



## When one plus one makes three

Carol Cronin finds herself uplifted following time spent with a US Paralympian quadriplegic who for decades now has dedicated himself to encouraging those he describes as ‘far less fortunate than myself’. And whose son Justin just joined Dad as a Seahorse Sailor of the Month

Paul Callahan has a theory: ‘the more you help others the better you make your own life’. I didn’t know him when he was ‘just’ another able-bodied Harvard business undergraduate, before he slipped on a wet floor and lost the use of both legs and hands, so I can’t verify Paul Callahan’s conclusion that it was this life-changing accident at 21 that gave him such a sunny attitude. Instead, when we sit down in the quiet sunny flower garden at New York Yacht Club’s Harbour Court (on a day when American Magic hopes are still alive, and its Youth America’s Cup team has just delivered a heart-stopping victory), I choose to bask in his positive perspective rather than worry about its origin.

‘I firmly believe that I’m not unique,’ Paul tells me, as he adjusts his wheelchair to better return my gaze. ‘But I think [the accident] probably gave me more insights,

made me work harder, and made me more efficient. And I have a wider angle view of life; I get to see a lot of the good in people, because people generally just want to help. That’s been a huge gift. So I think I’m very, very fortunate.’

Paul wasn’t always so accepting of his ‘gift’, he admits. He spent the first five years afterwards working his way across the USA in search of a cure. ‘There were a lot of people who told me at the beginning, “Look, you’re not gonna walk again; you’ve got to get integrated back into life.” And I was not ready for that whatsoever.’

Finally, a doctor told him to focus on living, not walking – and he listened. ‘I got to the point where I realised that I wasn’t going to walk. However, had I not done the five years of therapy I would no way be as healthy as I am today.’

Along the way he learned another important lesson: ‘You should never try to steal anybody’s dream, because you don’t know what’s going on internally and you can’t apply your strengths and weaknesses and background against anybody else’s. You have to let people develop in their own time.’

At 26 Paul became the first quadriplegic to graduate from Harvard. Next he earned an MBA (and Dean’s Award) from Harvard Business School, joining Goldman Sachs as an asset manager. ‘Those three things gave me a platform to do a lot of things I’m doing now,’ he explains. ‘Platform and education; then you develop your own instincts off of that. Each added a distinct component to who I turned out to be.’

### Freedom through competition

By the time a friend invited him to go for a sail on a Catalina 20 Paul was in his mid-30s – and he vividly remembers looking back at his wheelchair on the dock as they

sailed away. ‘It was the first time in 15 years I was able to do something on my own,’ he later told a CNN interviewer. Inspired by that freedom – if not by his job – he left Goldman Sachs to take over an ailing non-profit in Newport, RI, that helped people with disabilities learn to sail and race; that grew into what’s now known as Sail to Prevail. He also (metaphorically at least) dived head first into learning to race sailboats.

‘I played competitive basketball in high school,’ he says. ‘I was an All-American, but I stopped when I went to Harvard because I just got burnt out; too many other things to do. I really didn’t search for another competitive athletic endeavour until I found sailing, and that was a full 15 years later. I said, wow, this is a great recreational activity – but for me it was even more fun when the competition started.’

Along with basic racing skills Paul had to adapt his boats so that he could steer without working hands. ‘I drive the boat with upside down bicycle pedals, like a grinder, attached to my wrists.’ And he’s facing forward; ‘I can’t see the tiller, I just feel which way the boat’s going.’

Sailing became a fully fledged member of the Paralympic family for the 2000 Games, and Paul threw himself into training on the triple-handed Sonar just in time to win the US Trials. ‘I was still so new to the sport,’ he says now. ‘I was lucky to win, but we gave it our all.’ His team finished seventh in Sydney, thanks to assistance from many sailors – including a few names readers may be familiar with...

‘It’s amazing how many people helped me, everybody from regular day sailors to Jud Smith and Dave Curtis.’ Later, he adds Russell Coutts and ‘even Dennis Conner’ to his helpful legends list. ‘We received a lot of assistance, a lot; on the docks,





unloading boats, all kinds of things. When I started in 1998 with disabled sailing, that was very, very much an unknown. But we as a community were certainly welcomed and had no problem. Given its basic nature. I don't think it's difficult for sailing to have all of the diversity, and equality, and any other word you'd like to use. That's such a great piece of our sport.'

### The next generation

When I ask how Paul met his wife Alisa that trademark smile stretches even wider as he explains how she volunteered at Sail to Prevail shortly after he took over. She wasn't a sailor; her sports were softball and basketball. But 'she's a good athlete, and she understands what you need to do to be successful.' They married in 2001.

