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RIDING THE WIND

Sailing opens up a world of freedom for wheelchair athletes

By **TERRY PUGH**
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Saskatchewan paralympian Colette Bourgonje doesn't shrink from a challenge.

The recently-retired teacher has competed in nine Paralympic Games between 1998 and 2010; and brought home medals from each of those events in wheelchair racing and sit-skiing. Prior to a car crash in 1980 that left her a paraplegic, she was a national-calibre athlete in cross-country skiing. After a transition period, she became the first graduate of the University of Saskatchewan's physical education department who used a wheelchair. She went on to a successful career as an elementary school teacher and inspired millions of Canadians with her grit and determination. It's been five years since her last world-class competition, and while



Colette Bourgonje

she's not looking to add to her paralympic medal collection anytime soon, she hasn't lost her competitive edge. In fact, she's looking to get back into racing in a completely different sport: sailing.

"It's a great experience," said Bourgonje. "I started last year to learn the basics after an event sponsored by the provincial wheelchair sports association and the Saskatchewan Sailing Clubs Association (SSCA).

"I entered a regatta last year and got my butt kicked. It was hilarious. But now I know a bit more and it's becoming a lot more fun. I can't imagine competing at

the international level, but local regattas are a blast."

Bourgonje, along with two other women from the Prince Albert area, Crystal Shewchuk and Marie Gareau, have been learning to sail specially-designed racing sailboats that allow wheelchair athletes to ride the wind. Twice a week, they travel to Blackstrap Lake south of Saskatoon during the summer months. While they need help getting into and out of the boats, once the craft is launched they're completely on their own.

Officially known as the International 2.4 mR class dinghy, there are about half a dozen of these boats in the province owned by the SSCA and made available to wheelchair athletes. These mini-keelboats are 13 feet 8 inches long and have a beam of just 2 feet, 8 inches. They carve the water like a knife, powered by 81 square feet of mainsail and jib. Each boat weighs a total of 500 pounds. About 300 pounds of that consists of the keel mounted on the underside of the craft. The keel keeps the boat upright in even the strongest gales.

And boy, do those things fly.

"It's a feeling of complete freedom; complete independence" said Marie Gareau. "It's hard to describe but it's wonderful, because you're not grounded, you're like a bird out there. It's a great confidence booster because you're in control of where you go, how fast you go, and you don't have to rely on anyone else. You can compete head-to-head with able-bodied athletes."

Crystal Shewchuk of Prince Albert is on her way to earning her teaching certificate. She said sailing has really boosted her confidence level.



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"Colette and Marie got me involved," said Shewchuk. "I'd never been in a sailboat before and I'm kind of scared of water, so I was pretty nervous at first. But after a while I realized the boat wasn't going to tip over and now I absolutely love it. After doing this, I feel like I can do anything."

SSCA Coach Mark Lammens of Saskatoon said the provincial association has applied for funding to acquire additional 2.4mR keelboats to provide more people with the opportunity to experience the sport. There are currently three boats in Saskatoon and three in Regina. Corporate sponsors and volunteers have also provided specially-made docks and lifts that make it easier for the athletes to get into and out of the boats.

Bourgonje said she and the other athletes are very appreciative of the efforts



(Top) Colette Bourgonje and Crystal Shewchuk sailing 2.4 meter mini-keelboats at the Blackstrap Sailing Club in late August. (Above) Crystal Shewchuk is assisted by Saskatchewan Sailing Clubs Association coach Mark Lammens as she leaves her wheelchair on the dock and climbs into the cockpit of her sailboat.

by the SSCA, family and friends to make sailing accessible.

She said when she and her two friends make their

twice-weekly trip from Prince Albert to the Blackstrap Sailing Club, all the hard work is done for them.

"We're a pretty high-maintenance group" she said with a laugh. "We're like the princesses; we roll in and everything is all ready and waiting for us."

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