligations back home forced the team to miss the last day of the regatta, but all in all, they placed 99 out of 105.

"It was a fantastic experience," says Willcutt. "I loved the excitement of having 105 boats on the line, and it's a great sense of accomplishment to know that I sailed in a World Championship. I can't wait until next time!"

MWST offers excellent chances for women of all ages, backgrounds, and experience to plunge into the exhilarating sport of sailing and racing.

To learn more, contact them at: www.mwst@mwst.org