



Shirley Robertson

AFTER THE GOLD RUSH

Shirley Robertson is a rarity among an élite: one of sailing's only women Olympic Gold medallists. To win meant driving herself beyond raw talent for 12 years. She talks to Elaine Bunting about her rollercoaster life

When a newspaper like the *Daily Mail* wants you to take your clothes off, you know you've made it. Somehow they persuaded Shirley Robertson to remove most of hers and be sprayed in gold paint for a feature on Britain's Olympic Gold medalist. Britain's other sailing Gold medallists, Ben Ainslie and Iain Percy, have so far only got to ride round Winchester in an open top bus.

The phone hasn't stopped ringing since she got back from Sydney. People she doesn't know stop her in the street or write to her. Everyone wants to be Shirley's friend.

Robertson is 32 years old, pretty, smart and friendly. It's not surprising that she should be popular, but it couldn't be more of a contrast to the way things were after the last Olympics when, by a matter of a few less points, she finished 4th.

Whether 4th or 44th, it hardly mattered. When you're a world class sailor, your only goal is 'to medal' – and Shirley didn't. It was, she says, the worst of times. "There's a period of post-Olympic depression. You come back, it's winter and the phone never rings. It's like when someone has died; no one knows what to say." She was "in a mess" and vowed never again "to put myself in that kind of turmoil. It had been everything in my life."

She has been working for this Olympic medal for 12 long years – more than a third of her life. An only child, she grew up near Stirling in Scotland and started sailing with her father in a *Miracle*, then a *Graduate* and a *Mirror*. As a teenager, she sailed a *Laser* in the youth women's programme, but had no Olympic ambitions when she went to do a degree in recreation management at Edinburgh.

Afterwards, that changed. With two years to go to the Olympics in Barcelona, she concentrated on a new class, the *Europe*, a 13ft skimming dish single-hander for women. She finished 9th in Barcelona. At the age of 24, there was plenty of time to do better next time round.

Four years later, Robertson went to Savannah as one of Britain's best hopes and came away empty-handed. No one ever mentions that you mightn't win a medal, she says sadly.

By the same measure, though, it must seem like a foregone conclusion when you've finally done it. Although a win had eluded her, Robertson has taken away a Silver or Bronze from every major event in the last 2½ years. She has a reputation as one of the most consistent sailors in the world. ▽



Ocean Images

Victory, but it couldn't be more of a contrast to four years ago when, by a few less points, she finished 4th

Joe McCarthy





That makes her triumph in Sydney sound like a steady ascent, and it hasn't been. It would be all too easy to gloss over the erratic progress and stress of working for years for something liable to slip out of reach with one bad day. She describes her life as "a rollercoaster".

One of the low points came this summer, when Robertson and her coach, Laser national champion Mark Littlejohn, should have been on the light path to Sydney. "It was difficult," she remembers. "The clock was ticking and it wasn't going well. I was really struggling with equipment and training partners. From March to July, I was not sailing fast and to go sailing every day and be slow is hard."

The Europe class rules on masts had changed, so a new one had to be built. "I couldn't quite get what I wanted, and I didn't have anything I was rappy with," she says. The Europe's mast is free-standing; there are no shrouds or stays to adjust the rig, so it is vital the tube bends correctly and suits your sailing style.

"Say you're a very kinetic sailor," Robertson explains. "You could have a mast that's stiffer because you're working. But I'm a very good, very careful steerer and I needed a mast that could work on its own."

She called Jo Richards, a friend and former Olympic Bronze medalist, and told him she needed his help. He flew from Sardinia to Australia to do what he could. Robertson was only talking about bend characteristics of -2mm. "Some people would think that was all in your head," she says, "but Jo, the mast manufacturer and my coach all believed in my feel."

Such infinitesimally small things matter at this level and are what distinguishes winners from other very talented sailors. Eventually, they got it right and, by Sydney, Robertson was happy that she was sailing quickly.

Life in training doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs. Robertson lives in Cowes on the Isle of Wight, but sails from Hayling Island Sailing Club on the mainland, so every week she commuted by ferry and car. Often she would have to take her mast back to the manufacturers for more adjustments, which meant getting up in time to make the 0600 car ferry.

At Hayling Island, she and her coach would work together from Monday to Friday and sometimes at the weekend if the weather had been bad during the week. At one point each day, she would go to the gym and also worked with a personal trainer two or three times a week. At the end of the day, there might be equipment to pick up again before returning to Cowes.

