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Hall Has One Last Chance at Olympics

Annapolis Native's Appeal Will Be Heard

By *Angus Phillips*
Special to The Washington Post
Friday, March 21, 2008; Page E03

In a remarkable reversal, the Olympic Sailing Committee announced it will reopen a protest hearing from October that resulted in the ouster of an Annapolis sailor from the U.S. team. Farrah Hall, 27, won the trials in Long Beach, Calif., last fall, but was stripped of the Olympic berth by a protest panel 90 minutes later.

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"She's got the dream, she's living the dream. The worst thing is to see her getting stomped on," said the mentor of Farrah Hall, above, an Olympic hopeful. (By Keith Taylor For The Washington Post)

Hall led Nancy Rios of Cocoa, Fla., by one point after eight days of racing. She overtook Rios by winning the final two races, the last by five minutes in strong winds. Rios was second and fourth on the final day.

But while Hall was off showering and celebrating, Rios filed for redress. She claimed a collision with another competitor after the start of the last race left an eight-inch rip in her sail, which compromised performance.

The three-judge panel responded to Rios's tearful testimony by bumping the 20-year-old Floridian from fourth to second place in the last race, vaulting her ahead of Hall for the Olympic spot. It wasn't until the hearing was over and the decision rendered that Hall was called to the protest room and told of the decision.

There, she said she and her coach, Polish boardsailor Piotr Myszka, were advised that the ruling was final. What she and Myszka did not know, Hall said, is that she could have filed her own petition for redress. By the time she figured it out the next morning after consulting her mentor in Annapolis, Olympic medalist John Bertrand, it was too late. The petition was rejected as untimely.

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Now that ruling has been reversed by

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Now that ruling has been reversed by the protest panel at the urging of the Olympic Sailing Committee, whose chairman, Dean Brenner, said yesterday that the panel, augmented by two more members, will reassemble in Rhode Island April 8-9 to rehear Rios's case combined with a new redress hearing for Hall.

"It's a good decision," said Brenner yesterday, fresh from a trip to the Olympic venue in China. "Both women will be there and both will be able to make their case." The new hearing could also negate Hall's

scheduled federal arbitration hearing in San Francisco in May.

Bertrand, who took up Hall's case, was pleased by the decision. He's no stranger to Olympic intrigue. In 1984, he was second in the Finn trials to Russ Silvestri, but had results overturned on the grounds that Silvestri illegally blocked him in the last race. Bertrand went on to win silver at the Los Angeles Games.

Bertrand contacted legal authorities in California in Hall's behalf. They advised that under federal law, Olympic athletes may apply for arbitration if they feel they've been denied due process. The rule mostly is used in doping cases.

"It appears she did not get a fair shake," Bertrand said. "These are trials to pick an Olympic representative. The jury heard no outside witnesses. They only heard one side of the story in a non-appealable hearing to seat the person going to the Olympics.

"She's got the dream, she's living the dream. The worst thing is to see her getting stomped on."

Brenner was at the trials and attended Rios's redress hearing. "We believe our trials are a fair process," he said, "and as much as we don't want disputes to come down to the protest room, we believe we did it all by the books and the right person is going to the Games."

But yesterday Brenner said the idea of reopening the redress hearing was suggested by his committee. "It's the latest in a long line of concessions we've made," he said. "I continue to believe the jury has done things right."

He said whichever way the redress hearing goes next month, arbitration remains likely in behalf of whoever loses. Meantime, Hall, whose Olympic quest has defined her life for the last two years, is back to training and racing across Europe on a shoestring budget.

The Broadneck High graduate said of her financial circumstances: "We can't afford it. My mom's an art teacher and my dad's an engineer. We're just normal people. The normal cost for a full-on campaign is about \$35,000 a year, but I've done a whole season in Europe for about \$3,000."

She took up boardsailing at St. Mary's College. A former competitive swimmer, runner and triathlete (in high school, she ranked fourth in Maryland in the mile run), she took interest in an Olympic campaign after two-time Olympic medalist Mike Gebhardt spoke to her college boardsailing club.

Neither she nor Rios is expected to be in medal contention at the Games. Both finished in the bottom third at the world championships in New Zealand last winter. "The great windsurfers, they don't come from nowhere," Hall said.

But she reckons whoever gets to go to China will learn from the experience, and that knowledge could strongly influence future prospects. "It's an uphill fight," Hall said, "and I want to be the person changing that."

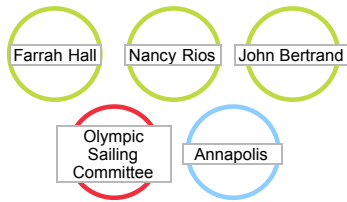
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