





SMOOTH WATER

DARTMOUTH SAILING
OVERCOMES THE ODDS ON
MANY FRONTS TO BECOME
A COLLEGE SAILING POWER

IMAGINE THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA-HUNTSVILLE ICE HOCKEY TEAM WINNING THE NCAA DIVISION I CHAMPIONSHIP

or NYU deciding to field a beach volleyball team and actually beating up on schools like Pepperdine and University of the Pacific, which play the sport at a varsity level.

While Dartmouth sailing doesn't have to deal with quite the kind of challenges the only varsity hockey team in the south faces, or that a beach volleyball team in the Big Apple would be up against, no one would expect a landlocked school sandwiched in the winter wonderland between Boston and Montreal to be a sailing powerhouse.

But it is.

Last spring the Dartmouth women's varsity sailing team became the first in a decade to earn back-to-back Inter-Collegiate Sailing Association national championships when it edged Yale at the Sperry Top-Sider Women's Nationals on the Severn River in Maryland. The Dartmouth women also won the national title in 1992 and 2000.

Dartmouth men's sailing won national championships in 1933, 1941 and 1942 (with famed America's Cup skipper Bus Mosbacher at the helm) as well as in 1974. The coed team, which won the national title in 1992, finished third in the country in 2013.

So how does the Big Green do it?

"In the end, what allows us to get over the big hump of having a successful sailing team in a place like Hanover is the people involved and the culture that has evolved over a long period of time," said senior Ian Storck, who will serve as a team captain this fall. "It is about really focusing on the process and not worrying about short-term outcomes. That and a lot of tough, hard workers."

The Ivy League's northernmost school has found success on the water because those "tough, hard workers" who sail for Dartmouth are unfazed by the long winters. It thrives because Big Green sailors and coaches steadfastly refuse to use climate and geography as excuses. It wins because the program makes effective use of the advantages afforded the program by Dartmouth Athletics and the Friends of Dartmouth Sailing.

RECRUITING

As a senior captain of the Columbia sailing team in 2002-03, fifth-year Big Green coach Justin Assad helped the Lions be the top

Ivy team. In part because he was focused on city schools, he will tell you he didn't truly "get" Dartmouth sailing until his senior year of college.

"I foolishly never really looked closely at Dartmouth," he admitted. "It was kind of perplexing to me that they had success until I competed on Lake Mascoma as a senior. Once you've seen it, it makes sense. It is a great setup for college sailing."

No one had to tell that to Storck, who came to Hanover from St. Anthony's High School in Manhasset, N.Y.

"I had a somewhat unique situation in that I have a brother who went to Dartmouth and graduated in '07," he said. "When he was in school the team was very successful. He was a multiple-time All-American. They were probably as successful as we are now."

"Through that lens I kind of knew that if you have the right group of people at Dartmouth it was possible to overcome the weather."

That's true, but it didn't stop certain other schools from reminding Storck how late the ice lasts on the water in Northern New England.

"The time when you hear that kind of thing, to be honest, is when you are visiting other schools as a recruit," he said. "They will just straight bring it up. They will ask where you are looking and if you bring up Dartmouth, they would be like, 'Yeah, they've got a good program, but they are limited in how much they can practice in the spring.'"

"It is obviously a consideration, but it's a decision that is outweighed by the type of school, and type of team that we have."

Senior skipper Deirdre Lambert – selected the Quantum Women's Sailor of the Year for the second year in a row last spring – came to Dartmouth from Cheverus High School near Portland, Maine. As a northern New Englander, she didn't have to be told about winters in the Upper Valley, although she was. Ironically, by Dartmouth sailors.

"When I visited the people on the team definitely talked about it, because the year before I was a freshman had been a particularly cold winter," she said. "But the people on the team made it sound like it wasn't a big concern. They said it is just what they do. It is fine, so I wasn't super concerned about it."

If the Hanover-area weather scares off some potential recruits,



that's hardly unique to sailing according to Assad, who will take over solo head coaching duties this fall after sharing them with John Storck – Ian's older brother – for the past four years.

