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**Page One**



Posted on Thu, May. 29, 2008

**DANE, SPERRY SAIL TOWARD OLYMPICS**  
**Olympic sailing team competitors making final travel preparations**

By DOUG BARBER  
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**GULFPORT** -- With the 2008 Olympics Summer Games just 70 days away, the pace has been hectic for U.S. Olympic sailing hopefuls John Dane and Austin Sperry of Gulfport.

Dane and his son-in-law Sperry will represent the U.S. in the Star class at the Beijing Olympics' sailing venue in Qingdao, China.

Wednesday turned into a day when Dane and Sperry gained the national spotlight. A TV crew from NBC came to Gulfport to film the tandem working out in the gym during the early-morning hours and sailing in the breezy Mississippi Sound in the afternoon.

Brian Williams will host the Olympics special, which Dane said will air in late July or early August.

"The story that they are focused on is someone trying for 40 years to make the Olympics, and No. 2, someone at my age competing at the Olympics."

Dane will be 58 when the Olympic Games begin in August. He is the oldest member of the 2008 team, although the team is not yet complete. And very few athletes compete at his age.

"There's no doubt about it," Dane said. "I've spent more time in the gym and I'm in my best sailing shape in 40 years. It feels good."

Dane finished second in the U.S. Dragon class trials in 1968, 40 years ago. He finished fourth in the Soling class trials in 1972, third in the Finn class trials in 1976 and fourth in the Star class in 1984.

Dane said he would weigh in at 210 pounds at Qingdao, 10 pounds lighter than he was when the tandem won the Olympic Trials in October in Marina del Rey, Calif. Sperry will drop from 220 to 217 for the Olympics.

Dane and Sperry just returned from Kiel, Germany, where they tested a new Star boat built specifically for China.

"We put 16 variations in the computer of hull shapes," Dane said. "We found one in 8 knots or less of wind that seemed superior than our current boat and the one most competitors will sail."

"We decided to build one. We tested it against our German counterparts who qualified for the Olympics and just finished fifth in the World Championships in Miami.

"Whoever was in the new boat would win the racing. Only two have been made in time for the Olympics. Hopefully, we have a secret weapon."

The Gulfport duo showed their tenacity in the clutch, rallying from a 13-point deficit halfway through the Olympic trials, wrapping it up on the last day.

"During the last five minutes hardly anybody on the spectator boat could breathe," said Dane's wife, Leslie. "When they crossed the finish line, we knew it was a clean race, they had won it, and there was total euphoria."

All the work for three years paid off.

"I would be lying if I said it wasn't tense," Sperry said. "But we had been preparing and training for so long. We were ready. I had the mental outlook the whole week - and I'm sure John did, too - that we were going to do this. We were focused. We went out and made it happen."

Sperry oversaw the recent loading in Miami of two 40-foot containers of motor boats, sailboats, masts and gear for China. He and Dane went to Chicago for an Olympic ambassador program, then to Kiel for the testing of the new design.

Sperry, in fact, flies to San Diego today to test sails and masts for the Olympics. Then the two will head to China June 13 for two weeks of training.

The process started three years ago; the goal is in sight.

"We went to Chicago two weeks ago to meet with the Olympic team," Dane said. "They said we'll always be considered Olympians after these games."

"We feel we have a good chance to medal."

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See more pictures of Dane and Sperry at sunherald.com

To follow the gold medal chase, you can also go to austinsperry.com

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JOHN FITZHUGH/SUN HERALD

John Dane, left, and Austin Sperry of Gulfport make their way back into the Gulfport small Craft Harbor Wednesday after a practice run. The two will be a part of the 2008 Summer Olympics in China in the sailing competition.

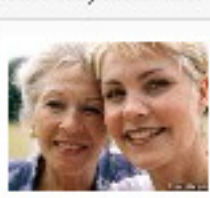


Olympic sailors

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