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OLYMPICS

With Clear Vision, Two Americans Brace for Rio's Polluted Waters

By **CHRISTOPHER CLAREY** MARCH 3, 2016

If a broken spine, two fractured ribs and a lacerated kidney did not put an end to Helena Scutt's Olympic dreaming, it should come as no surprise that she and her crewmate, Paris Henken, are not prepared to let the health risks in Rio de Janeiro dissuade them from taking part in their first Games.

Last month, Scutt and Henken became the first American sailors to qualify for the Rio Games. They will sail in a new Olympic class, the 49erFX, a high-performance skiff that looks more like a high-wire act and is open only to women. In light of the speed and the ocean spray and the fact that competitors are suspended off the boat on trapeze wires, the 49erFX is also one of the events that will put athletes in closest contact with the polluted waters of Guanabara Bay.

“At this point it's obviously not ideal, and I'm not the first to say that,” Scutt said in a telephone interview from Henken's home in Coronado, Calif. “But we're really trying not to be distracted by it. The team's prepared us well with medical recommendations and hygiene recommendations. We've just been following those and mostly just trying to be able to stay focused on our job, which is to win a medal.

“It's easy for people to say sailors should just throw their hands up and not compete, but the reality is that if we do that, there's 50 people on line behind us who will take our spot.”

Scutt and Henken, bronze medalists in last year's Pan American Games, have

made two training trips to Rio — in December 2014 and August 2015 — and plan to spend much of May, June and July there in preparation for the Olympics, which begin Aug. 5. The major concern remains falling ill during the Games. Both said they had received the recommended vaccinations and taken precautions — they plan to keep their mouths closed as much as possible during racing and to hose down their equipment each time they return to shore — and while Scutt took antibiotics as a preventive measure on one Rio visit, she said that she did not believe that was a viable option for the longer stay ahead.

“We’ll just continue to keep doing what we’ve been doing,” Scutt said. “We’re absolutely in favor of efforts to clean up the bay, as we would be for anywhere else in the world. But at this point we are realistic about the timelines, and we’ve seen it, and we know we are going to keep seeing it.”

They are taking a similar approach with concerns about the Zika virus, which has some female Olympians, like the soccer goalkeeper Hope Solo, expressing doubts about making the journey. Health officials and Olympic organizers have struggled to determine the risks posed by the mosquito-borne Zika virus, its potential effects on pregnant women and even the ways in which it can be transmitted, as it spreads through more than two dozen countries in the Americas.

“I’m not thinking about being pregnant any time soon,” Henken, 20, said of concerns about the virus. “We’re not going to be afraid because of mosquitoes. We’ve been informed about the dangers and the risks and stuff, but we’re O.K. We’re not worried.”

Henken and Scutt, 23, will be among the youngest members of the United States sailing team when it is completed. Scutt was born in Britain before moving with her British parents to the Seattle area when she was 2. She came relatively late to competitive sailing, after playing elite soccer as a youth, and graduated from Stanford with a degree in biomechanical engineering. Henken is a part of a sailing family from Coronado, the small resort city just across the bridge from San Diego that was once one of the hubs of the America’s Cup races.

Henken’s family moved there from San Clemente, where her father, Edmond, still has his orthodontics practice, in part to find a better sailboat racing program for

Paris; her twin brother, Sterling; and their older brother, Hans.

Hans, who sailed on the Stanford team and is dating Scutt, just missed making the Olympic team himself. He and his crewmate, Judge Ryan, are the alternates in the 49er class, the well-established forerunner of the 49erFX.

“These boats are very challenging from the point of view that they are very overpowered and very tippy,” said Charlie McKee, U.S. Sailing’s high performance director, who was instrumental in pairing Scutt and Henken in 2013. “Most Olympic boats are very difficult to sail well, but these when it gets windy and wavy are difficult just to get around the track without flipping.”

McKee, a former Olympic medalist who has known Henken since childhood, said that she had an innate ability to embrace risk and that he had seen her smiling and laughing in daunting situations during races. “That is something that is very hard to coach or teach,” he said.

But there were no laughs in Marseille, France, in September 2013 when Henken and Scutt, competing in their first world championships in the 49erFX, sailed upwind during a race and came too close to a competitor heading downwind. Scutt, suspended out wide, was struck full force by the other boat’s wing, fracturing her spine.

“The boats didn’t touch — it was just my body,” she said. “And both boats went from full speed to flipped over in a split-second.”

Scutt never lost consciousness, and amid the intense pain she said she was reassured by being able to feel herself wiggle her toes in the water. “I thought: At least I’m not paralyzed,” she said. Scutt said the major medical concern was internal bleeding from a lacerated kidney.

Henken said she had nightmares after the accident.

“I’m the one who steers the boat, and I thought I could have done something more to avoid it,” she said. “But Helena and I talked right after she got out of the hospital, and she assured me it wasn’t my fault and she didn’t hold anything against me.”

When Scutt returned to Stanford for her senior year, she had limited mobility and needed a golf cart to make it to class. But she was able to resume sailing by winter break and, despite the concerns of her family and plenty of reflection of her own, she said she was eager to resume competing in 2014 even if close encounters with other boats still cause her to flash back on occasion.

She and Henken have had to hustle and take chances to make their first Olympic team. They raised more than \$100,000 on their own to supplement national program funding, and each put her studies on hold in December 2014. Henken took a leave from the College of Charleston after one semester; Scutt stopped work on her master's degree in mechanical engineering at Stanford.

Both intend to re-enroll in the fall, and with financing secure for next season, they should be able to focus only on academics and sailing.

But first is Rio, and the opportunity and risks now symbolized by Guanabara Bay, so scenic from afar and so dirty at closer range.

"I'm not going to claim to know about the politics behind it all," Scutt said. "It's obviously a very populous city with a lot of economic challenges. I'm not going to comment on that because I know it's far more complex than I could wrap my head around right now, but I just hope the sport is able to draw the attention and momentum not just to Rio but all over. Because it's really a world issue. It's not unique to Rio."

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