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Quadriplegic sailor from RI seeks Paralympic gold

NEWPORT, R.I. (AP) — Paul Callahan remembers pulling away in a sailboat from Fort Adams State Park in Newport for the first time many years ago, and seeing his wheelchair sitting empty on the dock.

It's the way the 55-year-old sailor explains his love for the sport — he's free from the confines of his chair and in control of a vessel skimming across the water.

Callahan, who was paralyzed after a freak accident in college, has become one of the world's top disabled sailors. He leaves next week for London, where he will represent the U.S. at the Paralympic Games with two teammates — both amputees — on a 24-foot sailboat.

Callahan spends part of the year in Florida and the rest in Newport, R.I., where, 15 years ago, he founded a nonprofit that helps people with disabilities to sail. Sail to Prevail, with its fleet of specially adapted boats, works with about 1,000 children every summer, including those with spinal cord injuries, autism and other developmental disabilities.

"I encourage them to think as big as they can," Callahan said from the dock one recent morning before heading out into Newport Harbor. "If you're going to think, you may as well think big."

Callahan's life changed in a horrible instant when he was 21 and a junior at Harvard University: He slipped on a wet floor and snapped his neck. He spent the next five years, he says, trying all kinds of rehabilitation programs, determined to walk again.

"I really was a stubborn quadriplegic," he says.

Only later would he heed the advice of a doctor who had been following his rehabilitation, who told him to focus less on walking — and more on living. He returned to Harvard to finish his education. He later earned a degree from Harvard Business School, the first quadriplegic to graduate from there, and took a job at Goldman Sachs.

But a random invitation to sail in Newport would upend his life again. And he eventually left Wall Street to become CEO of Sail to Prevail, initially known as Shake-A-Leg.

“I have a belief that everybody — disabled or able-bodied — is capable of doing enormously more than they think they can,” he says. “I’m forever practicing that. Not everyone’s going to be a Paralympian, but everyone can succeed in their own way.”

Getting into the boat is one of the most complicated parts of Callahan’s sailing. He’s loaded in with the help of a sling, which lowers him into a chair attached to a half-circle track that allows him to be moved from one side of the boat to the other. He has no grip in his hands so wears Rollerblading gloves that hitch to a steering mechanism made from two bicycle pedals. The pedals attach to lines and pulleys that interface with the tiller.

This will be Callahan’s second Paralympics. He competed in 2000, but did not medal. His team qualified in January for London, winning the time trials in Florida. His crew consists of Thomas Brown of Castine, Maine, whose childhood cancer forced the amputation of one of his legs above the knee, and Brad Johnson of Pompano, Fla., who had one leg amputated above the knee and one below the knee after a car accident.

Brown has a bronze and a silver medal from the 2000 and 2004 Olympics in a different sailing class. Johnson also won a bronze eight years ago in the same class the team’s competing in next month.

Callahan’s sailing team came in fifth last year in the world championships.

Callahan’s wife Alisa says that, for everything he’s been through because of his injury, he has never worked harder for anything than he has preparing for the Paralympics.

“He’s ready,” she said. “I want it for him. All he can do is his best.”

She added: “He’s an inspiration to everyone that sees him on the harbor.” ■