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Cover photograph by Howard McKean

A Sailor

Howard Cosell says that sports is the toy department of life. If he is right, Kevin Saunders of Little Rock, Arkansas, must be having a ball. He quit his high stress job as a bond salesman to go sailing. Specifically, his "toy" is the 15-foot Finn, the only single-sailor boat in the Olympic yachting events. His final destination is Barcelona, Spain. His goal: to win a medal in the 1992 Olympic Games.

Along the way, he's visiting the playgrounds of the U.S. and Europe —Newport Beach, California, the Gulf of Mexico, the French Riviera. At each regatta, held at exclusive yacht clubs, he rubs elbows with high rollers: *USA Today* has reported that sailing is the fastest growing sport in households with more than $50,000 combined incomes. It seems, as the saying has it, like "a great life, if you don't weaken."

Photography by Ted Dion © 1990

It's a long way from Little Rock to Barcelona, but Kevin Saunders, outsider, is determined to make the voyage.

from Arkansas

By Harriet Magee
Photography by Harriet Magee

Saunders was not born with a tiller in his hand. Most Olympic class sailors, like most other Olympic athletes, started learning their sport in childhood. Saunders grew up in land-locked Amarillo, Texas. Between driving a long-distance truck and selling insurance, he got a college degree in biology. His most recent athletic achievement was finishing in the top ten bike racers in the U.S. Track Championships. He had never sailed until about five years ago, when he was 28.

His late start, plus the circumstances of his youth, mean that Saunders is not part of the "old boy network." He didn't grow up near an ocean, he did not belong to any yacht clubs, he never sailed on a college team. Even so, Gus Miller, an Olympic Yachting Committee coach for the Finn class, thinks he has a good chance. "There's the myth you have to start young and then be at your physical peak to compete. But emotional maturity, being organized, focused, and persistent, can more than compensate for the aging body."

Miller thinks Saunders has potential. "Kevin is a thinker and asks the right questions. He knows the value of laying out goals for training, then analyzing where he stands."

Saunders puts it more literally: "Standing in a cold shower wrestling with an invisible enemy" is what it sometimes feels like to race the small Finn.

The boat looks like the popular Sunfish available for rent at almost any waterside vacation area. It weighs twice as much, however, and its sail has six different controls, compared to one for the Sunfish. A few millimeters change in the alignment of the 62-square-feet of fabric can win or lose a race. Given the ratio of sail to null, an average person would be overpowered in even a slight wind.

Strength alone is not enough to handle the craft. Its design also demands speed and agility. The distance between the boom—the horizontal pole connected to the mast that runs along the bottom of the sail—and the keel-board is only two feet at best. When Saunders changes direction in a race, he has to lower his 180 pounds to the bottom of the boat and then spring up on the opposite side. If he miscalculates, a wind of any strength will give the boom enough force to cause a concussion.

Jim Davis, Ph.D., a professor of sports medicine and psychology at Southwest Missouri State University, explains that sailors tolerate the pain and danger of racing Finns because "Just as the winner of 100 meter dash is considered the fastest person in the world, the winner of the Finn event is considered the world's best sailor."

Although intensely athletic, the event requires as much mental as physical energy, Davis says. A

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Left: *Kevin Saunders in his Finn.* ***Right:*** *hiking out offsets the push of the wind and keeps the hull square in the water, improving speed and stability.*

volunteer with the Olympic Yachting Committee like coach Gus Miller, Davis attends as many training regattas as his schedule allows. He points out that many of the current Finn contenders, like Saunders, have studied the sciences. "Although these guys show a great deal of macho and bravado, their aggression has to be tempered by tactical considerations. They need to think like a chess player."

Davis advises the sailors on handling the physical and emotional challenges of competing. He notes that a combination of exhaustion and tension often produces insomnia. He recommends a homey yet scientific remedy to enhance "stage four" sleep: one hour before bed eat a high carbohydrate meal—with no protein or fat—and follow it with a whirlpool bath.

Davis says getting enough rest is the sailors' biggest problem. Unlike most Olympic events, which are over in less than an hour, a Finn race is likely to take at least six hours, usually longer when two or three races are scheduled back to back.