"We try to recruit kids who think Dartmouth will be the best place for them and that is typically not a kid who is going to be afraid of the cold, whether they are going to be sailors or not," the coach said with a chuckle. "Most of the kids who are interested in us have usually done a little bit of their own research, so they know.

"We work hard in the initial series of conversations to paint the picture realistically. We emphasize some of the strengths of the sailing program and the academic program in general, which includes the opportunity to study abroad as a sophomore and still be able to compete in two full seasons. There's also the opportunity to pursue competitive internships in junior winter and still be back for our whole spring season."

Eventually, the Dartmouth coaches pull out the hammer with regard to the perceived disadvantages of the weather.

"John Storck used to wave his hand across all of the All-America plaques on the wall," Assad offered, again with a laugh. "He'd say, 'It didn't slow any of those guys down.' What he would say is, 'The lake didn't start freezing just this year.'"

"I think what speaks a lot to the prospectives is the program has been so successful for so long reaching back even before Captain (Bill) Hurst and Art Allen were running it in the '80s and '90s. There is so much tradition and long-standing success that kind of speaks for itself."

NO EXCUSES

It is one thing to bring accomplished and promising sailors to campus. It is another thing to mold them into championship teams.

The Dartmouth program does it by taking advantage of a little secret: The fall season - on Mascoma Lake - is just as long as it is anywhere else.

"A lot of the training in college sailing is in the fall," explained Ian Storck. "It is much longer than the spring season for everybody, including us. We have just as much of the fall season as everyone else. That's when you get your freshmen up to speed and get everyone on the same page.

"Some people might think it is a hindrance when it's cold while you are sailing, and we've had practices when it is 30 degrees. But those are just as productive as the 70-degree days in September. It really is a testament to the toughness which is present in a lot of Dartmouth athletes. There is a mental toughness that allows us to make the most out of those fall days."

While it is indeed rare for ice-out to come early on Mascoma, the Dartmouth sailing program has developed work-arounds.

"During the fall we do a lot of work that will keep us competitive in the spring," explained Assad, "and so when spring comes we try to be as efficient as we can. You basically try to really think hard about what your weaknesses are, what areas you really want to focus on improving, and work on those."

A training trip south in December and another during the



March break help shake off the rust, and that's followed by weekly trips to Boston and Burlington Bay or Lake Champlain with rotating crews of sailors before the ice leaves Mascoma. The team hits the lake as soon as it is free of ice.

"The water might just be 33 degrees but their smiles are though the roof," Assad said. "You would think it was summer sailing for them."

ON THE WATER

Given the talent on the team, the hard work that takes place in the fall and the focus even before Mascoma is ready, Dartmouth is usually in good position to qualify for nationals. Thanks to the spring sailing calendar, Assad explained, there's enough time between qualifying and nationals for the Big Green to get up-to-speed with the best programs in the country.

"We have a full competition schedule in the spring and treat most of our regular-season events like practice," said Storck. "We have a really good attitude about not stressing how we finish at those events because, in all honesty, it doesn't really matter that much. The scores of those events don't count, so we are really just

trying to get better. Because we have such limited practice time, that pays dividends once we do get liquid water."

It is on those valuable practice days between qualifying and nationals that the "liquid" Mascoma becomes a surprising asset.

"The lake is an excellent training venue for practice," said Assad. "It is flat water and a small lake, so we deal with a lot shifting conditions and varying breeze strengths. That, I think, trains the kids well for competing in odd conditions. A lot of college sailing happens close to land, so it is often in very shifty conditions. Having the opportunity to practice where we do, in those conditions, is actually very beneficial.

"When we get a north-northwest or a south-southeast breeze, we can do straight-line sailing and go fast," the coach continued. "We always try to take it advantage of those days when we have them, and we try to embrace some of the less traditional sailing conditions when we get a westerly or a more fickle, early fall breeze."

AIDING THE CAUSE

In recent years the sailing team has solidified its status as a full-



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fledged varsity and – although it practices a half hour away from campus – has become a more visible presence within the Dartmouth Athletics Department.