In 2003 the Callahan twins were born – and today Mitchell and Justin are well-known around the globe, even though they didn't start sailing until the ripe old age of seven. 'They tried all the sports,' Paul says, adding that everyone – including Alisa – kept asking; when would Dad take them sailing? He was campaigning for the Paralympics again, so 'there'd be coaches at my breakfast table every morning... but I kept saying, "When they ask, that's when. I'm not taking them sailing until they ask."' "

That finally happened in the middle of a photoshoot for US Paralympians, when Justin crawled up onto Dad's lap to whisper, 'When are you going to take Mitchell and me sailing?' And I said, "Um, right now." We stopped the whole photoshoot and I told my coach, Jeff Madrigali, "Tell these people to go have lunch – because I'm not going to miss this moment."' "

He and Alisa took the boys out for a sail around Newport Harbor, 'while Jeff was on the dock pulling his hair out, trying to keep

all the media happy.' When the sea breeze piped up enough for even the Sonar to heel over Paul headed back to the dock before anyone could get scared. 'I said, "Boys, you're not going to be able to hear anything because these sails are going to really start rattling pretty soon. So here's the plan: Mom's going to pick you up and throw you to coach Jeff." They said OK! And that was the beginning of their sailing.'

Onboard the Sonar the twins would stand aft of their dad and hold onto the tiller, thinking they were steering. 'And when they moved it I would release the tension on my wrist. So it was fun.' Even once they realised they weren't driving the boat, 'They just liked it!'

The Callahans spend winters in Miami and summers in Newport, and the boys were soon dominating the USA youth circuit. At the 2017 International Optimist Regatta Mitchell beat his brother by seven points – and both finished well ahead of the other Red Fleeters, as well as helping USA win the Team Racing finals. Alisa's a college professor so she stepped up for the three years when homeschooling was deemed their best educational option; that allowed the family to continue travelling together, even as the focus switched from Paralympic training to Optimist and 420 regattas.

'We very much enjoyed all that,' Paul says. 'The Optimist is a great learning tool. The class gets a lot of criticism, and I don't think it's fair. There are just different ways people approach it, and there's a balance of how much you do for your kids. We chose to do as little as possible and made them figure it out themselves.'

And once the two boys started doing well, he adds, 'It was their responsibility to go around the boatpark and help the Green Fleet kids. That type of thing starts

**Opposite:** the USA Sonar team of Paul Callahan, Tom Brown and Bradley Johnson racing at Weymouth in the 2012 Paralympics where they finished seventh. **Left:** after a 12-year absence Callahan returned to Para Sailing at this year's US Championship where with Keith Burhans and Jen Edney they won the three-handed division, winning seven of the 10 races

early, and that's one reason sailing is so great: when I got in a boat there were so many able-bodied people who helped me.

'Sailing's such a great vehicle to help other people, and teach them great fundamental things,' he continues, 'like leadership and teamwork and self-sufficiency and confidence. I firmly believe that so I tried to drill that into my children.'

### 1 + 1 = 3

There's a saying you hear from both generations of Callahan males: one plus one equals three. 'I taught them that very early,' Paul explains; that they're stronger together. Chuckling, he adds, 'And that was a debate in my household for a while, because they said, "Mum says one and one equals two!" And I said, "No, this is the long term. You'll be much stronger together than you would be separately."' "

After the twins won the 2024 Snipe Junior Worlds Justin told a Harvard reporter; 'In our family we have a motto: "One plus one equals three." When you put two of us in a boat together we feel unstoppable.' Because, yes, the twins are both in their third year at Harvard, two reasons that school won the 2024 Collegiate Nationals. A month later Justin teamed up with Trevor Davis (Dobbs jnr) to win the Snipe Senior US Nationals – an event requiring a totally different skillset.

Then a few months after that the twins won the US Team Racing Championship for the second year in a row. No wonder Justin recently joined his father as *Seahorse Sailor of the Month*, probably the only father/son combination to appear on that illustrious list.

'But what's most important is that they're both great sportsmen,' their dad says now, adding how much he enjoys watching them compete. 'When they win it's wonderful. And when they don't win there are always lessons.'

### Another Paralympics

In 2012 Paul was again selected to represent the US in the Sonar. Though his finish was an exact repeat of 2000 he says it was far more disappointing; a startline mistake in the last race dropping them from 2nd to 7th overall. He calls that failure 'almost predictable', thanks to a tricky American law that makes it very difficult to change teammates after a sporting qualification.

Shaking his head, he says, 'The only thing I can do is pass along to my sons to be careful how you assemble your team...'

Sadly sailing was dropped from the Paralympics after 2016. But Paul's got some strong opinions about pathways to success – in both sailing and life. ▷



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### College counts

Collegiate sailing is often criticised as a distraction from the Olympics, but Paul considers higher education a requirement for success in the US – and a huge positive. At a recent collegiate regatta he got to the venue early to secure a parking place with a view of the course. When the kids arrived there were many familiar faces from Opti and 420 regattas. ‘They’re about to compete... but they’re all on the beach together having so much fun being with each other again.’

In Miami, ‘I wake up, and I’m not even sure if my own kids are there – but there’s probably 10 college sailors. That’s great fun, because they’ll have these friendships for ever. It still amazes me, watching these kids compete hard against each other then get off the water and be best buddies. It’s a unique dynamic; a gift from the sport.’

So when the pro sailing tour comes calling Paul tells his twins they have to finish college first. That way ‘they always have something to fall back on. If they wanted to take a year off I wouldn’t have the biggest problem... but I did have a very big problem when they were being asked to join professional teams right out of high school.

