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Olympic Broach: The No Good Very Bad Windiest Day

Two races in Athens shatter an Olympic medal dream.

Day two of sailing at the 2004 Olympics started out just like day one: sunny and gaspingly hot, with only about three knots of wind. And just like the day before, I called up to the committee boat, “Good morning—USA.” At this regatta, I checked in not as myself or as the skipper of a three-person team, but as an entire country. What a rush.

I remember that moment perfectly, but it’s taken me 10 years to swallow my pride enough to write about what followed. And I’m only going to do it once, so listen up.



Day two started out very light and ended up very windy. Fortunately our Olympic branding held up to the change in conditions better than we did. Photo: ©DanielForster

STARTING STRONG

The Saronic Gulf rippled and heat-shimmered beneath the light easterly, which we hoped would build to meet the five-knot minimum in time for racing. In similar conditions the day before, we’d finished second in the very first race of our week-long event. So I’d chosen the same clothing: white long-sleeved shirt, light-colored leggings, white USA hat. Liz had gone with short sleeves and Nancy sported a tank top, but we were unified by our Team USA regatta pinnies. And in case we forgot our last names, all we had to do was look up—they’d been stuck on the mainsail in bold letters, just below a large American flag.

All around us, our competition drifted, sails slatting: 15 sailboats with 15 different country flags on their sails. Their 21-foot hulls, like ours, had a distinctive three-letter country code stuck to the white bow, just ahead of “Athens 2004” and the Olympic rings. We’d been told to race like this was any other event, but everywhere I looked I saw something very, very special. The only distinguishing mark on any of these boats was its country.

SAILING A NAMELESS BOAT

Officials had even forced me to remove my favorite blue spider sticker from our boat's transom. Sailing a nameless boat seemed like a good way to annoy the sailing gods, but after our podium finish the day before I figured they must be cool with it. Because surely they were all watching from the nearby Parthenon, which stood tall and clear and white upon its hill above our race course.

If I'd thought about what that perfect view of the Parthenon meant, I might've been better prepared for what came next. The usual haze of smog over Athens was notably absent, which should've told me that the infamous Greek meltemi wind—clear, dry, and strong—had already started to blow down out of the mountains.

Instead my focus was on myself. Could I match yesterday's performance? Would everyone be gunning for us today? My brain didn't make the leap from "what a beautiful clear view of the Parthenon" to "where did the smog go" to "get ready for the meltemi." Because I was trying really, really hard not to throw up.

Tony, our coach, was nervous too. So he was staying well away until there was enough wind for racing and something to talk about.

OUR FIRST OLYMPICS

Many of the other teams were repeat Olympians, and I could understand now how valuable that was. Nothing but personal experience could've prepared me for the photographers' lenses and press questions—never mind representing an entire nation. It all added up to a unique stomach-churning combination of panic and pride.

Just before our scheduled start time, the light morning wind faded to nothing—or rather, to a series of "somethings." A puff filled from the east, then one from the northwest. It was no surprise when a blue-polo-shirted official on the committee boat fired off two guns and another hoisted a signal: postponement. The striped flag fluttered briefly, then drooped again.

After another weird puff filled from the south, I wondered aloud which breeze would win. Neither of my teammates responded. Instead Liz tried to distract me with a non-sailing question—what other sports should we go to see on our upcoming lay-day? Fencing? Water polo? Canoe-kayak? There were so many options, it was hard to choose.

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Meanwhile, a slightly stronger puff filled in from the northwest. I glanced toward it, but the water between us and the city was still a heat-shimmered aqua. I probably even commented on how clear our view of the Parthenon was.

Twenty minutes later, another puff filled from the same general direction. And another. Upwind, the water darkened to a disturbed deep blue. Without any discussion, Liz and Nancy dug into their clothing bags. They'd need more than short sleeves and tank tops to stay warm in the firehose of spray this unexpected wind would kick up, and we couldn't be sure how much time we'd have before the start.

And then an even stronger puff filled in. In only a minute or two we went from drifting, to sailing, to luffing the mainsail to keep the boat from heeling too much. The jib started to climb the headstay on its own, as if asking to be set. *Meltemi!*

“Did you see anything like this in the forecast?” Liz asked, her voice raised to carry above the luffing mainsail. I shook my head, pressing my lips together. We both knew it didn't matter now what the weather guy said—today would not be a light-air day.

