

Annie Haeger GOES for GOLD

by JOSEPH LONGO



PHOTO: BRIDGET GARNER

WISCONSIN NATIVE ANNIE HAEGER HAS MADE IT TO THE TOP OF WOMEN'S SAILING IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD. NOW HER SAILS ARE SET FOR OLYMPIC GOLD AT THE 2016 RIO GAMES.



Team Haeger/Provancha racing at the 2014 ISAF Sailing World Cup Mallorca in Palma de Mallorca, Spain where they placed fifth.

PHOTO: MICK ANDERSON/US SAILING TEAM SPERRY TOP-SIDER

"Is that a U.S. Sailing Team shirt I see?" yelled a woman atop the Waukegan Yacht Club balcony. With her signature wide grin, Annie Haeger proudly replies with a confident, "Yes ma'am." At only 24-years-old, with her bright, glittery gold Sperry Top-Siders on and slender figure, Haeger could pass as any post-college graduate, yet two things stand as a clue that she's more than your average 20 something-year-old. The woman on the balcony got one of those right: her plain blue polo with a big, bold "U.S. Sailing Team Sperry Top-Sider" crest; the other being her hands. With un-manicured, worn fingernails, Haeger's hands speak of someone with years of manual labor—in her case that being aboard a sailboat.

ANNIE HAEGER IS SOMETHING OF A SAILING PRODIGY. While most teenage athletes hit their peak in high school sports, and even those with projected college careers may travel the country on club teams, Haeger was a vast step ahead. It was during this period that she didn't first start sailing competitively; rather it was then that she started traveling the globe partaking in international youth competitions. "I knew I had a niche in the sailing

world right away. I was the women's national champion, I went to Europe, and I finished first in a lot of major events," Haeger said about her early success. "I knew that my passion and my atmosphere should grow into the sailing community."

Haeger started out in the Optimist Dinghy boat where she placed third in the open Championship, won a Women's National Championship, and

won the North American Championship in Tobago. She next moved on to the Laser Radial boat. In what is equivalent to the Youth Olympics, Haeger had her first major international success placing second in the Laser Radial at the 2007 Youth Worlds in Kingston, Ontario. It was also at this regatta where Haeger first met Briana Provancha.

Sitting down with Annie, there is someone she so often mentions—her former competitor and current sailing partner. It is who she considers her other half to be: Briana Provancha. Provancha is Haeger's crew on the sailboat and the one who introduced her to the 470 boat they currently sail. In 2010, during Thanksgiving break at school, Provancha told Haeger to come sail the 470. "[She] dragged me on the plane [to] San Diego and we went to the harbor. All we wanted to do was go for a cruise and see if I loved the boat," said Haeger with a reminiscent smile. "I fell in love with the boat and also her. I always call her 'my wife.' We spend more time together than I spend with my family, my friends, anyone. I love the girl to death; she's like my sister."

For someone as notoriously competitive as Haeger, this fierce bond is seen as a clear strength out in the sailing world. "I knew that Briana and I together had something very special. The

chemistry that we have, and the amount we are able to push each other, is such a unique thing, and she is an incredible sailor [and] athlete," Haeger said. "I couldn't ask for a better crew. I know a lot of international teams kind of struggle with the chemistry [aspect], and I think this is something very unique that we have. That is for sure a strength."

COMING ABOUT

Haeger's competitive edge was an obstacle to her early transition from solo sailing to partners. "I had to learn how to communicate effectively. That was a big change; it began in high school sailing, but I didn't really solidify how to communicate properly until college sailing." Haeger admits that early on she would not talk with her sailing partner. "We've fined-tuned our communication and are able to use limited amount of words and short-cuts in order to communicate more effectively. We use cute little nicknames for different maneuvers to keep it fun and more concise." Given that Haeger and Provancha spent the majority of summer 2014, their competition season, road tripping throughout Europe doing Mad Libs or playing Sudoku while transporting their boats themselves, quality communication was a necessity to have a successful season. Haeger recounts how they would often go on separate walks to both get time alone, but also to come up with more things to talk about.



Annie Haeger with her crew, Briana Provancha. They are currently ranked fourth in the world in Women's 470.

Though Haeger demonstrated potential professional talent early on in her sailing career, she didn't fully embrace the sport right away. "One Christmas when I was five years old, I walked down and saw an Optimist Dinghy under the tree, and I promptly started crying because all I wanted was a massive tiger [stuffed animal]," Haeger said. This resistance was a brief stint, however, as Haeger recounts falling in love with sailing as a family sport. With both an older and younger brother, she would travel the globe as a child sailing with her family visiting Antarctica, South America, and Africa among various other locations. "It helped me find the passion for the sport. I think that was the foundation to launch me into athletic pursuits of sailing."