Ask her how she relaxes afterwards and she looks blank. It's life, but not as we know it. "To say you live anywhere isn't right," she agrees. "I live on my own, and we spent hardly any time there. I haven't put any time into it. I haven't hung my pictures and I haven't done the garden."

There's more to being a top dinghy sailor than just getting out in the boat and sailing. In two years, Shirley Robertson has raced at ten major regattas all over the world. She's got six hulls and 40 sails; she's got to get herself, her boats and her training programme organised and work out how to locate funds for it all.

"I am the project manager," Robertson explains. "I have to decide what happens and when. I've got to sort out finances, sails, technical development, make sure the relevant equipment is at the right places at the right time. One of the things about getting to the Olympics is that you have to be very organised."

As Andy Rice reports on page 42, lottery funding has transformed how the British team campaign could be run. Like other British sailors, Shirley Robertson gets a subsistence allowance through the Royal Yachting

"The clock was ticking and it wasn't going well. From March to July I was not sailing fast. To be slow is hard"



Shirley Robertson beat rival Margriet Matthyse from the Netherlands by two points, with results of 4th, 3rd, 1st, 6th, 1st, 13th, 8th, 9th, 2nd, 16th and 3rd

Daniel Foster/DPP



John McCauley

Association (RYA). This varies from person to person according to age, circumstances and prospects. "It means that basic living expenses are paid for by the lottery. Personally, my quality of life has improved dramatically," she admits. "but you've got to look commercially for a top-up. Nobody's getting rich."

Robertson says she doesn't know and can't bear to think what her campaign has cost. I wonder if this is entirely true, because she strikes me as being completely on the ball. Ben Ainslie says his campaign cost £200,000 (see right), so perhaps it is something similar. But you take the general point: it's a lot of money to get one woman and her 13ft boat to the front of the fleet and at the same time pointless to measure the achievement that way. Over four years, it wouldn't run many other 32-year-old graduates at the pinnacle of a worldwide profession. This is a vocation, not a career.

In July, she left for Sydney and the 'Pink Palace', the house that had been rented near Rushcutter's Bay for the British sailing team. Age and experience were her allies this time. "It was a thinking person's Olympics," she says, adding that she believes this is why so many of the medalists were older sailors. A different mental attitude, perhaps a more balanced and mature one than she'd had in Savannah, played its part. "Now I only get upset about the things I can do something about. I was able to take things one at a time and one race at a time."

And technically? "We had a range of conditions and I don't really have any weaknesses across the wind range. So I was very relaxed at the venue and I was good at getting my head out of the boat."

Yet winning requires more than raw talent. What is it about Shirley Robertson that earned her a Gold medal? After 12 years, determination and persistence, obviously. Self-belief, too. She describes herself as a perfectionist, someone who will "never settle. OK is not good enough: I am always looking for something better." She says, rather incredulously, that others see her as confident and almost without self-doubt. Whether she recognises this or not, these qualities are immediately apparent and seem to be untainted by conceit.



Gilles Martin-Rognon/KOS

What to do now? – Ben Ainslie's dilemma

Of all the sailing victories in Sydney, Ben Ainslie's will go down as the best known. Even people who didn't know one end of a boat from the other were transformed into armchair experts by his 11th hour duel with Brazilian Robert Scheidt. The match racing tactics were easy to understand: it was brutal and it was personal.

He confesses that this last gladiatorial battle was "very stressful" but it worked and gave 23-year-old Ainslie a Gold medal to add to the Silver he won at Savannah four years ago, when he was sailed into 2nd place in the last race in a similar cliffhanger.

Behind the apparent symmetry of their second Olympic duel, this wasn't just a re-run played out with a different ending. In between have come four years of intense training and development.

"I've matured a lot in the last four years," Ainslie says. "I'm more confident and I make less mistakes. I'm not as naive as I was, in terms of racing and tactics." He also thinks being slightly heavier and a bit fitter has helped, as has working with training partner Paul Goodison.

Ainslie reckons his campaign has cost about £200,000, which has come from a mixture of Lottery funding and sponsorship from Audi, Winterthur Life and Henri-Lloyd. He has spent most of it on travel, going to "tons and tons of events." His two boats, masts and sails are the largest other expenses. At this level, a Laser sail can be used for only one or two events.

Having won a Gold medal, Ainslie thinks it's time to change from the Laser. "You've got to quit

while you're ahead," he explains. A lack of things to tweak on a Laser is one of its disadvantages, he agrees. "The Laser can be difficult because you can't change anything; it's all about what you do on the water. Sometimes it is fairly monotonous."

