

# [Into the wind](#)



## **Sailors with MS challenge themselves and others.**

by James Townsend

J.R. Hardenburgh and Nick Bryan-Brown take the motto “embrace the challenge” to heart. The two met at a multiple sclerosis support group in 2014 in Boston and became friends when they discovered they shared a life-long love for sailing. So, they decided to challenge each other in races.

They were invited to race in the fall regattas in 2015, 2016 and 2017 at the Y-Knot Sailing Center in Lake George, New York. In June 2018, they raced in the national parasailing championship held during the Clagett Regatta in Newport, Rhode Island.

## **Sail away**

A variety of opportunities exist for sailors with disabilities to get involved beyond the Clagett Regatta. Among them: the [U.S. Sailing Association’s adaptive sailing program](#), the [Judd Goldman Adaptive Sailing Foundation](#) in Chicago and the [Disabled Sports USA](#) produces parasailing events nationwide.

After two days of preparation and three days of racing, Hardenburgh and Bryan-Brown won the bronze medal at the C. Thomas Clagett, Jr. Memorial Clinic and Regatta, known by its shortened name, the Clagett. The late C. Thomas Clagett, Jr., was a lifelong sailing devotee with a love of honest rivalry and quality competition. His namesake event is North America’s

premier race-training event for sailors with disabilities, most of whom are amputees or those with spinal cord injuries. “Out of 46 competitors, we were the only MS patients in the race,” Hardenburgh says.

### **Motivating others**

Hardenburgh and Bryan-Brown hope to change that and help motivate other people with MS to do things they didn’t think they could do. Hardenburgh and Bryan-Brown work with the director of Y-Knot and its adaptive racing director to tell people with MS about the adaptive sailing program. “J.R. has been the driving force behind MS Sailing days at Y-Knot for the past two years,” Bryan-Brown says of his friend.

“We plan to get people with MS interested in sailing by hosting MS Sailing Days at the Y-Knot Sailing Center on Lake George and Community Boating on the Charles River in Boston,” Hardenburgh says. He and Bryan-Brown will skipper the boats, taking people for a leisurely sail so they get a feel for the experience. The two partner with the MS Cure Fund in Boston to get the word out. In addition, one of the Y-Knot volunteers whose wife has MS attends MS support group meetings in upstate New York and encourages group members to participate in the sailing days.

“In the disabled sailing community,” Hardenburgh says, “competition is as fierce as any other sport, but parasailing is really an open, honest and collegial environment where we’re all cheering for one another, rooting for other sailors to do better.” It’s what adaptive sailing programs around the nation are all about, he says.



**Coming into an inflatable buoy marker that must be rounded, Nick Bryan-Brown skippers an 18-foot sailboat as J.R.**

**Hardenburgh assists.** Photo courtesy of Clagett Regatta/RO Fernandez

## **A look back**

Hardenburgh, 63, grew up in Connecticut and learned to sail on the Long Island Sound at age 12. Diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 1995, he gave up sailing and experienced a long period of decline. “Although I was managing my MS and its symptoms, I was missing a decent quality of life,” he says. His pivotal moment came in 2013 while attending a Can Do Multiple Sclerosis event in Denver. “It was my annus horribilus, Latin for worst year ever,” he says. “My MS was progressing, and my career and marriage were dissolving, but two of my best friends encouraged me to try adaptive sailing. Prior to being diagnosed, sailing and skiing were my passions, so I pursued adaptive versions of both with vigor, and the outcome was very rewarding, greatly improving my quality of life each year.”

Bryan-Brown, 65, grew up in New Zealand and began sailing at the age of 5. “Sailing has been my passion since I was young and continues almost 30 years after my diagnosis in 1989,” he says. Bryan-Brown, who has primary progressive MS and uses a wheelchair, maintains his real estate business and remains active in sailboat racing. He teamed up with Robie Pierce, another sailor with MS who was organizing events for sailors with disabilities. Together, they won several national championships, then took a gold medal in the 1993 World Disabled Sailing Championships in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Pierce is famously quoted as saying, “I’m not going to let this MS stand in the way of me racing. If I have to crawl to the boat, I’ll go.”

“When I first was diagnosed with MS,” Bryan-Brown says, “my future was uncertain, not knowing if I could continue my prior activities that bring satisfaction to my life. Parasailing brings a quality to my life that I didn’t think possible.”

## **Adaptation**

Sailing presents unique challenges to those with MS, summer temperatures along with mental and physical fatigue among the biggest. “Summer heat is our kryptonite and sometimes temperatures on the water are in the 80s,” Hardenburgh says. “We have to wear cooling vests and constantly stay hydrated. Maintaining balance is a frequent problem for people with MS on land, but on the water, we leave our disabilities behind on the dock.” Adaptive sailboats are equipped with stationary seats that keep sailors in a fixed, centralized position regardless of the boat’s movement. There is a joystick to control the rudder (for steering) and lines to control the sails, all within reach of the skipper’s or crew’s fixed seat. For those in wheelchairs, like Bryan-Brown, there is dockside equipment to lift him into the boat. “Sailors with disabilities in boats properly equipped like this frequently beat able-bodied sailors in competitive events,” Hardenburgh says.



**Nick Bryan-Brown being Hoyer-lifted into a sailboat before the race.** Photo courtesy of Clagett Regatta/RO Fernandez

But it's not all about competition, Hardenburgh adds. Many parasailing centers welcome people with physical challenges and no prior sailing experience as passengers.

Hardenburgh says one of the best aspects of the Clagett is the extraordinary coaching he and Bryan-Brown received from Betsy Alison, five-time Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year, inducted in the 2011 inaugural class of the National Sailing Hall of Fame. Before the races, and every day during the race, participants meet with top racers like Alison for personal instruction. "When you get a member of the sailing hall of fame telling you what to do to win, you listen," Hardenburgh says.

"Sailing is one of the very few sports that offers a level playing field for both disabled and able-bodied competitors," says Sam Crichton, PR consultant to the Clagett and other sailing competitions. She loves the intense passion and joy in those involved with the program. "The Clagett is a deeply inspiring event," she says. "When these sailors come out of their boats at the end of a race, you couldn't get bigger smiles if you paid them for it."

**James Townsend is a writer in Boulder, Colorado.**