



Whitepaper

A Blueprint for  
**REVITALIZING THE  
US SAILING TEAM**  
Olympic Program

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The US Sailing Team High Performance Program stands at a critical juncture, grappling with challenges that impede its competitiveness on the global stage. This white paper offers a thorough examination of the program's current state, pinpoints key areas for enhancement, and proposes actionable strategies to reinvigorate its performance and regain its stature as a global sailing leader. The only pathway forward is for leaders within the United States sailing community to quickly form an independent organization to set the guardrails by which we will regain our position as proficient winners of Olympic Gold. Taking learnings from other winning Olympic programs, this organization should design the framework to bring together different groups – including American Magic, America One Racing, and US Sailing – to work towards a common goal. Priority issues such as funding, collaboration, talent development, and coaching demand immediate attention and resolution.

*[Author's Note: Throughout this white paper, we'll provide insights into recent developments within the US Sailing Team, drawing on interviews with key stakeholders and our own analysis of the program's challenges and opportunities.]*

## INTRODUCTION

While other countries have effectively implemented financial support for their sailors, adopted new professional coaching policies, and enlisted a range of technical support specialists, the US Sailing team has lagged behind. Its limited successes have been achieved despite its stagnant, business-as-usual approach, which is unsustainable moving forward. Moreover, the frequent turnover of management and the employment of part-time managers each quadrennial cycle have led to significant losses in both time and institutional knowledge.

The latest endeavor to establish a professionally managed high-performance program has regrettably faltered. It was anticipated to usher in a new era, propelling US sailors back to international eminence. However, the leadership's inadequacies have resulted in a dismal failure, precipitating the recent upheaval, and raising profound concerns about the program's trajectory.



## PROJECT PINNACLE

The genesis of Project Pinnacle was founded on a white paper developed in 2020 by a task force comprised of a combination of national and international experts. Project Pinnacle, the culmination of months of investigation by McKinsey, was intended to serve as the cornerstone for setting the US Sailing Program on the right trajectory. The resulting Project Pinnacle plan demonstrated that funding is indeed available in the US to support a comprehensive and thorough Olympic program.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Unfortunately, the Olympic program is again in shambles. The failure of Project Pinnacle can be succinctly attributed to a lack of leadership and the inability to effectively communicate a vision and foster a healthy organizational culture.

**The USOPC Review:** The USOPC undertook a six-month investigation of the US Sailing Olympic program on April 10, 2023. They interviewed 29 current and former board members, staff, coaches, athletes, and community members, and reviewed relevant documents to determine if US Sailing complied with the Stevens Act, the USOPC Bylaws, and other policies. They were specifically concerned that the Olympic program did not have a culture free from retaliation and fears of retaliation. The conclusion was that there was retaliation against an athlete by the Director and Chairman of the Foundation after resigning, and there was a fear of retaliation during the duration the Director oversaw the program.



**The report highlights problems from the very beginning of the Director's tenure.**

*"In the fall of 2021, several months after a Program Director was hired, USSA's USOPC AAC representatives informed USSA's Board of Directors of athletes' concerns regarding poor management of the Olympic team and a lack of communication to athletes regarding expectations, athlete funding and team selections."*

*Concerns escalated in early 2022 following debriefs about USSA's performance at the Tokyo Olympic Games. Initially in the fall of 2021, despite numerous requests from athletes to hold a debrief, the Olympic Operations staff did not hold one. The first debrief was not held until February 2022. In the initial meeting, which included athletes and Olympic Operations staff, a video of which the USOPC obtained and reviewed, some of the Olympic Operations staff were dismissive of athlete concerns relating to the team's performance. At various points, heated exchanges occurred between the Director and individual athletes. Athletes interviewed by the USOPC reported that after the call, several athletes who participated in the call shared with other athletes their fear of losing their funding if they continue to raise concerns. One athlete reported that a few other athletes contemplated quitting the sport after the call. After the meeting, the Director attempted to withhold funding from one athlete, accusing the athlete of breaching the athlete's obligations to the USSA by the manner in which the athlete had raised concerns on the call. Ultimately after discussions with other USSA leadership, the Director abandoned those efforts.*

