

Former rower Dell realizes dream of representing U.S.

By Christine Newby
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

After 'naming day' was completed on Sept. 20, Natalie Dell never experienced a longer 20 minutes of putting away rowing boats.

Dell, Class of 2007, vividly remembers her coach approaching her after practice, saying he needed to talk to her.

"At this point, I didn't even know what planet I was on," Dell said about waiting to speak with her coach. "He shook my hand and said, 'You did a great job. Congratulations. You've made it.'"

Consequently, Dell, 25, will represent the United States in the 2010 World Rowing Championships with the U.S. Senior National team from Oct. 31-Nov. 7 at Lake Karapiro in New Zealand.

The process

When Dell hits the water and begins racing, her parents pop into her head.

"You are pushing yourself to the absolute limit," Dell said about competing. "A lot of things come in and out of your mind, and you need something to keep you motivated — especially when you're really in the heat of it. One thing that I always think of is my parents. I think of my mom and dad, and I just keep pushing."

Without the presence, strong support from her parents, Richard and Karen, Dell said she wouldn't have made the U.S. Senior National team.

Richard and Karen recently made their first trip to visit their daughter, who graduated from Penn State with an advertising degree, at the USRowing Olympic Training Center in Princeton, N.J.

"It was a very emotional moment," Dell said. "My mom said, 'We didn't know how to dream big like this.'"

For Dell, years of dedication and persistence were wrapped into the family-sharing moment. After three years of preparing on her own in Boston, Dell became the first Penn State female graduate to train at the USRowing Olympic Training Center.

Dell, a Clearville native, said the first step to being on the Senior National team is receiving an invitation to train in New Jersey. According to Dell, 40 women train at the center full-time. In order to be asked to join the USRowing Olympic Training Center, Dell

attended tryouts known as the National Selection Regatta for three consecutive years, in the spring of 2008, 2009 and 2010.

The third attempt proved to be a relieving victory for Dell.

"You just keep showing up and if you show improvement, they might let you in," she said. "[The National Selection Regatta] is the best way to put your face out there."

About 30 women participate in the tryouts each year, according to Dell, who was the lone rower invited into the training center from the regatta this spring.

"You should have heard my family when they found out [I made it]," she said.

The women's U.S. Senior National team consists of approximately 20 out of the 40 full-time rowers training at the center, Dell said. Tryouts for the national team take place during the summer.

According to Dell, the group of about 20 women compete in the annual World Rowing Championships, or Olympic regatta, if it is an Olympic year.

"I had accepted the fact that I'll probably be [training at the USRowing Olympic Training Center] for two years [before making the U.S. Senior National or Olympic team.] On Aug. 20, I thought, 'Alright I'll shoot for 2012.'"

On the day she found out she made the Senior National team, Dell said the women were still rowing at 9 a.m. when the final list had to be submitted at noon.

"You race your heart out," she said. "I started getting put in the selection group which is the 'A' lineup. I was taken out and put back in. And I'm thinking to myself, 'This is not happening. There is something wrong.' I kept thinking, 'Tomorrow I'm going to be switched [out of the selection group] so I need to be ready.'"

Dell surpassed her goal of representing the U.S. in 2012 by being named this year to compete in the women's quadruple sculls.

The event consists of four female rowers holding two oars, one in each hand. Dell said the U.S. Senior National team departed from Princeton Oct. 21 and have spent this week practicing in New Zealand before the race begins Sunday.

On the current women's U.S. Senior National team, Dell is the only woman who rowed for a collegiate club crew program.

The majority of the rowers have roots in prominent universities. Rowers who derive from these universities get fed right into the USRowing Olympic Training Center, Dell said.

"The best way to get in is if you go to a school that is known for rowing," she said. "At Harvard and Princeton, rowing is like football [at Penn State.]"

Coming from Penn State's club crew team, Dell had to claw her way onto the U.S. Senior National team.

"I'm thrilled," she said. "It is very hard to do coming from an unfunded program. It says a lot about Penn State's program."

Dell wants to somehow show off her Penn State pride while on the national team.

"I'm still trying to figure out how I can sneak in some sort of Penn State memorabilia onto my uniform," she said, laughing.

College career

Dell was a competitive track athlete at Everett Area High School and everett considered competing at the collegiate level.

West Virginia, Temple and Pittsburgh were all after Dell for track and field. She was a 400-meter and 4x800-meter relay state medalist in high school.

However, a series of injuries and becoming burnt out from four years of competition were factors against participating in track at the collegiate level. Dell said she was very interested in walking on to the Penn State track team, but decided not to.