‘I had to, you know, play Dad. It seems enticing, it seems fun, but... not until sailing becomes a career with some certainty in it. The Europeans, I think they’re closer to having some security in sailing, and hats off to them for being able to do it, but you’ve got to succeed in your own playground and our culture doesn’t allow for that.’

Until sailing offers a full professional pathway, ‘college sailing is going to remain the winner. Because the institution is so strong and so embedded.’

After college, Paul says, his boys ‘can sail to their heart’s content as far as I’m concerned. They can always jump back into the workforce and they’ll be fine. There are a lot of companies that would hire an accomplished athlete before they would hire someone out of school who has knowledge but little real life experience.’

### Medals vs fun

When I pass along the editor’s request for comment on the delicate balance between winning medals and having fun, Paul sits

back in his chair to ponder. ‘It doesn’t have to be an either-or situation,’ he says finally.

‘First you have to determine what fun is and who’s making that judgment; there are a lot of different opinions. In any sport in any country with adequate resources you can have different attitudes towards fun, but with proper management there’s certainly enough to go around.’

Paul was on the US Sailing board in the early noughties, and at that point ‘I thought that we had figured out the organisational chart’ to best balance Olympic preparation with the many other missions. ‘But then it deteriorated again. Which is unfortunate, because the ultimate output into the Olympics or professional sailing then stalls – just at the time you have an unbelievable opportunity with LA 2028.

‘It is going to be an extraordinary challenge to get up to speed and maximise what the next Games could deliver for sailing in this country.’ For any system to succeed, he adds, ‘you need a very solid team of very good thinkers with resources and leverage. Until you assemble that...’ he cocks his head, and just for a moment that smile fades. ‘There’s nothing that can’t be done, but we’re certainly not ahead of the game.’

### Sail to Prevail

Long before sailing was dropped from the Paralympics, Sail to Prevail had already widened its mission beyond racing: the goal now is to provide sailing opportunities to those who would not otherwise have them. That of course is well aligned with Paul’s philosophy, that helping others makes the world a better place. ‘Also, it’s more fungible; you can produce outcomes other than just being defined by where you finish.’ The summer-only programme sells out in a few days and serves over 1,000 people each year from its Newport docks.

When pandemic demand swelled the ranks to 1,500 Paul says he could ‘feel the wings vibrating on the plane. It becomes unsafe... too many people on the dock, too many wheelchairs, and too many intellectually challenged kids who may need more attention for safety purposes. A thousand seems to be the maximum we can handle without either having an accident or losing

‘Sailing with your brother, especially your twin brother, is one of the most special things you can do. We haven’t sailed together since 2020, so it’s cool to come back four years later and jump right back into it’ – Justin and Mitchell Callahan win this year’s Snipe Junior World title. A few months later Justin went on to win the Snipe US Nationals sailing with Trevor Davis. And before you raise that eyebrow, a full nine points back in 2nd was multiple Snipe and also 2016 Star World Champion Augie Diaz, racing with Christine De Silva

the personal feel. The formula works very well, and we’re happy in our niche.’

When the Newport season ends they move a few boats and instructors up to the Harvard University Sailing Center. ‘There we do a programme for Boston children with disabilities,’ Paul explains. ‘Take a six to 12-year old child from the inner city, who has two strikes against them already, and put them on a boat’ with both a Sail to Prevail instructor and a Harvard student. ‘You want it to be in the formative years for both the participant and student-athlete.

‘College kids have so many demands on their time; I wanted to create a way where they could pass along what they know to a child without making it onerous.’ The result is both fun and confidence-building; what Paul calls a win-win-win.

Combining three such different life experiences into one cockpit also benefits Sail to Prevail... ‘It teaches our instructors how to manage a complex process. It’s always an ongoing experiment,’ he admits, ‘but so far it seems to be working.’

### Still racing

Paul retired from Sonar sailing after the 2012 Paralympics – until quite recently at least. ‘After literally not getting into any sailboat to compete since London 2012,’ he tells me proudly, ‘without any practice at all I won the 2024 USA Disabled Championship.’ He sailed with 2000 teammate Keith Burhans and Jen Edney. ‘It was so much fun!’ he adds, before admitting that it also helped him keep up his credibility with Justin and Mitchell.

I wouldn’t wish the loss of working hands and legs on anyone, but Paul Callahan certainly has made the most of his many life challenges – and, regardless of where he acquired such a sunny attitude, it carries right through to the close of our conversation: a big-picture rumination on sailing’s benefits. ‘Is it ever going to be the biggest sport in the United States or the biggest sport in the world?’ Paul shakes his head...

‘I don’t think so. But it just might end up being the best in terms of both competition and humanity.’ Son Justin will probably carry that perspective to his next international regatta, the World Match Racing Youth Championship in Jeddah. ‘He (and I) are very excited about this one,’ Paul adds, before repeating his life philosophy: ‘I’m really extremely fortunate because I know that I’m utilising whatever I have. And the more you utilise [your own skills] for other people the better life becomes.’ □