Once everyone had enough gear on, we tightened the rig, hoisted the jib, and headed upwind for a quick tuning run. Tony fell into place behind us, nodding at our setup. The boat and our crew work would be fine, but we all knew big breeze was not my best condition. I preferred the finesse and subtlety of light air, not this battle to strong-arm the tiller and mainsheet. I'd been working on my heavy-air technique, but at this level, even a tiny weakness could become a big liability.

All around us, our competitors were scrambling to get ready too. Who would adapt the quickest to such a radical change in sailing conditions?

MASTERING THE MELTEMI

By the time the race committee pulled down the postponement flag, the breeze had built to 18 knots and the small boat that marked the left end of our starting line was bobbing in a short steep chop. It would be hard to steer a straight course in such a sloppy sea state.

As soon as the starting gun fired, Liz and Nancy dropped over the side of the boat together, maximizing our righting moment. Even so I had to flog half the main to keep the boat from rounding up into the wind. When the first of many unavoidable waves broke right over Nancy's head, I was glad she'd put on a spray top. I sat higher up for better visibility, but that also kept me drier—hardly a democratic distribution of dampness.

I tried to settle into a heavy-air rhythm. As Nancy counted down to a big puff, I'd ease out the mainsheet and Liz would tighten the backstay to depower. In the lulls, we'd power up again—but not too much. Meanwhile, I steered up and down, trying to find a path through the waves that kept the boat from hobbyhorsing and my teammates from swallowing too much water.

Did I mention that heavy air was not my thing? As I tightened my grip on the tiller extension to steer around yet another watery mogul, I couldn't help thinking: *This is supposed to be a light-air regatta!*

Ten minutes of bashing upwind later, we rounded the first mark in the bottom half of the fleet. The whitecaps were merging into one big mess of spume, which meant the wind had climbed past 20 knots. And all those boats in front of us had left their big wakes behind, mixing up the water even more.



Team Canada tempts the sailing gods with a lot of windward heel, while we bring up the rear. Photo: ©DanielForster

As Liz and Nancy set the spinnaker, I eased off the controls in anticipation of our reward: downwind sailing. The tumbling whitecaps that had been obstacles on the upwind leg now became our pit crew, pushing us toward the next mark. Once the white sail with its painted stars and stripes was up and pulling hard, Liz pumped the sheet to catch the next wave—but it was too small for our heavy keelboat to get much of a ride. “That’s all right, just catch the next one,” Nancy said, before returning to her steady commentary about the puffs and lulls filling in behind us.

But the waves hadn't built as much as the breeze had, and I was having a hard time finding any good rides.

THE MOMENT WE'D ALL BEEN DREADING

"Time to jibe," I yelled.

Jibing would be even riskier than usual. Usually I turned the boat while riding a wave, and I hadn't found one yet that was big enough to catch. But the next mark was coming up fast, and the only way to get there was to sail toward it. We couldn't put this off any longer.

"Ready? On this wave."

There was no response, but I wasn't expecting one.

The stern rose on a wave crest, so I turned the boat and pulled the mainsheet as hard as I could to throw the boom across the cockpit. Nancy attached the spinnaker pole to the mast, and all was well. We'd made it—until another wave, larger and off-center, broke hard against our port quarter. The tiller went light.

"I'm losing it!"

The boat rounded up and lay over on its side, spilling water into the cockpit. We'd broached, dammit—in the Olympics! Team USA was now being passed by foreign flags on both sides.

As soon as that beautiful stars and stripes spinnaker touched the water, Nancy let the halyard off a few feet. The sail collapsed, and the tiller grabbed again so I pulled it hard. The boat bore off and came back upright, but the cockpit was full of water. Now we had to re-hoist the spinnaker and get going again... in last place.

Back under control and heading toward the mark, I watched two other teams show off their keels, but both recovered before we could make the pass. As we rounded the second mark and followed the entire fleet back upwind, my confidence was shattered. Broaching, like a frigging rookie! What was I doing here at the Olympics?

After another lap we limped across the finish line, DFL. Nancy and Liz pulled the spinnaker down; then, still breathing hard, they began to bail the water out of the boat. Bailing, at the Olympic Games: that was definitely not in the brochure.

And for the first time, there were no cameras clicking away in our direction.

Tony approached in his RIB, bringing along his usual smile and cocked head. "Everyone okay?" He had to yell to make himself heard over the wind and flogging mainsail.

We all nodded.