*Members of the USSA Board and CEO tried to work with the Director to address perceived weaknesses relating to operational support in the Olympic Operations program and to provide resources to improve. To do so, they held multiple meetings with the Director, offered to provide mentorship from the Board members, and suggested that the Director hire a Director of Operations to assist with operational objectives..... the Director mostly rebuffed this latter suggestion, promoting the coach leading the Olympic Development Program ODP into the role after some delay. While by all accounts the coach was a good fit with ODP, witnesses reported poor performance in the operations role. One Board member reported their belief to the USOPC that the Director made the promotion because he was unwilling to bring any outsiders into his team."*

One of Project Pinnacle’s objectives was to scale up the ODP program. However, with the promotion of the ODP coach, what appears to have transpired was a scaling down of the high-performance program. By promoting the ODP coach to the Development Director’s position, unintended consequences arose, effectively bringing down the high-performance program into the Olympic Development (ODP) program.

The Director operated with very few constraints imposed by the US Sailing Board or the CEO of US Sailing. He enjoyed substantial support from both entities. As the CEO of the sailing team, he was unconstrained and set policy and directed every aspect of running the team. The only constraints that the US Sailing Association imposed were those mandated by regulations set forth by the US Olympic Committee and Paralympic Committees, aimed at safeguarding the well-being and interests of the athletes.

## RESIGNATION OF THE DIRECTOR

The board determined to remove the Director based on his conflicts with the Board and other organizational issues within the Olympic Operations program. The athlete investigation was a minor aspect of the Board’s considerations.

After receiving numerous complaints about the management of the Olympic program from various sources, including athletes and the USOPC, the Board of Directors concluded that a change was necessary. They requested the Director to step away from the management role and instead focus his efforts on fundraising for the program.

The matter of the US Sailing Association increasing its resource allocation towards the Olympic program is a distinct issue that had no direct impact on the management and operation of the Olympic program itself. The US Sailing Association shares resources and personnel with the Olympic program, and it is reasonable to allocate resources in the budget for these services.

The Director resigned from the Olympic program, as did the Chairman of the US Sailing Foundation, and three employed coaches. He publicly criticized the US Sailing Association. It is alleged that the Director and the Chairman of the Foundation contacted existing donors and the team’s title sponsor to persuade them to withdraw their support from the US Sailing Association. Furthermore, it is alleged that they represented to others, including donors, that they would take over the Olympic program through the America One Foundation.

Ideally, the Director, would have stepped aside and allowed more competent individuals to step into the leadership role and accepted a vital role of fundraising. Instead, the Director made a very public resignation and cast negative comments about US Sailing, refusing to personally accept any of the blame.

US Sailing is currently suing the Director, a donor, and the ODP coach, along with the America One Foundation, for allegedly utilizing trade secrets and primarily for breaching agreements. In response, the America One Foundation is countersuing. Additionally, the America One Foundation has established America One Racing, which bills itself as a high-performance program and provides direct funding to US sailing teams. In certain cases, it also covers coaching expenses.

With the multiple resignations of 90% of the high-performance staff, all moving to the America One Racing created an independent organization supporting funding and services to the US sailors. Apparently, this was done to compete directly against the US Sailing Association’s Olympic program.

The very public departures and negative comments in the press have damaged an already less-than-stellar reputation of the US Sailing Association. The lawsuit will further diminish the association in the eyes of its constituents and will guarantee the sailors will be the ones most damaged.



# AMERICA ONE SOLVING A PROBLEM THEY CREATED

With the very public resignations that led to the withdrawal of support from the Olympic team's principal sponsor, along with numerous donors, the US Sailing Olympic program finds itself in a compromised state, facing a shortfall in funding.

The same management team that previously had unfettered control over the Olympic and development program has now created America One Racing as a direct competitor organization, believing it to be a better model to support the Olympic team. The significant difference is that they can now operate without the structural guardrails mandated by the Stevens Act and the USOPC bylaws. This decision has resulted in a fractured Olympic program.

