

SPORTS

AUTO RACING • D-2
PREP REPORT • D4-
SCOREBOARD • D-7SECTION
DTuesday,
October 16, 2007Indians defeat
Red Sox 4-2
to take 2-1
lead in ALCS
See D-7

Johnny Lovell: Had hands full in the Olympic Tornado Team Trials in San Diego

Rare pair: N.O. sailors heading to Beijing

*Lovell makes fourth Olympics;
Dane is competing in his first*

By Kyle Whitfield
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The 2008 Olympics in Beijing will include two hometown sailing standouts.

New Orleans natives John Lovell and John Dane III, 57, will compete in the sailing portion of the Olympics, which run Aug. 8-24. Lovell and sailing partner Charlie Ogletree won the Olympic Tornado Team Trials in San Diego, and Dane and his son-in-law partner, Austin Sperry, won the Olympic Star Team Trials in Santa Monica, Calif.



John Dane III
Took nearly
40 years to
reach goal

The Olympic berths also are a victory for New Orleans, since it's rare to have two competitors from the same city and same yacht club reach the Games.

The trip to the Olympics is nothing new for Lovell and Ogletree, who have competed in the

See OLYMPICS, D-5

OLYMPICS

"That's (qualifying for the Olympics) a crack in the door. We're going to work to get a medal. That's just a start."

JOHN DANE III, sailing in Star class



AP FILE PHOTO

JOHN DANE: When the 57-year-old president and CEO of Trinity Yachts and crew Austin Sperry, bottom, qualified for the Olympics in the Star class, "We hooted and hollered," Dane said. "We sprayed champagne all over ourselves. It was definitely emotional. I didn't cry; I just shouted for joy."

N.O. sailors make waves

OLYMPICS, from D-1

previous three Olympics, but that's not the case for Dane, who is the president and CEO of Trinity Yachts.

Dane competed in his first time trial in 1968. Almost 40 years later, he punched his ticket to arguably the largest display of international athletic talent.

"We hooted and hollered," Dane said. "Our wives and friends were in a spectator boat. They came over and threw us a bottle of champagne. We sprayed champagne all over ourselves. It was definitely emotional. I didn't cry; I just shouted for joy."

Said Sperry: "It was really surreal. It was pretty special at the end with all my family and my wife there. It's really hard with your emotions to keep everything in check. . . . The biggest thing with this is you just put so much energy and so much time and money into it. It's just your life is invested in one goal. Just to be able to succeed and work as hard we did, and we did it — that's pretty rewarding."

Dane and Sperry compete in the Star class. Star boats date to 1910 and are two-handed keelboats that typically are about 22 feet long. Winning the Star time trial was no walk in the park. The duo needed a first-place finish in the final race to secure its winning 59-point total. The second-place team finished with 63 points.

"It wasn't really nerves. We've been practicing for this," Sperry said. "We had a team down from (Los Angeles) for six months. We practiced these scenarios. You've got to know what to do. We predicted it; we rehearsed it."



FILE PHOTO BY AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD

Charlie Ogletree, left, and New Orleansian John Lovell have competed in the previous three Olympics. The duo had to fight for their sailing lives at the time trials in San Diego before pulling out a narrow victory.

"It was pretty special to win on the last day. I'm still pretty mentally and emotionally spent, so it's probably going to be like this for the next few days."

Lovell and Ogletree are eager for their shot at the gold medal. Before then, however, even reaching the Olympics for the fourth time was stressful enough.

In their 20-foot long catamaran, the duo had to fight for their sailing lives at the time trials — something they didn't expect beforehand. The trials consisted of 16 races over an eight-day span, plus a day off in the middle.

"We were extremely confident that we would do well and thought we might be able to win it pretty easily," Lovell said. "But, obviously, that didn't happen."

Lovell and Ogletree ran into the sailing team of Robbie Daniel and Hunter Stunzi, who came close to capturing a berth in the Olympics.

"In San Diego, it's very light

winds normally," Lovell said. "They sailed together about 20 pounds lighter than us as combined crew weight. That's really risky. That wouldn't work if there were strong winds. It was never windy, so it really paid off. It was kind of a gamble."

In the trials, teams are awarded points according to where they finish in the race. For example, the first-place team receives one point, and the second-place team receives two points. After the 10th race, Lovell and Ogletree found themselves down by five points, 19-14, with six races remaining.

"That was almost catastrophic," Ogletree said. "It left us at the last three days of the event having to win five of the final six races, which is a pretty tall order. In some ways, we were a little bit prepared mentally if we didn't win."

But they pulled off the comeback against Daniel and Stunzi by netting 23 points and winning races 11 and 13-16. The second-place team finished with

22 points.

"It was still a little stressful coming down to the last race," Lovell said. "We kind of thought we might lose, and I think that relieved a little bit of the pressure. We started clicking toward the end of the event, and we made zero mistakes in really the last six races."

While Dane and Lovell were successful in their bids to compete in the Olympics, another New Orleans native fell just short of his goal.

Mark LeBlanc finished in a tie for first in his one-person keelboat time trial, but he was defeated in a tiebreaker race.

Lovell's team and Dane's team now will continue training and compete in various events leading up to the Olympics.

"We'll go to the world championships in February in New Zealand, and we'll probably do two events leading up to the world championships," Lovell said of his and Ogletree's schedule. "Later in the spring and early summer, we'll probably do two-three events in Europe, including the European championship. Then, we'll probably go straight to China and train for about four weeks before the Olympics . . . on the Olympic course."

Dane said he isn't satisfied with simply making the Olympics. He wants more.

"That's a crack in the door," he said. "We're going to work to get a medal. That's just a start."

Sperry said he and Dane still are working out their schedule for the coming months, but he guaranteed the pair will be ready for its toughest test yet.

"For me, it's even more motivating now," he said. "Now, it's just gone to another level. I'm ready to go now."