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The Olympic debate



Goran Petersson talks to us about why we now have one less Olympic medal and the pressures of complying with the IOC

Read part one of this interview with Goran Petersson [here](#)

The reduction from 11 to ten medals for the 2012 Olympic Games in Weymouth has caused significant surprise and speculation among the sailing community. There has been much talk about the boat most likely to be dropped and the classes likely to be kept as well as discussion about how the decision will be made and why. Primarily it will be the job of the ISAF Council to make these decisions but until then there is a great deal for the average sailor to ponder.

While some see ISAF as a large faceless organisation, talking to ISAF President, Goran Petersson, one gets an entirely different impression. Friendly and chatty, he does not come across as a bureaucrat with a hidden agenda or a man trying to prevent sailors knowing about the future of their sport. In fact the opposite is true: almost immediately Petersson's passion for the sport comes across and it is hard not to feel infected by his enthusiasm. It is equally clear on many occasions he finds himself stuck between a rock and a hard place and there are moments you can hear the strain and frustration in his voice.

We kick off our chat to Petersson with the obvious question on everyone's lips; why has sailing had an Olympic medal removed? "Let me first explain it is not that we [ISAF] are dropping a medal - they [the International Olympic Committee] are taking a medal from us," says Petersson, his accent thickening slightly with the

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Goran Petersson

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words 'they' and 'taking'. "We have no direct influence on that. We have, of course, discussed this with them, we have lobbied and we have done everything within our power to avoid this," he continues.

Petersson explains the original decision by the IOC was taken not just in reference to sailing, but as a way of cutting down athlete numbers across the board, a move dating back to the time of the Sydney games in 2000. He adds that many other sports have had to cut down on the amount of medals and many of those who have not, have had to cut down on the amount of athletes participating. It is important to note here the reasons for losing a medal are an effective cut to athlete numbers not specifically a cut to the representation of sailing on the Olympic stage. This reduction was actually due to take place [for sailing] before China. We managed to postpone it because we are at a removed venue and that was an argument they accepted. In 2012 we will be down to ten medals and 380 athletes," explains Petersson.

The IOC's control over sailing at the Olympic Games is extensive and indicative of the IOC taking a significantly bigger interest in the running of all Olympic level sports. "It has changed a lot over the last ten years, specifically since the IOC began formally evaluating each sport," say Petersson "All sports have to concentrate on the things the IOC want and that is generally a lot of things. Specifically now the media issue is the most important one of all. Everything comes down to media which, in turn, comes down to money. We have to be realistic about that."

As most know ISAF have, over a period of years, been tweaking sailing at the Olympics in order to make it more attractive to the media and easier for them to cover. These changes, such as the variety of different formats tried out before the adoption of the new 'medal race' have come under a significant amount of criticism for not being representative of the sport, but Petersson argues that such changes are not an option. Olympic sailing must be made as media-friendly as possible. The only other option is for sailing not to be part of the Olympics.

"My answer is that it is absolutely essential sailing is an Olympic sport," Petersson confirms, adding as to why this is the case: "I think there are several reasons for this, but there are two main ones. Firstly money -we need to remember that funding is a thing of the last ten years. The IOC did not give out money in any significant amount before that. Now we get a significant amount of money for being a part of the Olympics.

"The second is what I call the 'Olympic effect'. If you try to develop sailing in countries that are not wealthy enough to do it themselves then you must be able to say 'Olympic'. If you can't say 'Olympic' then the government will not fund it. This then filters all the way down to the grass roots. They provide sailing schools, clubs, boats and instructors. If you do not have an Olympic programme then this will simply not happen. This is especially true for Africa, Asia and South America, so this is absolutely essential." To many this may seem as though the benefits of the Olympics are more significant to developing sailing nations rather than those already major players - typically western nations. However, Petersson argues that although the potential benefits may seem more significant in less developed sailing countries the whole sport benefits from the increased level of international competition.

As well as the IOC putting significant pressure on ISAF to become more media friendly they have other targets in place for ISAF to meet. "As you are probably aware we have our regulations – there are lots of regulations – which are about males and females as one issue and nations as another issue," Petersson says of the main issues concerning the IOC currently. The IOC have tasked them with ensuring the maximum number of nations compete and that they comply with the Olympic-wide target that 35% of athletes are female. "We were one of the few sports that actually managed to do this in Athens and Sydney," he says.

Then there is the issue of crew weight and how this varies between nations. "If you talk to the Japanese and Americans, say, then they clearly don't have the same average weight, but they are both looking for the best average weight for each certain boat, so we have to look at that too. The Asians are gaining more importance and more influence in the sport as time goes by, taking it away from

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Europe and the west," he says.

Increasing international participation on the one hand is made all the harder by the IOC's demands to reduce the number of sailors on the other. "If you look at the wealthy western countries - they are not all participating in all the events. In fact very few countries participate in all 11 events. They are participating in fewer, much fewer than that. It is easier to get more nations to participate in one event than to try to persuade a wealthier country to take part in an additional event," explains Petersson.

Ideally one gets the impression the perfect Olympic Games for the IOC would have every country in the world participating in one or two classes only at the Olympics. This happening is, of course, very unlikely and ISAF are aware that getting countries who have shown no previous interest in sailing to try for the Olympics is hard. To entice countries to participate, they draw up a hit list of the most likely candidates. First, and highest on the list, are all the counties who have participated in the Olympics before but where not at Athens in 2004 or Sydney in 2000. Then there are countries who have competed at other major international events, such as the ISAF Youth World Championships, but not the Olympics. Finally they look at countries that have had a relatively consistent presence in recognised youth or junior classes such as the Optimist and the 420. Funding is then available to countries on the hit list to assist in their getting to the Games.

While the IOC has a big say in what goes on in Olympic level sailing, it is still very much the responsibility of ISAF to make the changes and major decisions in the sport. As with most large scale operations the time it takes for any big decisions to be made is long. In April of this year there will be an Olympic Equipment Evaluation for a potential women's high performance dinghy class (more on this tomorrow). This will be followed by an ISAF meeting in May where some shortlists will be drawn up before the major decisions are made at the annual ISAF Conference in the autumn. "Now, we are looking at the events for the Olympics," explains Petersson. "We will have a list of various events and then the final decisions will be made in November this year. Following this, in November 2008 - three months after the Olympics, we will decide which classes will be used. That is the procedure we have, that is in our regulations and we are now preparing for that."

The main people involved in the major decision making and who have the final vote are the 39 members of the ISAF Council and three representatives for ISAF classes, women and offshore but they will have taken advice from many others. "First of all, the events committee is looking at this and then the staff and the executive committee look at it in different ways. There is also the Athletes Commission made up of athlete's representatives and we informally go to events and talk to sailors and to media people and anybody interested. A wide collection of information goes on," Petersson comments. "These views are not always telling us the same thing as you might expect. If you have a good sailor in a certain class then they obviously tend to support that class so we have to take all of this information into account. The council are the people who make the final decision and that will be known after the vote."

Hopefully this article has answered some questions about why sailing has to adapt for the modern day Olympics and given an idea about what issues are faced by ISAF when making changes at the Olympic level. Tomorrow, in the second half of this interview, we get Goran Petersson at the potential changes likely to take place in 2012 and further in the future. This includes discussion on the Bladerider Moth, how sailing will adapt for the media and just how many classes might be changed for future Olympics.

As ever any feedback about the IOC, Olympic medals or any other comments you may have are welcomed at: batmail@thedailysail.com

Peterson with Tornado sailors Fernando Echavari and Anton Paz

Photo: Dan Forster / ROLEX



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