Through the stress of training and the grueling competitions, the Finn sailor is alone. Observing Saunders, Davis says, "Kevin's got an advantage in having been a bike racer. That's a solitary sport, too, demanding the same self-reliance." The lone Finn racer, Davis notes, must fill simultaneously the roles of captain, mate, sail trimmer and tactician.

The long days at the regattas begin with launching the boat, sailing to the starting line, maneuvering for the best position and then maintaining it until the starting gun. As in any race, a bad start, even a few yards behind, usually means a bad finish. Often, the first three-hour race—courses typically cover five to eight miles—is followed by an equally grueling second event. Then the sailors take their Finns back to the dock, where they haul them out of the water and wash them down. Saltwater will quickly corrode the hardware and mar the hull's finish.

Back on land, you'll find no slim, navy-blue-blazered aristocrats among Finn competitors. Instead, you'll see people who look like Mr. Universe contestants, minus the oiled bodies and bikinis.

Kevin Saunders has the highly developed forearms, quadriceps, and abdominals typical of this class racer. Beyond the sculpted and perpetually tanned body are signs of wear and tear. His hands are calloused and scarred like a fisherman's, and his feet are as beat up as any ballerina's from straining against the toeholds on the boat's bottom. These straps virtually anchor the sailors in their boats. They allow the sailor to position his body over the edge of the boat to balance wind pressure, improve hull position and increase speed. The advantage of "hiking out" is increased by adding up to 30 pounds of water bottles in the special vests competitors wear. It also increases the strain. To develop his upper body Saunders visits Gold's Gym

in Little Rock to use the weights. He also follows an exercise program designed by a sports trainer. It includes the goal of 1,000 situps a day.

There's a saying that showing up is all you need to do to succeed in life. For Saunders, who lives in the middle of the country, showing up at regattas is the most tedious part of his Olympic campaign. When it's over, he figures he will have covered some 160,000 miles.

He's driven his Chevy pickup, hauling a home-made trailer holding his $9,000 boat, through the Mojave Desert and over the Cross Bronx Expressway. When he gets tired, he pulls over and sleeps in the back of the truck, where he keeps a mattress. A clothesline for his always-wet drysuit doubles as a curtain.

At his destination—often some of America's most expensive real estate—it's more of the same, unless he can stay with a friend. "At least in the yacht club parking lots, there are no refrigerated 18-wheelers pulling in and waking me up," Saunders notes.

His high carbohydrate training diet adapts well to the road: "Beans, corn and ravioli, cold and right out of the can, taste real good when you're hungry," Saunders says. His positive attitude underlines his awareness that he needs as much hustle as muscle to succeed in his campaign.

Financing the drive for an Olympic berth can be just as grueling as the athletic competition. "One of the reasons I was selected for the Finn Development Program," Saunders says, "was because I'll be involved full-time in my training program. So I've got to raise money to support myself and to pay for traveling expenses—I figure I'll need about $150,000 to train so I can compete at Barcelona."

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Above: *making ready and lowering away. The effort of practicing and racing is equalled by the labor of preparing and fund raising.*

Arkansas Sailor. . .

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As a former bond salesman, Saunders isn't daunted by the prospect of asking strangers for money. He uses a computer to keep track of prospective donors, and he's assembled promotional materials about his campaign.

Pat Healy, a Canadian National Yachting Commission Coach, said about Saunders, "It's as true in business as it is in world class sailing that the best are fanatical about reaching their goals. Kevin is fanatical about his campaign, plus he's now got a sound competitive sailing background. He's also at a time in his life when he can make the commitment to an aggressive program. I hope his potential sponsors take this into account."

Saunders says, "Two points I make are that Arkansas has never fielded an Olympian in this event, and that, unlike many other countries' athletes, Americans rely on private organizations and individuals to support them. The prize is the intense pride everyone feels at seeing the U.S. capture medals."

The sailor from Little Rock also likes to point out that the skipper of the *Australia II*, which took the America's Cup in 1983 after the U.S. had it for a century, was a Finn sailor. Saunders says, "This is the chance to be the best I can—for that I'll drive anywhere in my homemade RV." ●

Left: *Saunders and the pick-up truck that's his home away from home.*