Ainslie must decide where to go now and is considering campaigning a Soling or a Star for the next Olympics. But he would like to try different kinds of sailing. "I'd like to try bigger boats." When pressed about what kinds he says: "All sorts. America's Cup. Volvo."

He's already had calls from two US America's Cup syndicates. He would prefer to sail for Britain but doesn't believe a British campaign is likely. There's no denying that a job sailing for an America's Cup team would introduce Ainslie into the big money and turn his medals into something bankable.

Yet the high-octane world of Olympic competition isn't easy to leave. He would like to try racing Corel 45s, a design being talked about as a new Olympic class. And there's a match racing to think about, and the possibility of teaming up somehow with fellow Gold medalist Iain Percy.

Ben Ainslie's got so many options that working out what to do next is the biggest dilemma. "I'm just sorting things out at the moment and trying to decide what to do in the next four years," he says. "You get lots of offers, and it would be easy to go off and do too many things. I've got to decide soon and it's hard."

Ingrid Abery





Climate of excellence

How do you bottle the magic ingredients for Olympic success? Andy Rice finds out how the British team turned talent into triumph

Now the euphoria of five Olympic medals for Great Britain is dying down, the Royal Yachting Association must begin to assess what went so right this time. Secretary general Rod Carr has already warned against hopes of such success being repeated but you can be sure the brains in Eastleigh will be doing everything they can to bottle up the magic ingredients from Sydney to see if the same potion will work again in Athens in four years' time.

Exactly what was it that worked so well for our sailors in Sydney? The sailors, like the rowers and cyclists who also excelled at the Games, have pointed to the Lottery funding the RYA has received for the past three years. But as Star silver medallist Ian Walker was quick to acknowledge, there are other equally well funded countries like Spain and France – traditionally strong performers at the Olympics – who came home with no medals of any colour.

Walker believed the fluky and unpredictable conditions in the Harbour made it a mentally tough regatta and that a crucial factor in the team's success was the Brits' ability to knuckle down in the face of adversity and just put it down to a bad day. Ian Barker faced exactly such a situation after leading the first race of the 49er fleet, when a 180° windshift sent the course – and the fleet order – into reverse. This dropped him from 1st to 13th at the finish, while others benefited from a reciprocal rise in fortune. But it did not faze him, he was able simply to shrug it off and make the view that over 16 races there was a good chance of 'what goes around comes around'.

This attitude of taking your chances when they come and not getting upset when they don't seemed to pervade the team. John Derbyshire, the Olympic team manager and his coaching staff would take a large part of the credit for this, having identified very early on that Sydney Harbour would be what Derbyshire termed "a street fighter's venue".

"What I said to the team before the Games was that more medals are lost than they are won. If you can keep your head while all around you others are losing theirs, then you have a good chance of winning a medal.

"If you look at Chris Nicholson [the home favourite in the 49ers] for instance, he panicked and started sailing for a win each time. The same



"Our team didn't panic. They didn't get too up and they didn't get down, they just kept relaxed and kept their heads" John Derbyshire

with Mateusz Kusnierewicz in the Finn. Every morning at the team meeting I would emphasise that it was just another day. 'Just chip away' was the advice. And our team didn't panic. They didn't get too up and they didn't get down, they just kept relaxed and kept their heads."

Derbyshire also thinks the unpredictability of the conditions suited a team that by and large had grown up sailing on gravel pits in their childhood. "It was probably many years since they had done that sort of sailing, but I think it stood them in good stead in Sydney Harbour."

But in his eyes, a lot of the winning had been done long before the team arrived in Sydney. The level of preparation eclipsed anything that had

been attempted before, thanks in large part to the injection of Lottery cash.

The Lottery funding, which amounts to around £1.7m a year, enabled the RYA to set up base in Sydney over a year before the Games and also gave sailors the freedom to explore new areas of psychology, physiology, technical testing and things that would have seemed a rather frivolous luxury four years ago. There is no doubt the organisational ability of the RYA put that funding to highly effective use and brought out the best from a pool of talented sailors.

Will that same organisation and funding bring similar success in the future, or was this an exceptional bunch of sailors? The question really boils down to whether great sailors are born or made. Stephen Park, or 'Sparky' as he is known to the 49er sailors he coaches, comments: "A few years ago I would have said that they were born, but not now. At the Olympics over 50 per cent of the fleet are winning races in their class, which shows they have the potential. Whether or not they win a medal is all down to how hard they are prepared to work. You might have a great windsurfing brain, for example, but if you're not fit enough to pump your way all round the course, then you're not going to win. To get into the frame for a medal you certainly need the talent, but from there it's a matter of honing your skills."