"I'm one of those people that if I really want something, I will go after it," she said.

Dell said she wanted something more than going to the White Building to workout daily, so she looked into rowing.

Dell's first taste of the sport occurred during the spring semester of her freshman year in 2004, when she started to get involved with Penn State Crew.

"My initial thought about Natalie was her tremendous strength," said John Biddle, former Penn State women's crew head coach from 2000-07. "I identified her pretty quickly as just a powerhouse of tremendous strength. She really stood above."

Biddle trained Dell with the varsity women instead of the novices during her freshman year.

"Looking at her scores on the [erg] machine, I knew that she

had great potential," Biddle said. "I knew her history as an athlete could drive her forward. She arrived with a sense of an athletic ability."

Practices began at 5 a.m. at Stone Valley, about 20 minutes away from State College, or Bald Eagle State Park, 40 minutes away, according to Dell.

"I thought I was pretty fit before going to crew," Dell said. "After the first crew practice, basically I couldn't do daily activities. I couldn't laugh because my abs would hurt. I've never been so sore."

"[Rowing] was a challenge that I just never encountered before and that's why I stayed with it."

Almost gone

Going into Dell's spring sophomore season, universities began recruiting her for rowing, Connecticut, Cincinnati, North Carolina and Kansas all offered her scholarships to transfer.

Dell narrowed her choices to North Carolina or staying at Penn State.

"[UNC] was the only school that was tempting enough," she said. "It has a beautiful campus, but it wasn't Penn State. It had water very close to campus, and everybody had Nike gear."

"I couldn't leave Penn State. I loved it so much, and I loved my team."

Biddle wanted Dell to do what was best for her.

"I didn't want to pressure her to stay," he said. "I knew that I couldn't provide her with all the necessary coaching that other schools had. I'm reasonably sure that she had greater success here than she would have had at UNC."

Dell's decision to stay at Penn State meant she still had to pay about \$400 a semester to row, along with roughly another \$300 for the annual spring break rowing trip, rather than taking a scholarship at a different college.

The decision came with a reward for Dell: going undefeated her junior year at Penn State. "In spring 2006, nobody came close to us," Biddle said.

Life after Penn State

Dell attended Boston University from fall 2007 until December 2008 for a masters in public health.

Dell said neither of her parents went to a four-year university or went after a master's degree.

"They were so excited for their daughter to get an undergrad and

a master's," she said. "And then I decided to row. I knew that they were concerned about making money in the sport. They were there every single step of the way. Sometimes they were shaking their heads, but saying, 'OK. We are here.'"

Dell said she wasn't ready for a full-time job after graduating from Penn State because she wanted to keep training. The Penn State alum trained for three years in Boston at the Riverside Boat Club on the Charles River. Dell competed in the women's high performance group, comprised of 10-15 women who had aspirations to race on the U.S. Senior National Team as well. Tom Keister, who is in his fourth year as the women's high performance head coach, said he definitely knew that Dell had the potential to make the national team.

"[Dell] brought a very competitive spirit right from the start," he said. "She brought a lot of intensity and focus. She immediately started to make a lot of progress physiologically and on the water."

Dell said Keister and his wife, Liane, the assistant coach, were a big reason she made the team.

"They are two people I really attribute to me actually making the national team," she said. "They are tremendous people."

After graduating from Boston University, Dell was employed by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs as a research health scientist, specifically with mental health research.

"I told them right from the get-go about my training, and they loved the whole rowing thing," Dell said.

Dell's daily schedule consisted of two training sessions at the Riverside Boat Club from 5:30-7:30 in both the morning and evenings, while going to work in between and running during lunch.

"U.S.A. on your chest"

Dell compared making the 2010 U.S. Senior National rowing team to three well-known sport movies: "Rocky," "Invincible" and "Miracle."

"It's the feeling of your dream coming true," Dell said.

"I can't really describe it. It comes with a lot of responsibility. You allow yourself to be happy for a day or two. But now, you are representing your country. You have U.S.A. on your chest. I'm so up for it."

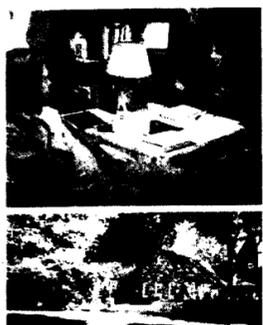


Natalie Dell rows on the Charles River in Boston. Courtesy of Igor Belakovskiy/Sculling Fool Photography
Dell represents the United States in the 2010 World Rowing Championships in New Zealand.

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