While sailing around the world with her family, Haeger was home-schooled, so when her family moved from East Troy, Wisc. to Lake Forest in 2001, and she enrolled in sixth grade at Deer Path Middle School, Haeger was not used to the structured setting of a classroom. "Coming into middle school it was a little bit hard for me to acclimate to the school system and social aspects behind that," Haeger said. "[However] the amount of the world I saw on a sailboat and the amount of the world I saw with my family next to me is incredible, I would never take that away." Growing up in an environment that promoted sailing, while allowing her to do so in a safe, motivated environment gave her a leg-up that many other sailors did not have.

ON HER OWN

It may seem like much of Annie's success is due to opportunities her family bestowed upon her. Yet Haeger is not just a product of her family, she has shown she can be successful on her own accord. When asked if she felt behind in her Olympic preparation, since she is relatively new to the 470, Haeger's competitive nature has left her with an optimistic view of playing the catch-up game. "Looking at it, it's very intimidating. Trying to catch up on the many years you spent at school in order to catch up to their level right away is very daunting, but challenge accepted," Haeger said, referring to how European sailors are paid professionally straight out of high school, whereas in the United States the sailing at the collegiate level often follows high school.

Remarkably, Haeger had a hugely successful college sailing career. Attending Boston College, she was named the 2012 Female Eagle of the Year, 2012 Double-handed National Champion, three-time single-handed National Champion, and four-time All-American. Simultaneously, Haeger also received a Bachelor of Science in Marketing. In her mind, Boston College was the perfect fit all-around. "My parents were really wise in saying that if you broke your leg, would you still be happy in that school?" Haeger said. "And 100 percent it was the school for me. I loved the competitive atmosphere."

She would go on to spend a year post-college working for OCA Ventures, a venture capitalist firm in Chicago. Working part-time, as well as sailing full-time, became too much for her to handle, thus forcing her to reevaluate her situation. "Every time I was off a sailing event, I would fly directly to Chicago and go to work the next day. I would be jet lagged and it was really, really hard. I had no days to myself because on the weekends I would go back sailing again," said Haeger, who appreciated OCA Venture's flexibility in regards to her sailing career. "My coach and I sat down and told



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Haeger and Provancha striking a fun pose at the medal ceremony of the 2014 ISAF Sailing World Cup in Hyères, France where they won bronze.

me that I really needed to focus on the sport and become a student of the sport. That meant whenever I had time off, I was studying sailing."

Haeger's mentality is one of goal-setting both in her Olympic pursuit and her everyday life. "It is taking bite-sized chunks of a massive goal of winning a gold medal, and checking the boxes," Haeger said. "Briana and I know when we get to the games not every box is going to be checked, so hopefully the ones that need to be are." However, it is coming-to-terms with this idea that weighs on Haeger. "I'm a perfectionist. I want to be the best at everything, and I know with this boat in particular, that is not a possibility. Being able to compensate for the things that you're lacking with some of your strengths is where we're focusing."

TOP NOTCH

Currently ranked fourth in the world and formerly ranked first—and determined to get back there—Team Haeger/Provancha has indeed showed success. In fact, in their 2013-2014 season, the duo were bronze medalists at the ISAF Sailing World Cup in Hyères, France and placed second at the



Annie Haeger and Briana Provancha out for a race. Years earlier the duo had come away with the national title while at Boston College.

PHOTO: MICK ANDERSON/US SAILING TEAM SPERRY TOP-SIDER

2014 470 North American Championship. All these are boxes checked off in hopes of the ultimate goal, Olympic gold in Rio.

Haeger's competitive edge often dominates her personality, but there's another aspect that comes around often: her silly, happy manor. Not afraid to make a joke or poke fun at herself, her dream of Rio 2016 is more than just to sail, she wants to experience the culture as well. "I can't wait to get down there. I want to salsa dance and go to the beach. Everyone is calling it the "Rio Experience" so far, because it is a very unique venue and takes a lot of getting used to." The recent FIFA World Cup held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil has only furthered her restless anticipation.

Regardless of whether or not Rio 2016 comes to fruition—they still must qualify for the U.S. Sailing Team, and then as the representatives for the U.S. Women's 470—Haeger says she will always come back to sailing. "It's my passion. Through years and trials, sailing is the one consistent thing in my life that I know I can push myself as hard as I can, and I will keep coming back. Even if I have the hardest day on the water and I'm crying and so exhausted, I know the next day I will be able to step right back up because that is what I love," Haeger said.

She is well aware of the risks she is taking both physically and personally

by focusing solely on sailing. "I'm giving up a lot. Everything that I make goes into sailing. I'm not investing in my future financial stability or my future job position, and I'm so happy to be doing it," Haeger said, who admits it can be challenging to always be away from family and never have the stability of a day-to-day lifestyle.



PHOTO: BRIDGET GARNER

"I always tell everyone I'm the luckiest girl in the world. I'm doing what I love, and being quite successful at it. Hopefully I get to my dream which is the gold medal, but I'm so lucky on this journey right now with Briana." U

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