

baltimoresun.com

Smooth sailing for Olympic windsurfer Farrah Hall of Annapolis

After being denied trip to Beijing Olympics, windsurfer prepares for London

By [Jean Marbella](#), The Baltimore Sun

3:26 PM EDT, July 22, 2012

First, the spot she won on the Olympic team for the Beijing Games was taken away and given to a competitor. Then, after making this year's team, she learned her sport would be dropped from the Games after London.

advertisement



Somehow, Farrah Hall, the sole American woman in the upcoming Olympic RS:X windsurfing competition, always finds herself fighting her sport as much as her competition. And yet, if there's anything the 30-year-old Annapolis native knows how to do, it's navigating rough waters.

"I just put my head down and kept going," she said. "I think that's why I'm finally having some success. I've taken what the sport has handed to me and barreled through."

With an ocean-wide smile that crinkles her bright blue eyes, Hall looks entirely the part of someone who lives the life aquatic. She was home for a brief visit recently before heading to Weymouth on the southwest coast of England, where the windsurfing competition begins July 31. She was staying with her parents in the Cape St. Clair house in which she grew up and enjoying the familiar waters in which she first learned to sail.

"After being all over the world, I always think, it's really a nice place to live," she said, enjoying a late lunch on a recent afternoon at the Boatyard Bar and Grill in Eastport. "I enjoy sailing here. It's so pretty. I like knowing the water, knowing I can go wherever I want to go."

"I like the sailing community here. There's a lot of competitive sailing, but there are also people who just enjoy the water."

Just getting to the London Games is something of a triumph for Hall after being denied her shot in Beijing.

Hall had won the qualifying trials for the previous Olympics, but the fourth-place finisher, Nancy Rios, protested that her collision with another windsurfer tore her sail and slowed her down. A U.S. Sailing committee found in Rios' favor, raised her point total and gave her first place in the race over Hall.

She appealed but it was not until after the Beijing Olympics had come and gone that a U.S. Olympic Committee panel found that the sailing organization denied her due process. At the time, she called it a

"hollow victory," but these days she is looking forward rather than backward.

London looms with particular urgency because of another controversial decision, this time by sailing's international governing body, to replace windsurfing with kiteboarding starting with the 2016 Games.

"No one wants to hear your sport is being taken out of the Olympics right before you're about to compete," she said ruefully.

The decision has triggered efforts to reinstate windsurfing, which Hall calls "the red-headed stepchild" of the sailing world. While she plans to learn how to kiteboard, and anticipates that many of the top windsurfers also will make the switch, for now, she is focused on her current sport.

"I think most of the other windsurfers are feeling the same way — we are going to work as hard as we can for the Olympics and see what happens in November," she said of the International Sailing Federation's next meeting.

While she faces tough competitors in the Games — Hall says there's a much deeper windsurfing racing culture in Europe and other parts of the world than in the U.S. — she hopes her high level of fitness and racing skills will help get her at least into the medal round.

She is a lifelong athlete, playing soccer and competing for the Naval Academy Junior Swim Club as a child. A 1993 Baltimore Sun story about under-12 youth soccer had this item about the future Olympian: "Farrah Hall's goal with 1:40 left in regulation gave the Cape St. Claire Cougars a 2-1 victory over Mayo in Saturday's Division III county league game."

At Broadneck High School, she ran varsity cross-country and track and was among the top in the state for the 1,600-meter event. "I'd pull an all-nighter for [an Advanced Placement] class and run a race the next day," she said with a those-were-the-days laugh.

Hall started competing in triathalons as a teenager and started windsurfing more seriously as a student at St. Mary's College, where she graduated in 2003 with a degree in biology.

Hall followed a college boyfriend, and the chance to windsurf year-round, to St. Petersburg, Fla., where she worked for a research institute studying seagrass. Eventually, though, she took off to pursue her athletic dreams. "He wanted marriage and babies," she said of the boyfriend, "I wanted the Olympics."

That's meant a largely itinerant life in which she spends about half the year in Europe and much of the rest of her time in Miami. "I haven't had a fixed residence since '06," she said.

Her parents, William and Linda, recently retired, he as an engineer, she as an art teacher. With her younger brother, Nathan, also an engineer, they plan to cheer her on through the five days of racing in which competitors seek to place in the top 10 to compete in the medals round.

Hall said she enjoys how windsurfing challenges both the body and the mind — competitors literally have to think on their feet, reacting to various wind and water conditions.

"The best is when you're fast, and you know what to do," she said of the combination of fitness and tactical thinking required at the elite level of the sport. "You have to make decisions when you're working physically hard."

Hall is sponsored by several foundations, including the Annapolis Yacht Club Foundation. But her primary sponsor is the Annapolis-based Compass Marketing, which works with Fortune 100 companies including

Procter & Gamble and Duracell. Sponsors help defray what Hall estimates is about \$100,000 in her annual costs for coaching, travel and equipment.

Hall's mother had approached the company several years ago when she saw it listed as a sponsor for a local musical performance. Compass CEO John White, who said he was impressed with how the windsurfer remained committed to her sport even after she was denied her chance to compete in Beijing.

"She was ready to buckle back down and think long term ... 'I'll be back to get 'em later,'" White said. "I think it says that she has the tenacity to be a world champion no matter what and against all odds."

White will be part of Hall's cheering squad in Weymouth, and his office in Annapolis will host a party for local fans to watch her compete against the world's best. His money, literally, is on Hall.

"She seems so meek and quiet, until you dig in and hear her story. You might underestimate her," White said. "I would never bet against this woman."

jean.marbella@baltsun.com

[*twitter.com/jean_marbella*](https://twitter.com/jean_marbella)

-  [Text NEWS to 70701 to get Baltimore Sun local news text alerts](#)

Copyright © 2012, [The Baltimore Sun](#)