

Maryland becoming known as a kayaking hotbed

Nearly a third of U.S. National Slalom Team hails from state

by Jennifer Beekman, Staff Writer

Sometimes Germantown native Ashley Nee has to stop and pinch herself to make sure she's not dreaming.

The Olympics are the pinnacle of her sport of canoe/kayak, she said. The 2007 Northwest High graduate, 22, has put herself in position to make her longtime dreams of kayaking in the Olympics come true.

Olympic canoe/kayak is a fairly obscure sport but Maryland is a hotbed for elite-level talent.

Nee is one of seven locals vying for a spot on Team USA.



With Nee, fellow Darnestown native and 2010 Bullis graduate Caroline Queen and Bethesda residents Scott Mann and two-time Olympian Scott Parsons, Montgomery County alone accounts for 31 percent of the 13-person U.S. National Slalom Team.

"There is some sense of Maryland pride," said Queen, who in 2007 became the youngest-ever member of the national team at 15. "We definitely do support each other; it's healthy competition at its best."

There are two main reasons for popularity in the sport in this area: The Potomac River and the Dickerson Whitewater Course.

The Potomac River is one of the few bodies of water in the nation that runs through a major metropolitan area and also provides consistent whitewater.

The Dickerson Whitewater Course at Mirant's Dickerson Generating Station was constructed in 1992 to help American athletes train for the Barcelona Games. It was North America's first artificial whitewater course.

"They allow us to kayak in the outflow of the water used to cool their turbines," Nee said. "It's a Class 4 artificial course which mimics the kind of courses we will race on at the Olympics. We're also allowed to paddle in the mile-long pool housed outside the David Taylor navy warfare facility. So, between the Potomac River, the whitewater course and the navy warfare facility, this area is the best for kayaking in the world."

Paddle sports are unique in that athletes must work with the natural energy of the water.

They require a tremendous amount of upper body, core and hip strength. It's imperative paddle athletes learn how to read the water and are patient enough to adjust to its natural ebbs and flows. A strong aerobic system is vital as well, Queen said.

Paddlers reach the Olympic Games by qualifying places on behalf of their countries at either the 2011 World Championships, slated for Sept. 6-11 in Slovakia, or European Championships, according to the BBC Sport website.

The qualifying places belong to the country, not the competitor. Athletes' selection will likely be made based on at least three races spanning this year, Queen said.

Nee has been in this position before. After winning the first of her four consecutive U.S. National Team Trials to earn the top spot on the Women's National Team in 2007, she performed well enough at her first World Championships that fall in Brazil to qualify for a women's boat at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

A dislocated shoulder sustained shortly thereafter required surgery, thus derailing her Olympic campaign.

"The influence of having the top men to train with is the most important training tool you can have," Nee said. "[The local paddlers] are a very tight-knit group. We all travel together when we're not at home and we all support each other."

jbeekman@gazette.net

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