Farrah Hall

By Jane DeLashmutt

The Athens 2002 Regatta, the first of the Olympic test events, was held August 12-25 at the Agios Kosmas Olympic Sailing Center on the Saronic Gulf in Athens, Greece. 507 sailors from 40 countries competed in this event; of those sailors, the United States had the largest contingency, with 43 sailors racing in eight different classes and ten events. Among them was 22-year-old Farrah Hall of Annapolis, the only American to sail in the women’s Mistral event.

Hall first stepped foot on a sailboard when she was a sophomore in high school. She was at a summer music camp in Toronto that happened to be on a lake. She felt clumsy and uncoordinated, as most people do their first time on a windsurfer. Then, some time later, after capsizes and wipeouts too numerous to count, Hall found herself working for a boardsailing shop on Martha’s Vineyard for the summer. That summer she learned a lot of basic techniques for the longboard. She hit the hook “when [she] saw the store manager doing some serious ‘old school’ freestyle tricks like rail rides and sail 360s. [She] didn’t know it was possible to do anything like that with a windsurfer.”

As a freshman at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, Hall found kayaks, Fjs, and 420s scattered along the campus waterfront. She was impressed with their dinghy collection but thought something was missing. So Hall rallied the troops she could find on campus, and she started writing down names, taking donations, and raising money for a boardsailing club. Three years later, the club is the proud owner of a waterfront storage shed, complete with racks and a loft for boardsailing equipment. The club consists of about 15 sailors who practice once a week and travel to regattas around the Bay. In the spring, the club sponsors a trip to Cape Hatteras, which, for most of the board sailors in the club, is some of the best sailing they get all year. St. Mary’s is the only school on the entire east coast with an active windsurfing club.

In her third year as a boardsailor, Hall began a learn-to-boardsail clinic for students who (she hopes) will take over the club when she graduates next spring. Last year, she had the favor returned when legendary boardsailor Mike Gebhart came to Annapolis to run a Mistral clinic. Interested in establishing boardsailing as a collegiate sport, Gebhart decided to ride down Old Solomons Island Road to check out the windsurfing club at St. Mary’s.

Gebhart joined the club in a practice session and gave Hall a few pointers. Since then, Gebhart has sort of been a mentor and coach to her. Hall said, “He was very persuasive in convincing me to go the next step. He told me about the women’s Mistral class and that I should look into it.” So last winter, Hall flew to Miami to race in the Olympic Classes Regatta where she placed fourth and qualified for the Athens test regatta by default (the second and third place finishers could not attend).

Although she didn’t exactly finish at the top of the fleet, Hall is thankful for the experience and exposure gained in Athens. “Competing with the European women was tough,” she said. “Windsurfing is much better organized [in Europe] than it is here; competition is stronger and funding is easier to come by.” She knows that “the U.S.’s top five women Mistral sailors are nowhere even close behind any of the European countries’ top five.” But seeing how strong the Europeans were gave Hall hope for the Mistral, a class that, especially for women, has struggled to gain popularity in the U.S.

Farrah Hall, 5’6” with blonde hair, describes herself as a generally shy person, but as St. Mary’s boardsailing club advisor and sailing buddy Richard Wagner can attest, “she’s a pistol” when it comes to windsurfing. Hall knows that “there is room for a lot of change in [the Mistral] class...the whole rig needs to be updated and the long board as a whole is pretty obsolete. No one likes to sail them when there is better equipment available for short boards.” Though she admits her shortcomings, Hall is an advocate of the long board: “Long board sailing is a foundation. It is the key to success and a spring for all other types of boardsailing.”

When she graduates in the spring with a major in biology, Hall plans to move to Florida where she can concentrate on training. She also hopes to organize the women in the Mistral class into a more focused US Sailing team. Hall is optimistic, but she knows that there is a lot of work to be done. For the time being, she wants to enjoy her last year in college and get as much sailing in as possible. Farrah plans to race in the Olympic pre-trials regatta in Stuart, Florida, October 31 through November 3. The pre-trials is a key regatta for the Mistral class, as it is the sole ranking event for 2003. The winner of this regatta also receives an entry to the XIV Pan Am Games, scheduled for August 1-17 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and the Olympic practice regatta in Athens, Greece, also in August.

The Mistral has been an Olympic class since 1996. For information about the Mistral, visit www.lmco.org or ussailing.org under Olympic classes.

Farrah Hall is a senior majoring in biology at St. Mary’s. She is currently ranked fourth on the US Sailing Mistral Women’s team. To contact Farrah, e-mail fihall@smcm.edu.