

# Sailor looks to make waves at world championships

By **MURRAY TOWNSEND**  
Special to The Champion

Stephanie Taylor leaves Milton today for the world sailing championships in Portugal.

That's no small accomplishment because she came very close to falling overboard in her quest to make it overseas.

First, a little history.

Sailing didn't come naturally to 23-year-old Stephanie. In fact, it didn't come at all until she was well into her teens. "I wasn't a big fan of it — I played t-ball and softball. It wasn't that much fun for me because I wasn't any good at it."

Stephanie's father had grown up with sailing, so she was exposed to it above the normal level, especially each summer when they returned to her grandparents home in Hudson, Quebec. At 15, her parents bought her a byte class boat, which is basically a training boat. It's predominantly a youth class boat that fits one small person.

That seemed to kick-start her interest and she started to enjoy it, spending much of the summer on the boat.

At 16, she starting racing. She competed in a circuit around the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario, until she made it to CORK. That stands for the Canadian Olympic training Regatta at Kingston.

She finished dead last. Stephanie laughs when she mentions her placing. It didn't even bother her because she was having a great time, traveling with the team, and in her words, "having a blast."

"I loved sailing, I just wasn't any good at it."

That was the last time she'd think that. The next year, at age 17, they had a trial in Quebec to determine whom they would send to Vancouver for the Canadian Youth Championships, the biggest regatta for youth in this country.

"I ended up being the top female at the trial event. All of a sudden I won a regatta and didn't

know what to do with myself."

That was just the beginning. In Vancouver, she won the Canadian Youth Championships. "It blew my mind and blew my coach's mind. I'm still not sure how it happened. All of a sudden, over the winter, from 16 to 17, something clicked and I learned how to sail."

That's when Stephanie started to race even more seriously. And started to win consistently. She won four of five major byte events over a two year span and figured it was time to move on to a different class of boat. If she wanted to stay "single-handed," she had to sail the Europe Olympic class boat.

She had to learn how to sail it, and she also wanted to compete in the 1997 Canada Games.

It was her last year of high school at E.C. Drury, but she took it off to move to Hudson so she could qualify for Quebec under the Games residency standard.

Stephanie trained there and won the trials, earning the right to go to the Canada Games. The yacht club bought her a used Europe and she had just a couple weeks of training on it.

The one regatta she entered she finished last. Stephanie laughs again at this, perhaps illustrating that those who finish last, laugh first.

She wasn't taken seriously at the Canada Games, competing against those who had already been training for a year on their boats. It came down to the last event on the last day of the five-day marathon.

She had to finish first and another competitor had to finish sixth or worse. That's exactly what happened, and Stephanie had won a gold medal.

"Basically, after I won at the Games, it was a no-brainer that I was going to keep sailing the boat. That was the start of the whole Olympic dream — international sailing idea."

Stephanie admits that much of the rest is a bit of a blur. She went back and finished high school, spent a winter in Florida sailing, trained in Victoria, B.C. for a summer, enrolled in Queen's University, went to Australia for the Canadian Olympic trials, and went to Spain for the World University Games.

In Spain she finished last, to which Stephanie naturally laughs.

That was the last time she would laugh for a while, for any reason. While in Spain she got sick. At first she thought it was just a flu bug. So, did the doctors. In fact, she had been getting sick ever since she went to university and didn't know why.

She laughs about finishing last now, but she didn't at the time. "When I came home I wanted to redeem myself and went on a crazy training program. I didn't want to make a fool out of myself two times in a row."

She finished second in the trials and qualified for the 2000 Canadian national team. But, she

kept getting sick, and when it came time to go to the world championships in Brazil, she couldn't even go.

Eventually it was determined that Stephanie had Crohn's Disease.

She lost weight, she was loaded up on drugs, she was constantly tired and she couldn't eat. But, because she was on the Canadian team she kept training.

Part of the reason was that national team mem-

bers are sponsored by Sport Canada. She needed the money they provide.

She'd train for three days and then sleep for four. Climbing up a flight of stairs would exhaust her. "The drugs themselves were almost worst than the disease," recounts Stephanie. "They weren't working within my system. I was constantly having to change drugs."

The Canadian 2001 trials were going to be difficult because they were a five-day event and she could only stay awake for three days.

But, after four days she was in second place — with the top three earning national team berths.

On the last day, however, they encountered heavy winds and eight-foot waves.

"I was so small and weak that it was kind of a hopeless cause. I lost enough points that I went from second to fourth."

That was disheartening, but after those trials a drug was found that actually worked. She has been training and racing throughout this year. "Four weeks of training and sailing and I hadn't got sick. It was such a nice feeling to feel healthy again."

Then she finally got a bit of luck. One of the top three women in the Europe class couldn't to the world championships, so she gets to go.

As she has regained her health Stephanie has started to renew her dream of competing in the next Olympics. Crohn's Disease is incurable, but hers is almost in complete remission.

As for the world championships, her goal is to finish in Gold Fleet. The field, usually around 180 boats, is divided into three classes for the final races after qualifying — Gold, Silver, and Bronze.

If she somehow finished last, Stephanie Taylor would no doubt laugh.

After the health problems she's already successfully battled, in many ways she has finished first before she even leaves Milton.



Stephanie Taylor is taking her sailing skills to the world championships in Portugal.

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