
Sailing Ahead

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Isabel Smith, 17, a competitive sailor from Mountain Brook, strings up the sail on her sailboat at the Birmingham Sailing Club on Logan Martin Lake on Sept. 8.



Isabel Smith has learned to sail at a high level, but now she's taking on a new challenge: coaching others to do the same.

Smith, a senior at Mountain Brook High School, recently earned her U.S. Sailing Level I certification when she finished the power boat portion of the training in late November. She's already had people reach out to ask her for coaching and is helping one young girl learn to sail at the Birmingham Sailing Club.

While she hasn't done much coaching so far, Smith said she's learned to be encouraging and patient as she teaches younger sailors.

"You have to take it piece by piece," Smith said. "You can't be completely harsh."

Smith grew up sailing and has achieved great success, now receiving several collegiate scholarships, including being ranked as the top sailing recruit for Jacksonville University and Rollins College in Florida.

Growing up, Smith spent a lot of time at her family's lakehou

"I just enjoyed being at the lake and the water," Smith said.

Smith's father, Fred, sailed competitively, so it was no surprise when the younger Smith, now 17, began doing it, too. Since she started, Smith has excelled, being chosen to compete in the Ida Lewis regatta, where the top 40 junior teams are chosen by U.S. Sailing to compete in a weekend event. Smith has raced in adult regattas in Pensacola and sailed with Denmark's youth national team while she was in nearby Belgium, competing in the North Sea.

"It's awesome," Fred Smith said. "... It's really thrilling to see her [sail] at a high level and having fun with people from all over the country."

The Smiths travel regularly to competitions, as there aren't places to sail around the Birmingham area, though Smith is part of the Birmingham Sailing Club, based out of Logan Martin, right next to the family's lakehouse.

Recently, she moved from a single-person boat to a two-person boat, gaining a partner, Evie Blauvelt from Atlanta.

"I liked being by myself so I could make my own decisions, but I like having the other person's ideas," Isabel Smith said.

In her travels, Isabel Smith said she's met a lot of "cool people" from around the world and has a good friend in Ohio. Her dad said he'll walk into her room and she'll be FaceTiming someone from another state or even another country.

Because of her constant travels, Isabel Smith does her schoolwork in the car or on the plane. This past summer, Isabel Smith traveled to California, Connecticut, Maryland and Rhode Island.

"I [had] maybe two weeks off this summer," Isabel Smith said.

It's not a typical vacation though, Isabel Smith said. While she's visited interesting and unique places, most of the trip is filled with sailing. When she recently went to San Francisco for 10 days, she had just one day to see tourist attractions.

Recently, Isabel Smith raced J/70 boats with some friends in a competition that mostly included college sailors. Her team placed fourth overall and had two first-place finishes. Smith's team impressed a member of family that built the boats. The family, the Johnstones, sponsor two youth teams each year to sail in a high-profile regatta series, and it's possible Isabel Smith will be a part of that team.

Even when she's not sailing, she's working on her craft, training in the gym to become fitter and ready to sail.

"You have to be in good shape," Isabel Smith said.

When Smith was 13 years old, a friend challenged her to a sit-up contest. It's unknown how many sit-ups Isabel Smith's friend did, but whatever the number was, it wasn't nearly enough to top the young sailor.

"I made her stop when she was at 550 [situps]," Fred Smith said.

Isabel Smith's physical training and commitment to her sport follows a young lifetime of numerous hospital visits.

In October 2018, Isabel Smith had spinal surgery, the second such surgery she's had, with the first coming at birth. She was born with a large number of overstretched nerves, causing nerve damage that has required not just spinal surgery but numerous foot surgeries as well.

"It was hard in the beginning, but it's gotten better," Isabel Sr

Her father said it was "frustrating" for Smith to not be able to months.

“She wanted to be back in the boat immediately,” Fred Smith said.

It didn’t take long for Isabel Smith to find her way back to the water. She said the surgery “didn’t affect” her much, though her father offered a different take. “She doesn’t let it affect her,” Fred Smith said. “It’s really awesome. She doesn’t let it slow her down.”

Although sailing remains a mystery to many in the landlocked Birmingham area, Fred Smith said it’s more than just a lazy day at sea. “Racing is not relaxing,” Fred Smith said.

“It’s harder than it looks,” his daughter added.

Isabel Smith said she’s gotten pretty good at starting a race, as sailors have only five minutes to start, and they must battle the wind and other boats. Isabel Smith and her partner work to identify the “favored line,” which is the path in the water that is closest to the race marker. The crew works during the race to navigate around other boats, choose the right path and work various sails in order to win the race.

“It’s a lot of strategy,” Fred Smith said.

Isabel Smith has benefited from numerous coaches during her young career, and while there may not be anywhere to practice near Birmingham, the Birmingham Sailing Club does a great job in providing coaching and opportunities to sailors like Isabel Smith, her dad said.

“College and Olympic coaches seek [members of the BSC] out,” Fred Smith said.

The father and daughter don’t get to sail much anymore, but in 2018, they were able to share a boat during an event, though it ended with the pair unintentionally swimming in the water, Fred Smith said.

In most of his daughter’s races, Isabel Smith drives a RIB, an inflatable boat that coaches use, though he admitted his daughter surpassed his expertise long ago.

“It’s nice to have him though,” Isabel Smith said.

“We’re pretty tight,” Fred Smith added. “It’s fun.”

Smith’s younger brother, Darby, has also started sailing, and while he doesn’t always listen to his sister, he found some success at his recent regatta when he did, Isabel Smith said.

Throughout the course of her young career, Isabel Smith has not only made lifelong friends, but learned invaluable lessons, such as making decisions by herself and gaining the confidence needed to face whatever lies in front of her, both her and her father said.

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