



Fresh canvas

The transition from promising young hopeful to top junior sailor can be a difficult one, but as editor SCOTT ALLE discovers, talent development programs are providing a fantastic blueprint for success.

A fitful breeze is channelling down a stretch of Sydney Harbour in front of the Hunters Hill Sailing Club, the water brown and swollen from recent storms.

Gusts around 17 knots are delivering periodic turbo-boosts for a 420 dinghy crew working across the bay. They plane adroitly, the forward hand skillfully out on the trap keeping the boat level, while the skipper makes practised adjustments on the helm to keep it flitting across the waves.

To me they look like a polished team, anticipating and communicating well, but in fact it's only the second time Bec Hancock and Rhiannan Brown have sailed together in their 420.

Former top Flying 11 skippers, they are a new pairing to join the proven talent nursery of the New South Wales Youth Sailing Team. Craig Ferris, a former 420 world champ himself, is their coach.

"They bring a combination of talents," he says. "Physically, they fit the boat quite well; probably in another six months they'll be ideal," he predicts.

It's Ferris' job to guide the next crop of talented, but green, young skiff sailors from being among the best in local fleets into the select group occupying the top ranks at any youth world championships.

It's a long process, over a few years, and Bec and Rhiannan have just embarked on it. But according to this experienced mentor, the raw material is there.

"They have to work on their strength and nutrition to get around the courses, because they (the 420), are a very physical boat. It's about getting them to communicate as well," Ferris explains.

Watching them go through their paces it's clear they are very good sailors, poised and accomplished beyond their fifteen years. Their enviable technical skills honed in the Flying 11s, a feeder class for many of Australia's Olympians.

In the most recent Flying 11 National Championships on the Derwent in January, they finished the regatta first and second in the Girls' division, while Bec managed fifth in the Open as skipper, a very creditable result up against the nation's best Flying 11 sailors.

The question is now, how will they sail together as a team? Bec's Dad, Warwick, a senior official in the Flying 11 class, is confident they'll mesh well.

"From what I've seen so far it looks really good," he says enthusiastically. "Out there today looking at them, Rhiannan moved around the boat like a cat, which is perfect. And the girls both have that competitive streak in them."

They'll need it. Other strong sailing nations such as the UK, Italy, the US and France have their own very successful youth development programmes, and the pressure

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will definitely be on in the big international fleets at a Youth World Championships.

But Bec and Rhiannan will be ready by then, with Craig having prepared them mentally and physically, for what's to come.

"They've got to learn boat handling, they've got to do the processes," he outlines.

"The process goals are what we are looking at first. Once we start to get the boat around the track, then we've got to understand how

the boat works, the way the rig's set-up, how to change it."

Building that knowledge base occurs over 50 days of training spread throughout the year, including regattas, starting with Queensland Youth Week at the end of June. There's strength, conditioning and nutrition programs. There are scans to see how their bodies will handle the stresses they'll be put under.

It's also a big commitment for the girls' parents. They've outlaid for the boat, and there's the time, the many weekends spent out on the water or travelling to events.

Rhannian's mum Darani has thrown herself into supporting her daughter's sailing ambitions.

"At the pointy end of a regatta it gets a bit exciting," she confesses. "When you see the first spinnaker go up and it's your spinnaker you think 'oh can they hold that lead?'"

Darani's also making her own significant contribution in developing young people's connection with sailing.

"I like to see the kids out on the water. I love the water myself. I've also been able to do a race officer course and a safety boat officer, so I'm learning as well. I like volunteering, and this way I can go out and watch the kids as well."

Now it's all up Rhannian and Bec, how far they want to go, and what they want to achieve as a team. But it's also about having fun along the way. According to Coach Ferris the focus for now is "on process, not results."

Nevertheless, when pressed how they might do at the 420 Worlds in Fremantle in December, he smiles and says, "If we are looking at mid-fleet then I'd be extremely happy."

It's a long but rewarding journey; one tack at a time. ⚓

BONDING SESSIONS
The challenge for Bec and Rhiannan is to combine their skills in the 420.



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