According to Shirley Robertson's coach, Mark Littlejohn: "Good sailors are born but Gold medals are made. A talented sailor will be able to get a top six at the Games on their natural ability but to get a medal takes more than that," he says. Littlejohn believes great credit should go to Derbyshire for creating a framework that enables sailors to improve on their weaknesses without crushing their flair or individuality.

Sparky says the RYA's aim was to create a "climate of excellence". For the first time, the squad sailors had the budget to cherry-pick from a menu of specialists who could help raise their game in different ways, whether it was working with the physiologist to be able to hike harder and longer, or to gain 10kg of muscle to reach the target weight for their class.

In Robertson's case, the funding gave her the opportunity to work with Mark Littlejohn, who had no previous background in coaching but had an excellent pedigree as a world class Laser sailor



in his own right. He began working with Robertson about 18 months before the Games and soon identified some key areas for improvement.

Downwind sailing was one of them, and to help her raise her ability he took on up-and-coming Laser sailor Paul Goodison, acknowledged to have excellent skill in sailing down waves. Goodison has since gone on to prove himself as Ainslie's successor in the Laser, having run his training partner very close for the European Championships earlier this year.

For training, Littlejohn did not bother with video footage, but used simple observation to pass on Goodison's skills to Robertson. "Every time I saw Paul make a gain, I would stop them both and explain to Shirley in the greatest detail possible what I thought he was doing differently."

The use of coaches this time round has been far greater than in the past, another example of the way the RYA has put its new-found funding to good effect. One of the most imaginative appointments was that of Hamish Wilcox, a three-times 470 world champion from the 1980s. He coached Nick Rogers and Joe Glanfield, who came within a point of winning a Bronze medal in the 470 in Sydney.

Derbyshire says the talent and commitment are down to the individual; there is nothing that he or the RYA can do about that. But what the Lottery funding has done is to complete the third side of a triangle that has been missing for too long in Britain. The RYA has proved that it knows better than any other organisation in the world how to put those resources to most effective use in bringing home medals. As the sailors and Derbyshire himself acknowledge, the coaches played a crucial role in those three Golds and two Silvers.

Great sailors – born or made? Derbyshire won't commit: "Nature or nurture – that's a tough one. But what I do know is that coaches make the great sailors greater more quickly." □



Team GB and how they performed



Name: Ben Ainslie
Age: 23
Lives: Lymington
Class: Laser
Result: Gold medal



Name: Ian Barker
Age: 34
Lives: Hamble
Class: 49er (helmsman)
Result: Silver medal



Name: Simon Hiscocks
Age: 27
Lives: Dorking, Surrey
Class: 49er (crew)
Result: Silver medal



Name: Nick Dempsey
Age: 20
Lives: Peterborough
Class: Mistral windsurfer
Result: 16th



Name: Andy Beadsworth
Age: 33
Lives: Titchfield, Hants
Class: Soling (helmsman)
Result: 12th



Name: Richard Sydenham
Age: 24
Lives: Portsmouth
Class: Soling (middleman)
Result: 12th



Name: Barry Parkin
Age: 36
Lives: Sunningdale
Class: Soling (bowman)
Result: 12th



Name: Christine Johnston
Age: 25
Lives: Whitechurch, Hants
Class: Mistral windsurfer
Result: 18th



Name: Iain Percy
Age: 24
Lives: Southampton
Class: Finn
Result: Gold medal



Name: Shirley Robertson
Age: 32
Lives: Cowes
Class: Europe
Result: Gold medal



Name: Nicholas Rogers
Age: 23
Lives: Lymington
Class: 470 (helmsman)
Result: 4th



Name: Joe Glanfield
Age: 21
Lives: Exmouth
Class: 470 (crew)
Result: 4th



Name: Hugh Styles
Age: 26
Lives: Portsmouth
Class: Tornado (helmsman)
Result: 6th



Name: Adam May
Age: 24
Lives: Exmouth
Class: Tornado (crew)
Result: 6th



Name: Ian Walker
Age: 30
Lives: Hamble
Class: Star (helmsman)
Result: Silver medal



Name: Mark Covell
Age: 32
Lives: Ermsworth
Class: Star (crew)
Result: Silver medal