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In wake of partnership, Dane's sailing smooth

By *By the Associated Press*

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NEW ORLEANS(AP) - At 6-foot-3, 220 pounds, John Dane III is a big man who builds some of the biggest yachts in the world for some of the richest people anywhere.

Is the 58-year-old living his dream? He will in August, when he takes to the Yellow Sea on a small, two-man sailboat off the Chinese port of Qingdao.

An avid sailor since he was a 10-year-old learning with his father at the historic Southern Yacht Club in New Orleans, Dane finally made the U.S. Olympic team after seven tries.

That's right. At 58, he's a competitor, not a coach, though he's often mistaken for the latter.

"On my first trip to China last year, to the Olympic venue, we went through security and they took one look at me, saw the gray hair and said, 'Coaches over there. The other side is for athletes,'" Dane said. "It's happened on more than one occasion."

Japanese equestrian team member Hiroshi Hoketsu, 67, is the oldest athlete to qualify for these Olympics. Dane is the oldest U.S. athlete and oldest sailor from any country. And when he says he could not have done it without the support of his family, he's not kidding.

The crewman in Dane's Star class keelboat is his 30-year-old son-in-law, Austin Sperry, who met Dane's daughter, Sally, while competing in a regatta on the Mississippi coast in 1999.

The past Olympic trials were their first as a team and the culmination of one last shot at an Olympic dream that Dane was determined to take despite the destruction of his home and business during Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

"A lot of things fell into place," Dane said. "It was a challenge rebuilding a business and a home while putting together an Olympic campaign, but I love challenges and I was fortunate to have the stars aligned this time."

Even the late-summer timing of Katrina was fortunate because most major North American sailing regattas aren't held in winter, and neither Dane nor Sperry had time to do much sailing during the winter following the storm.

Dane's home in Pass Christian, Miss., about 60 miles east of New Orleans, was knocked off its 20-foot pilings and obliterated. Sperry's home across town flooded badly, but was salvageable.

The region was in shambles and depression was setting in for many. There were about 440 homes on the peninsula where Dane lived. All but two were wiped out. However, Dane had a houseboat tied up in a lagoon that made it through the storm, so he and 12 others, including Sperry, moved into that.

After a few days in cramped quarters, Sperry decided he and Sally should spend a few weeks with his mother in California to get away from the devastation and regroup. Dane thought that was a bad idea, and wasn't shy about saying so.

"I told him, 'You need to stay here and show your wife you're ready to take charge, clean up your house and get your life back going again,'" Dane recalled. "A little while later he came back and said, 'We're going to stay.' He thanks me for that today because he learned a lot and did a good job."

Dane and his wife found a house north of Gulfport that had survived the storm, while Sperry oversaw the rebuilding of his home. Meanwhile, Dane bought 100 trailer homes for displaced employees and set them up on property owned by his company, Trinity Yachts, which builds so-called "mega yachts" ranging in price from \$60 to \$90 million. He put Sperry in charge of the acquisition, installation and management of the trailers.

Dane said Sperry's decision to stick around strengthened their bond in a way that probably helped their chemistry on the seas.

"We spent the next few months living together. We had to worry about everything from water to fuel to transportation to gasoline," Dane said. "You need a very close group to support each other coming out of total devastation."

By the spring of 2006, both Trinity Yachts and another company Dane owns most of, United States Marine (which builds naval patrol boats), were running strong again. Dane and Sperry were ready to resume their Olympic campaign. Their wives and business partners were supportive, so they went for it - the wisdom of the father-in-law and athleticism of the son-in-law proving a formidable combination, even if they sometimes cursed each other like sailors along the way.

Sailing requires quick, intelligent, vigorous and often instinctive reactions to shifting winds and changing seas. A small error by either man in a 22-foot, 7-inch Star class boat can cause a ruinous loss of momentum, so teammates tend to communicate in loud, indelicate bursts that convey a sense of urgency.

"There's no doubt that in the heat of battle we've probably said a few things that hurt each other's feelings," Dane said. "I'm sure he goes home and tells Sally what a jerk her dad is. We've obviously figured out it's just the heat of competition and we're all pulling for the same goal."

Dane, who grew up in New Orleans and studied engineering at Tulane University, honed his skills on Lake Pontchartrain, which forms the northern border of his native city, home to a long legacy of great sailors. The first American to win Olympic gold in the Star class was Gilbert Gray of New Orleans, who also sailed out of Southern Yacht Club and competed in the 1932 Los Angeles Games. Several other members of the club later won Olympic medals.

When Dane was a boy, he sailed with Gray, who taught him how to handle the massive-but-shallow Lake Pontchartrain's unique and often challenging conditions.

"It's basically a saucer with heat all around it, but when a front comes through, the lake is only 13 feet deep, so you get very steep waves," Dane said. "You get the full gamut of light air, fluky winds and fronts that come through and produce 30 knots. If you can master those conditions, you can sail anywhere."

The more than 150-year-old Southern Yacht Club had been housed in a building that dated to the 1940s, but was destroyed during Katrina, apparently when wind-driven waves ruptured gas lines, causing a fire that raged for days.

The club is operating again, albeit it out of temporary trailers, and Dane visits for lunch every few weeks.

More than the old building, Dane laments the loss of sailing memorabilia from the club's storied history.

"That's hard to replace," he said.

Eventually, the club will be rebuilt, gradually filled with new memorabilia, perhaps some brought back from Beijing, where a longtime member will have taken on the greatest sailors in the world.

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Rating: 5



AP Photo/Bacardi Cup, Alex Gott

Dane and Sperry round the third mark on their way to a sixth-place finish at the 2006 Bacardi Cup. The finish assured them the overall lead by eight points.

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