

GOING FOR GOLD



Britain has some of the strongest Olympic contenders in the world, so with only one representative allowed in each class, some very good sailors are going to be left out. Who will make that critical selection and will the losers always wonder if they could have struck Gold?



One of the harsh realities of Olympic campaigning is that only one representative per nation per class is allowed to attend the Games. This means that to make it to the Olympics, first you have to beat your compatriots. Skandia Team GBR has great strength in depth in some classes, which is great for Britain, but very harsh on the sailors who have proven they have medal potential and yet will never get the chance to put it to the test in China next year.

Top: break up of the 'Blondes'. Sarahs Ayton and Webb have a new crew. Right and below: 49ers of the moment, Steve Morrison and Ben Rhodes



For example, in the Yngling women's keelboat class, one of our Olympic champions from Athens will not be defending their title. Why? Because the 'Three Blondes in a Boat' who took Athens by storm three years ago – Shirley Robertson, Sarah Ayton and Sarah Webb – are now divided into two boats. The two Sarahs formed their own campaign soon after Athens, with Ayton stepping to the back

to take the helm while former Youth World Champion Pippa Wilson is the new girl on board.

Shirley Robertson, on the other hand, is making a late bid to secure selection ahead of her former team mates and aiming at a third consecutive Olympic Gold. Sailing with new campaigners Annie Lush and Lucy Macgregor, along with all the responsibilities of bringing up her twins born last year, Robertson has a steeper

mountain to climb than ever before.

One way or another, one of our Gold medallists is going to finish this campaign disappointed. At the moment things seem to be moving in favour of

Ayton's team, who finished 2nd in the Princess Sofia Trophy in Palma, behind the top American team headed by Sally Barkow. Robertson, who has been using Palma as her winter training base for the past few months, started the regatta well, but faded in the latter stages to finish 8th.

The RYA has not been explicit about the selection procedure for China 2008, but certainly there is a lot riding on the ISAF World Championships this July in Cascais, Portugal. That leaves Robertson just three months to close the gap with Ayton and Co. When you ask close observers of this Yngling duel, some say that Shirley has left herself with too much to do, others that you just can't bet against someone with the sheer grit and determination that has already brought two Gold medals.

In the Princess Sofia Trophy, the only Gold medal for Skandia Team GBR came in the 49er skiff fleet, with Stevie Morrison and Ben Rhodes confirming their status as the most consistent performers of the past year. The Exmouth duo are the reigning European Champions and have secured more podium finishes in the past year than any other team. The proven performers, Chris Draper and Simon Hiscocks, on the other hand, have suffered a dip in form this season, coming 12th in Miami where Morrison and Rhodes finished 2nd and finishing 8th in Palma compared with their rivals' 1st.

However, Morrison is aware that the weight of history lies with Draper and Hiscocks. They are the reigning World and Pre-Olympic Champions, they have finished in the top two of the past five 49er World Championships (winning in 2003 and 2006) and they won a Bronze medal at the Athens Olympics. So who do you choose? The benchmark team of the past five years or the benchmark team of the moment?

Tough decisions for the team selectors, but even tougher times for the sailors who will always wonder if they could have won Gold in China – if only they had earned the chance to compete.



Photos: R Langdon/Skandia Team GBR

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