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## Adapted sailors find freedom on the water

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**Local news** - It took Audrey Kobayashi some convincing to get her into an adaptive sailboat, but once she did, she was hooked.

"It took me about 15 seconds and I said, 'This is it!' " she said. "A week later, I was in the Mobility Cup."

Now, Kobayashi is the chair of Able Sail Kingston, and has helped organize Ontario's first provincial championship and regional regatta in adapted sailing, a task she said was "a huge amount of work."

This is also the first year Ontario has had its own adaptive sailing team, of which Kobayashi is a member.

"It's a question of institution building," Kobayashi said. "Ontario sailing has been working very hard on developing the adaptive sailing program."

This weekend, about a dozen sailors with disabilities will be zipping around the lake on Martin-16s, the Canadian-built boat that has become the standard for the adapted sailing circuit in Canada. The Martin-16s are controlled via a complicated-looking network of ropes and pulleys, and a joystick that controls the rudder.

How the boats are sailed varies depending on the sailor's level of disability, and can range from manoeuvring a joystick to controlling the boat entirely with one's breath, called a "sip and puff" system. They're deeper than most boats and have a 110-kilogram centreboard, which makes them less liable to tip.

The boats are also equipped with a number of straps and belts for the sailor, and even the dock has to be equipped with a sling to allow the sailor to get in and out of the boat.

Adapted sailing competitions are divided into two "fleets": gold and silver.

One difference between the silver and gold fleets, Kobayashi said, is that sailors in the silver fleet have an able-bodied companion with them in the boat to help out and give advice.

In the gold fleet, however, sailors can have a companion, but only for safety purposes. The companion must remain silent the entire time. This can be a challenge, Kobayashi said.

"They have to keep quiet even if you're doing something really stupid," she said, laughing.

Kobayashi said learning to sail an adapted sailboat isn't any more challenging for someone with a disability than learning how to sail a regular sailboat would be for an able-bodied person.

"You have to learn how to sail, like in any other boat," she said.

Kobayashi said what draws her to sailing is the freedom.

"Because of the technology ... the freedom on the water is amazing," she said, adding that there is a community aspect as well.

"People have fun, which is the main thing," she said. "It's competition, but it's fun competition."

Kobayashi said that, just as in any sport, adapted sailing requires people to get into the right mindset.

"Some people sail only by feel, and some people intellectualize it, and you've got to find the right mix," she said. "I'm working on the instinctive part."

Yesterday, the sailors were practising with their coaches in Portsmouth Olympic Harbour. There are two days of training, yesterday and today, before the two-day regatta begins tomorrow.

It was a scene of mild chaos as wheelchairs, boats and slings were transferred to and fro. But despite some technical difficulties, including a snapped jib, everyone was in high spirits and looking forward to the weekend.

Coach Brianne Howard said she enjoys teaching adapted sailing.

"It's great 'cause it's really one-on-one," she said, adding that it can be more rewarding than teaching kids to sail. "I find it much easier to teach Able Sail than kids. Someone who wants to learn is so much more receptive."

And of course, teaching in boats incapable of "turtling" is fun.

"These boats can handle anything," she said. "They don't tip, so they're wonderful."

Marc Landry brought his own boat to the regatta: the Aladin.

"It gives me a thrill," he said, adding that he also enjoys the learning experience it offers. "There's so much to learn about it. You think you know a lot, then ... you go, 'Wow! I didn't know that.' "

Landry said adapted sailing gives him the chance to be active and get close to nature.

"Being out on the water brings me back to nature," he said. "You have to respect the wind, but you can play with it."

The independence of adapted sailing is also important, Landry said.

"It makes me feel like I've accomplished something ... I'm not just sitting there watching someone else do that," he said. "There's not many things that can make me feel that."

Laurel Ladd, a sailor in the regatta's silver fleet, said she first heard of the adaptive sailing program from other people who have multiple sclerosis.

"I thought, 'I've never been sailing in my life,' " she recalled. " 'Yeah, like that's going to happen.' "

But Ladd got started, and then she couldn't get enough, she said.

"I started two years ago, just puttering around for fun," Ladd said. This will be Ladd's second regatta, having just got back from the Quebec cup. She originally planned to compete last summer but couldn't because of an exacerbation of her MS.

Shelley Gautier sailed in the adapted sailing silver fleet last year, and said she's excited to be joining this year's gold fleet.

"I'm learning, and I'm just a beginner, but it's really exciting being with the gold fleet," she said. "I like ... getting out there, sailing, being independent."

Gautier said her role in adapted sailing extends beyond the water, to fundraising and raising awareness. Gautier said she thinks it's important for people with disabilities to have opportunities like this.

"People are out of their wheelchairs, in the boat, and that's something that's really special," she said.

Sailing is also a way for people with disabilities to interact with other members of the community, Gautier said.

Kobayashi said a common misconception she comes across is that people tend to think "it's a big deal that someone with a disability can sail."

"Some people are pretty patronizing about it," she said. "It's just a little adaptation to the controls. These are really high-performance boats. These aren't toys."

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