The US Sailing Association is the recognized national governing body by the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee and, as such, is the only body recognized to manage the Olympic program.

America One Racing and US Sailing are chasing the same dollars and donors. This situation guarantees that there will never be an Olympic program that matches or exceeds programs like the Australian team or the British team. What it guarantees is what's called the occasional alpinist, which is the occasional sailor team to win an Olympic medal. It takes talent and funding to win, but the truth is, it's the strength of the Olympic program that consistently brings in medals. And the occasional medal will be harder to achieve the further behind the US falls.

## MOVING FORWARD

The current situation as it stands is insane. There is no logical reason for it, and the victims are the ones who have invested the most: their time, energy, finances, and emotions. These are the sailors, some of whom have committed 12 years to pursue the Olympics and to represent the United States of America. Not to mention all those family members, individuals, and organizations who have supported them in this endeavor.

The ongoing litigation between US Sailing and the principals behind America One Racing must be resolved for the Olympic program to move forward effectively. The apparent motivation behind America One Racing seems to be to financially cripple the US Sailing Association. Resolving this conflict is essential for the stability and progress of the Olympic sailing program.

Project Pinnacle had the potential to propel the Olympic program onto a path to greatness. However, achieving this goal requires great leadership and vision. US Sailing must also be willing to think outside the box and break free from its habitual inability to produce an organization capable of meeting the challenges and standards necessary to return our sailors to the podium. Furthermore, US Sailing should not be expected to single-handedly launch an Olympic organization equipped to sustain a high-performance program that sets a new standard in Olympic sailing.

Collaboration and innovation from various stakeholders will be essential to achieve this ambitious goal.

The US Ski Association faced similar challenges in the mid 1990s. At the time they had comparable results to the US Sailing Team's occasional medal. They managed to turn their program around through the vision and leadership of Bill Marolt. They are now recognized as the top ski and snowboarding program in the world today.

Bill Marolt is not only a ski visionary, but he's also a living legend known for his Olympic-level ski career, NCAA Championships, and US Ski and Snowboard Teams. When Bill proclaimed that the USA would be the best ski team in the world, the world thought he was crazy, but Bill achieved that goal and many more throughout his career.





*“When I went to the team, I knew what I wanted to do in terms of culture. I knew what I wanted to do in terms of the team and how I wanted to do it. And when we came up with the “Best In The World,” we really sat down as a full staff. It wasn’t just me and my executive team, or, you know, the assistants; it was everybody in the building. Everybody got to sit in those meetings.*

*When you’re starting something, when you’re getting ready to push off on a new venture, you take inventory. Who we are, where we’re going, and how we’re going to get there. And that’s what I did when I got to the ski team. And then you give everybody a chance to be part of that process.*

*Our goal is to be the best in the world, and a lot of people had a hard time with that. They didn’t believe it was possible. We worked with a consulting firm. We really honed it down and put the meat on the bones of what we were going to do and what we were going to focus on and emphasize.*

*One of the things that made us strong is that we learned together, we had success together, we got beat up together, and out of that, you built that cohesion. You built an A-Team, a team that trusts each other and believes in what you’re doing and won’t compromise.”*

In the United States, we possess all the necessary resources to construct a world-leading program.

- We have a vast pool of sailing talent.
- There is ample financial resources available to support a successful program.
- The American culture values winning and strives to be the best in all endeavors.
- We also have access to cutting-edge technology that can be leveraged to our advantage.

All the pieces of the puzzle are readily available; what is needed now is to assemble a team capable of putting them together effectively.

## FUNDING

The Project Pinnacle plan convincingly showcased the availability of funding in the US to sustain a comprehensive and thorough Olympic program. With such backing, the US possesses the capacity to cultivate a program that can effectively challenge the dominance of existing sailing powerhouses.

Since the launch of Project Pinnacle, \$18 million was raised in the first year for the Olympic program.

## TALENT

The US boasts a vast pool of sailing talent, comparable to that of Australia and Great Britain, the top two Olympic sailing programs in the past two decades. This talent is bolstered by a robust sailing culture, with yacht clubs, programs, and parental support for junior sailors prevalent across most geographic locations nationwide.