“There was a time when we were sort of a pseudo-varsity, but that has changed,” said Storck. “Over the last 10 years or so we’ve become a real varsity sport and the culture has shifted. I think that everybody now probably takes the concept of being a varsity athlete a lot more seriously on the varsity sailing team than years ago.”

Added Lambert: “Back in the day sailing was that weird sport that nobody really knew anything about or paid attention to. But I think with more recognition within the school athletic news it is becoming more of a mainstream sport.

“With DP2, especially, there has been a difference. We have a strength coach now, which we didn’t have my freshman year and the coaches wrote out our workouts. In a few years before I came the sailing team didn’t even lift and that has definitely helped a lot. Last summer we lifted with the Nordic team. To be able to train alongside them was cool.”

A successful fundraising effort also made a big difference, enabling the Dartmouth sailing team to purchase 18 new Z420, and 18 new FJ boats.

“We used to have just six 420s and when we would train in them we couldn’t have the whole team working together,” said Assad. “The new 420s are a new design and we actually had the first college fleet of them. They are lighter and a little higher performance and are the same boats we sailed at both championships.”

The addition of the new boats meant a lot to the team.

“I think it is really cool the athletic department and the Friends got behind these new two fleets,” Lambert said. “Most schools only raise enough money to have one new fleet every six or nine years, but the fact that we got two new fleets in one year speaks volumes about the support there is for sailing at Dartmouth, and wanting to grow the program and make it one of the best in the country.”

NOT JUST ONE OF THE BEST

The Dartmouth women’s team took third in the always-tough New England Inter-Collegiate Sailing Association championships and the coed team placed second. Those finishes brought the Big Green teams each a berth in the nationals and time to get the necessary work in on Mascoma before the nationals at the end of May.

The first day of the 2014 nationals broke cool and rainy,

conditions not unfamiliar to the Big Green. With Lambert and Avery Plough ’14 sailing the A-Division boat and Kelsey Wheeler ’14 and Lizzie Guynn in the B-Division, Dartmouth trailed Yale by three points after the first of the two days of competition.

“That’s not a lot in sailing,” explained Lambert of the differential. “We were pretty pleased with how the day had gone results-wise, but we knew there were a lot of areas to improve on, even though it seemed like we had done well. There were definitely mistakes that we made and things that we could do better.”

Lambert and Plough took care of that in light air the next day, winning four of their final five races to finish as the low-point A-Division team with 60 points to Yale’s 101. Navy was third with 112.

Despite having given Dartmouth the lead, the A-Division sailors knew the championship wasn’t a sure thing unless the B-Division team could protect the lead over the Bulldogs.

“We sailed the last race and after that race we were 10 points ahead of Yale,” recalled Lambert. “We were watching the finish of Kelsey and Lizzie’s race, hoping that they could remain within 10 points of the Yale boat, and they did. The Yale boat beat them by only five places, so we ended up winning by five points. It was kind of a nailbiter but super exciting.”

Dartmouth would go on to finish eighth in the Gill Coed Dinghy Nationals, one slot ahead of Navy.

“We were a little disappointed with that, but sailing can be a funny sport,” said Assad. “You can train as hard as you can and it can still come down to the conditions of the day and what your strengths and weaknesses are.

“The coed team sailed really well all year and came in second at the New England championships, which is important because it’s the hardest conference in college sailing, for sure.”

The future is bright for both teams according to Storck.

“We are returning a lot of awesome people,” he said. “Really, the culture is what put us over the top the last couple of years and that’s not changing,

“We have a ton of really hard workers and people who don’t really care about the odds being stacked against us.”

That kind of talk is wind in Athletic Director Harry Sheehy’s sails.

“I think there has been a great job of building a really good culture on a team,” he said. “It wasn’t that way in my first year here. This group has worked hard. I give them all the credit in the world.

“It shows you sometimes the things that you might think make it impossible for us to succeed don’t really make it impossible. They are speed bumps. They are not mountains.” **DP**