"That sucked," he said to me. "But you can do better."

I dug deep for a smile in response. "Yes I can. Thanks." We still had another race to sail, and I had to try and shake off the bitter disappointment of this one.

It was too windy for a real conversation, and the two boats quickly drifted apart. We all knew what had to happen: I had to keep the boat upright the next race, or our medal chances would be history.

IT GETS EVEN WINDIER

The tops of the waves were blowing off now, which on my personal Beaufort Scale meant "f-ing windy." How were we going to sail in this, let alone race?

A warning flag went up: five minutes to our next start. There must've been a sound signal too, but we couldn't hear it. I started my watch, took a deep breath—and then the postponement flag went up again.

Liz pointed to the left end of the starting line, where that small bobbing boat was now dragging its anchor downwind at an alarmingly fast pace. As we watched, the officials began to haul in several hundred feet of anchor line. Then they valiantly motored back upwind, disappearing in the deep troughs between waves.

The anchor didn't hold any better the second time. Too small an anchor, or not enough line; it hardly mattered why. Obviously I wasn't the only one who'd planned on a light-air event.

They repeated this drill over and over for the next hour and a half, hoping to get lucky. All we and the other teams could do was reach back and forth, jibs tied to the deck and mains trimmed as much as possible to keep them from flogging—but not so much that the crews had to hike out. The tiller was tugging so hard I held onto it

"I had to keep the boat upright the next race, or our medal chances would be history."

with both hands, leaving Liz in charge of the mainsheet. We needed to conserve our energy for the next race, but in this much wind there was no way to relax and still keep the boat under control.

WOULD THIS DAY EVER BE OVER?

That anchor just wasn't going to hold, and I began to hope they'd send us ashore. Instead the race committee finally tried something different—they hoisted the five-minute countdown flag when the small boat was still well upwind, dragging at what was by now a rather predictable speed. By the time we started, the line between it and the big committee boat was just about where it should be for a clean start—though it also added a new degree of difficulty, judging our time and distance to a moving target.

Amazingly, we got off the line in clear air and headed upwind, into the blowing spray and whitecaps.

Our upwind thrash felt more like survival than racing, but we rounded the first mark in eighth. I was surprised to see gold medal favorites Team GBR behind us, but it made me feel better—other teams were struggling, too.

It also made me feel better to catch a decent wave and nail our next jibe, especially since we passed (and didn't run over) the boat that broached right in front of us. But when Team GBR passed us on the next upwind leg, on



Team GBR got around us on the second upwind leg, on their way to another race win. Meanwhile from the Parthenon, the sailing gods watched over us. Photo: ©DanielForster

their way to a second race win and looking as cool and steady as if out for a quiet walk in the park, I wanted to pound the deck in frustration. Instead I just hung on, trying to balance the demanding tugs of mainsheet and helm until we reached the upwind mark again.

And then on the final run, it happened again.

Just as we jibed, a big puff hit and an off-center wave rolled us up onto our side again—another broach! I could already picture the headline: American-flagged Spinnaker Takes Second Swim. Everything seemed to happen more slowly this time, giving Nancy and Liz the chance to look back at me. Their salt-whitened faces seemed to say, “What are you doing back there?”

A few minutes later we limped across the finish line, full of water again. We'd be scored as ninth, but it felt a lot worse than that. Because one broach was a fluke; two was a pattern. Two finishes in the bottom half of the fleet was also a pattern—and not one that would bring us a medal. As I wrote in my notebook that evening, "Just when you get it all together, you forget where you put it."

Three days later, after the light air returned, we'd win a race. The day after that, we'd win another one. But they don't give out gold medals for individual finishes in sailing; the results counted an entire eleven race series. And I've never tasted anything so bitter as the bile of not medaling at an Olympic Games.

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not medaling at an Olympic Games."**

It wasn't until a few weeks after the closing ceremonies that the bitter taste faded. It didn't seem to matter to anyone at home that I hadn't won a medal. They just wanted to know, "What was it like, sailing at the Olympics?"

Ten years later, people are still asking that same question.

And when they do, I don't talk about broaching and bailing on that no good very bad windiest day. I talk about our two victories, and about looking back at the finish to see all those spinnakers with their country flags behind us. I tell them about walking into the opening ceremonies. And most of all, I talk about the honor of representing something so much bigger than myself and my team: the magic of calling up to that race committee, "Good morning—USA."