Recent results at the Optimist class World Championships highlight the potential future Olympic champions among US sailors. In the 2023 World Championships, US sailors achieved notable success, capturing silver and bronze medals. Additionally, two other sailors finished impressively in 11th and 14th place.

Transitioning from being a top Optimist sailor to an Olympic champion requires a well-organized and supportive National Olympic Program. For instance, Hannah Mills, the most decorated female Olympic sailor from Britain, won the women’s Optimist class World Championship at the age of 15 and went on to win Olympic silver nine years later. This journey was facilitated by the guidance and support of the British Olympic development and sailing teams.

## TECHNOLOGY

The US possesses extensive technical resources that could significantly enhance the Olympic program. It's no longer merely an option but a necessity to tap into existing technologies as well as be on the leading edge of new developing technologies. The US Olympic sailing program lags far behind in the technology department and faces a significant gap. Closing this technological gap is crucial for ensuring the competitiveness and success of the US Olympic sailing program on the international stage.

## NATIONAL TRAINING CENTER

Australia, Great Britain, the Dutch and other Olympic sailing programs have their technology facilities and National Training Centers housed in the same location. This setup enables seamless transmission of data and ideas, leading to enhanced efficiencies across the board. The systematic retention of performance metrics data and technology over the years is another crucial component.

## COLLABORATION

Collaborating with the American Magic's America's Cup team would provide the Olympic program with a enormous advantage with leading-edge technical resources. American Magic plans to develop their program's Technology Center and training base in Pensacola would provide a tremendous benefit to the Olympic program. It would support their goal of developing future America's Cup and Grand Prix sailors, historically the most sought after being Olympic champions. An added benefit of American Magic's support of the Olympic program as a sponsor could provide additional sponsorship benefits to their America's Cup sponsors and broaden their support throughout the sailing community.

There are numerous organizations that have demonstrated a high interest in supporting aspiring Olympic sailors and the Olympic program. There is an opportunity to formalize a coalition of support that can be managed through the Olympic Sailing program.





# A NEW AUTONOMOUS ORGANIZATION

The era of musical chairs within the organization must come to an end. It's imperative to break out of the current bubble and seek expertise from high-performance professionals across various sports. Study well-established high-performance models to identify the best organizational structure that aligns with the sport and culture.



## Recommendation

### Build a New Organization:

Establish an organization to manage the US Sailing Olympic Development Program and Olympic Team. The organization would operate autonomously but not independently from the US Sailing Association. There would be sharing of staff and resources as is the current practices and would be self-funded. It would have its own Board of Directors made up of supporting organization and donors. It would annually engage a consultant and have an independent outside review to ensure established milestones are met.

## Imperatives For Success

1. Coalesce 2-3 leaders in the sailing community who share a vision for the future and are bold enough to push for change.
2. With their support and under their guidance, immediately form a task force tasked with designing the future autonomous organization and the framework for collaboration of key groups (including US Sailing, America One Racing, American Magic...).
3. Part of that framework for collaboration needs to be resolving the pending lawsuits. Substantial engagement and arbitration are likely required, but this is a priority.

4. Commence dialogue with the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee and relevant parties to endorse a new autonomous organization to propel the US Olympic Sailing team into the future.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Bertrand, is a highly accomplished figure in the world of sailing. He has made significant contributions to the sport both as a competitor and as a leader. Bertrand is best known for his success in the sailing world, particularly in the realm of Olympic sailing. His involvement with the two most accomplished Olympic programs, along with his engagement with sailors associated with Project Pinnacle, and his leadership in spearheading a task force and writing the white paper that was the genesis of Project Pinnacle, gives him a unique perspective on the Olympic program.

