



Sailing past the competition

BY SYDNEY CROMWELL JUNE 27, 2016 2:29 PM

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Isabel Smith

Mountain Brook resident Isabel Smith sails competitively across the country, and has since she was 8 years old.

Sailing wasn't a sport that interested Isabel Smith at first — she tried it because her dad liked it and so did her grandparents. Once she stopped being nervous about the wind and the waves, however, she fell in love.

"She learned how to deal with that, and you can't get her off the water now," said her father, Fred Smith.

Now preparing for her freshman year at Mountain Brook High School, Isabel Smith became interested in sailing competitively when she was about 8 years old.

"No one really does it around here, so I thought it would be u

Just like her love of the water, the competitive drive was also Smith, now a real estate agent, raced boats in high school and has quickly outpaced him.

“Now when we go out, she wants to drive [my boat]. And I usually let her, because I’m pretty certain she’s at a much higher level — I know she’s at a much higher level of racing than I ever was,” Fred Smith said.

Isabel Smith’s boat of choice is an Optimist dinghy, often shortened to Opti, called the Izinator. She can compete in Opti regattas for another year or so before moving to a larger boat. It’s a sport that requires a high level of dedication in order to succeed.

She gets the Izinator out on the water as often as she can, whether at Logan Martin Lake, in Atlanta or even Pensacola. On the way to practices and regattas, Isabel Smith is hard at work to keep up with her schoolwork; on the way home, she’s filling a notebook with what she’s learned in competition.

Since sailors are few and far between in Birmingham, Isabel Smith is part of a team based out of Long Island, New York. The team, called LIMA (Long Island Mid-Atlantic), requires daily strength conditioning and healthy eating of its members.

“She whips out 115 situps like that,” Fred Smith said.

That strength is necessary when she’s sailing. Because Optis are light and fairly small boats, Isabel Smith frequently has to “hike out,” leaning her body almost entirely out of the boat, in order to keep it steady in rough conditions. At the same time, she has to maintain control of her boat’s rudder and sail to get to the finish line. Isabel Smith said high winds and waves are more fun to sail in.

“I used to be really afraid, but I’ve gotten over that,” she said.

Opti races are about an hour long, and Isabel Smith has to avoid running into dozens or hundreds of other sailors, keep the Izinator upright and still try to make it to the finish line first. Fred Smith said at a recent regatta in Fairhope, Isabel came first in seven out of nine races.

The dedication Isabel Smith poured into sailing has paid off. She’s competed around the nation and is qualified to compete internationally. She competed in the 2015 Nationals last summer and in April traveled to San Francisco to participate in the U.S. Team Trials.

“It’s like the top 1 percent of kids, so the competition is huge,” Fred Smith said.

College coaches already have begun taking an interest in Isabel Smith’s wins, and she said she plans to compete in college, earn a spot on the U.S. Team and, perhaps someday, the Olympic team.

Along the way, she’s made friends from other states and even other countries, which Fred Smith said has been a good experience for his daughter.

“Usually your world doesn’t expand for a normal kid until you’re in college,” he said.

The rest of the Isabel Smith’s family — including mother, Holly, sister, Lily, and brother, Darby — do enjoy spending time in a boat, but not to the same level as Isabel Smith. Fred Smith said they’re committed to supporting Isabel Smith’s racing career as much as they can.

And though Isabel Smith now works with a team of college-level coaches and her father has hung up his racing gear, she and dad are still a team at weekend practices and every regatta.

“I’m kind of her local coach,” Fred Smith said.

Photo courtesy of Fred Smith.

Isabel Smith

Isabel Smith with "The Izinator," the Optimist dinghy that she races.

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