
Mountain Brook teen sails in prestigious regatta in Italy

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Darby Smith, a senior at Mountain Brook High, before a sailing competition in Charleston, South Carolina.

A Mountain Brook teen had the experience of a lifetime during the summer of 2023, competing in one of the world's most prestigious sailing competitions.

Darby Smith, a senior at Mountain Brook High School, is a competitive sailor who is more at home testing his abilities on the water than on an athletic field or basketball court.

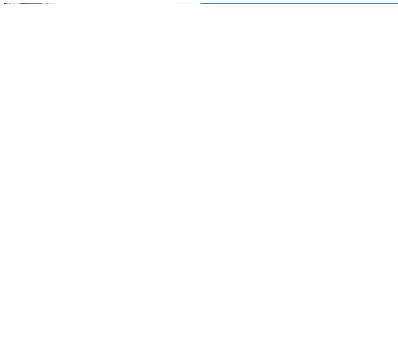
"I really like how it's more mental than other sports. It's not like basketball or football, where you have to like to play through physical pain or something," Smith said. "It's just a good mix of strategy and pure physical endurance."

He had the opportunity to put his skills up against some of his toughest competition yet at the world's largest regatta, held in Lake Garda, Italy. Located in north-central Italy, sandwiched between Milan to the west and Venice to the east, Lake Garda hosts close to 1,400 sailors competing in dozens of categories each summer.

Smith was one of a handful of American teens invited to compete in 2023, racing a 14-foot sailboat as part of a fleet in a four-day series of races against 300 experienced sailors.

For the Smith family, sailing is more than a hobby, it's a passion. When not traveling around the country, setting sail for sport or leisure, the Smiths can often be found taking part in events with the Birmingham Sailing Club on Logan Martin Lake in Pell City or the South Carolina Yacht Club on Hilton Head Island.

Darby's older sister, Isabel, is also a competitive sailor and attends Auburn University.



Now 18, Darby Smith has been sailing competitively since he was around 10 years old. During his time as an amateur, Smith has raced renowned North American events such as the C420 North American Championships and the 2023 ILCA National Championships at Lake Sinclair in Detroit.

He's raced all over the eastern seaboard, New England, the Gulf Coast and even the Optimist Team Trials in California. However, nothing could prepare him for the scenic beauty and challenging environment of Lake Garda in Italy.

"It was incredible. It was easily one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in my life," he said. "I remember just sailing along and I would look up and I would realize where I was, and then I would be like, 'I need to focus back in and focus on sailing instead of the beauty around me.'"

Lake Garda is not only stunning to look at but also one of the most coveted — and challenging — environments in competitive sailing. Darby's father, Fred Smith, said that the lake's extremely cold and deep water, combined with the unique wind patterns caused by the surrounding Garda mountains, can test the mettle of the most seasoned of sailors.

"This lake is a sailing mecca. It's a bucket list and all our Olympic sailors go and train there because of the consistent breeze," Fred Smith said. "You get this cold water runoff and the lake is like a thousand feet deep."

Overnight, the winds calm, but during the day the sun heats the surrounding mountains, sucking the warm air up and over the surface of the lake, an effect called the "Ora." The phenomenon is what brings sailors from around the world to every summer like clockwork.

"It's like turning a switch on every day at noon and it blows 20 to 30 miles an hour," Fred Smith said. "So you can count on this consistent breeze out of the same direction and that's why they hold all these huge events there because, you know, you're going to have just incredible wind."

Darby Smith sailed well during the competition, finishing in the top 25 despite being penalized with a black flag, resulting in his disqualification from a couple of races. He said the regatta was a great experience, even though it did show him how much more work is needed to become a world-class elite sailor.

"Back home, I'm used to winning, so it was a little like it was a little bit an eye-opener. But it was really fun because there were different types of sailors who are all very competitive," he said.

Kids literally from all over the world come together to compete in this event, so it's really the best of the best, so a top 50 finish is phenomenal."

Smith also recently achieved Eagle Scout rank, following a project to create 50 plaques in honor of American military veterans for residents at the Colonel Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home in Pell City. After graduation in the spring of 2024,

he hopes to compete at the collegiate level at either Jacksonville University or the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

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