# WINNING FORMULA

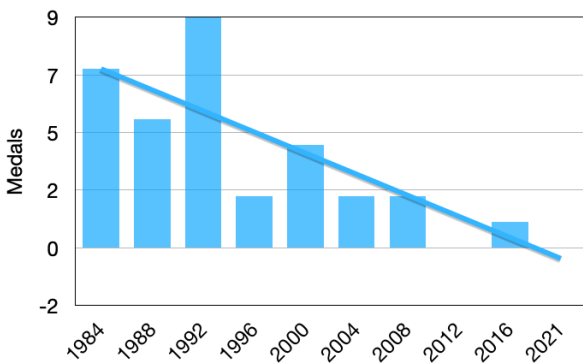
Bill Marolt, a former alpine ski racer and coach, served as the President and CEO of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association (USSA) from 1996 to 2014. During his tenure, Marolt implemented significant changes to restructure the U.S. Ski Team and enhance its competitiveness on the international stage.

One of the key initiatives Marolt introduced was the creation of a “super board” or a centralized governing body to oversee all disciplines within the U.S. Ski Team. This move aimed to streamline decision-making processes, improve coordination among different skiing and snowboarding disciplines, and maximize resources and talent across the organization.

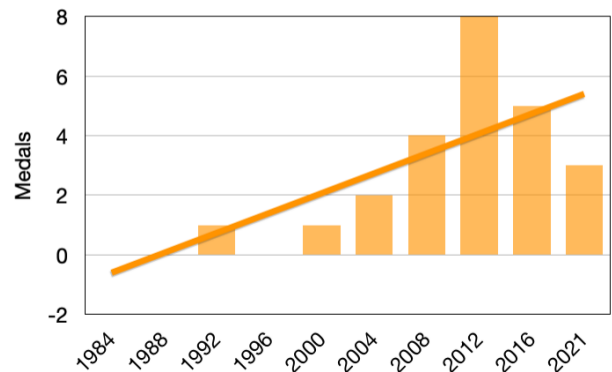
Under Marolt’s leadership, the U.S. Ski Team saw notable successes in various disciplines, including alpine skiing, freestyle skiing, snowboarding, and cross-country skiing. Athletes such as Lindsey Vonn, Bode Miller, Shaun White, and Mikaela Shiffrin achieved significant victories and became household names during this period.

Marolt’s restructuring efforts and focus on athlete development helped elevate the U.S. Ski Team’s performance on the world stage, leading to increased competitiveness and medal-winning performances in major international competitions such as the Winter Olympics, World Championships, and World Cup events.

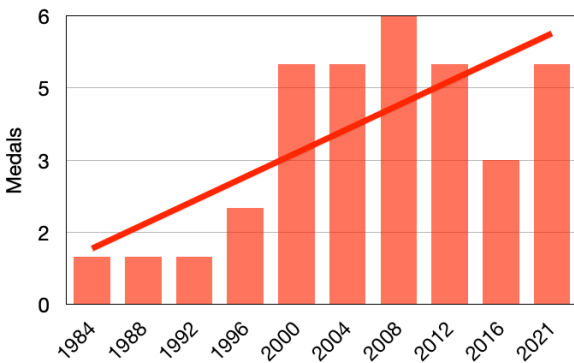
US Sailing Team



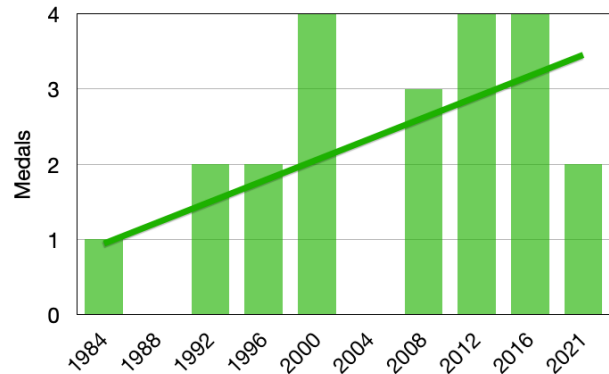
US Ski Team



Team GBR



Australian Sailing Team



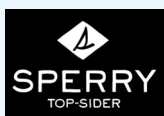
# VISION FOR THE FUTURE



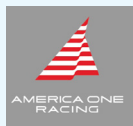
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