

# Belize: Blazing Forward

*Youth2Adult — Y2A — is a series of articles celebrating sailing's role in youth development. In December we make a departure from the normal format and feature two Belizean youths who make history this month as they travel to Malaysia to be the first to represent their country in the ISAF Youth Sailing World Championship.*

"Belize once had a strong commercial sailing tradition, when lighters full of sand or fish (or probably contraband) were sailed up and down the coast in the usually steady winds and shallow waters inside the barrier reef," reported John Oliver on Scuttlebutt.com in March 2006. "Now with outboard motors replacing sails for those who must make a living at sea, and finances and time for recreational sailing severely limited, and in spite of strenuous efforts by regatta committees and sea scout instructors, this tradition is rapidly failing."

By 2009, Oliver was changing that landscape: "As a sailing teacher for a group of Sea Scouts, I have been asked to find out if a junior program for the schools would be feasible." Eighteen months later, successful planning had created a new Belize Sailing Association (BzSA), which joined the International Sailing Federation (ISAF). Finding local sponsors and securing government tax exemption led to duty-free purchase of 26 Optimists, subsidized and sourced by the International Optimist Association (IODA). Initially, the boats were divided up between the Sea Scouts and bases in Belize City, Corozal and Ambergris Caye. IODA provided an instructor-training course given by a bilingual coach from Puerto Rico. Expansion was rapid from 2011 to '14, including ordering 40 more Optimists using IODA's "6 for 5" boat purchase scheme. Additional junior sailing centers opened in Placencia and Caye Caulker.

A trailer was built for boat transport and a racing circuit grew from five to seven regattas. The time had come to develop a Five-Year Optimist Program to determine and develop Belize's best junior sailors. In 2015, qualifying trials were held and, because IODA encourages girls to participate, Belize was able to send four sailors, two boys and two girls, to July's OPTINAM in Antigua. That same month, IODA sponsored a basic-level instructor course in Belize.

Capitalizing on the protected waters inside the Belize Barrier Reef, BzSA is making sailing lessons affordable and accessible to youth. Their Board voted in September to sanction the attendance of Blanca Velasquez and Antonio Ricardez Jr. at the December 2015 ISAF Youth World Championship in Malaysia.

The challenge of continuing sailing development sophistication, for example the requirement that a youth participate in all seven regattas in order to qualify to compete in the National Championship, while keeping it affordable and accessible to all Belize children regardless of economic status is calling for creativity and innovation. One answer has been to have youths compete within Bart's Bash (a legitimate international race for sailors worldwide and in every class of sailboat; on a designated date sailors take to their home waters and sail courses designed via computer program by Bart's Bash Committee). In the 2014 race, all of Belize's sailors finished in the top 15 percent of the 16,780 entrants. The Belizean children aged eight to 15 all finished in the top eight percent of the 1,174 competing in their class. This performance stunned the sailing world and promoted recreational sailing in Belize. Because revenue from public sailing classes is a funding mechanism for Belize junior sailing, this is important.

## Y2A Featured Youths

*Blanca Velasquez, 15 years old*

*Junior Sailing Program: San Pedro Sailing Club*

*Favorite boat: Optimist*

Blanca Velasquez started sailing at ten years of age. The next year, excitement was high for the first Belize National Championship, which was held in November 2012. Blanca's younger brother Kevin, age 10, won! Racing entered Blanca's blood at that time and still flows through her veins today. By 2014, she'd won the National Championship.

Blanca is a native of San Pedro. She lives on Ambergris Caye with her five siblings, mother and father, and attends San Pedro High School, Second Form. "It has always been math," Blanca says of her favorite subject. When Commodore Andy Milner of the San Pedro Sailing Club spoke of sailing instruction opportunities at her school, Blanca thought it sounded fun and exciting. "Sure enough it was. From the beginning, I loved it. You learn how to bond in a group. (One builds) social closeness from

sharing the same experiences and challenges on the water." She feels that racing at the higher level of competition while juggling homework, studying and school projects is forcing her to learn time management.

This year she began sailing Lasers and was selected to travel to Antigua for the ISAF Youth Worlds Emerging Nations Program Advanced Clinic (YW-ENP). "It was hard. The winds were so high. I'm little. I struggled. The coaches asked if I wanted to give up. No way! At the end they said I was one of the most improved sailors. Now I'm picked to go to the Youth Worlds in Malaysia where the winds will be what I like — light."



According to her Argentinian coach, Juan Mazzini, "We train in boats four times a week, we run on the beach twice a week and three times per week she does Crossfit to complement all the other fitness training. As well, she works with a nutritionist to keep her diet right." Between weight training and technique, she is handling heavier wind better. ISAF is giving her a full scholarship to go to Malaysia. The contacts and the resume this will give her is huge. She will be able to apply for a (academic) scholarship in the States." In November, she raced her last

Optimist National Championship, taking fourth.

When it comes to pitching in, Blanca indicates they've done three fundraising car washes and sold raffle tickets to raise money for her competitive sailing program. She is expected to wash and maintain the boats and help with the club rental program, which generates revenue that supports the free sailing program for local youth. Blanca aspires to become an Olympic sailor.

"I'm a very competitive person. Sometimes that is good but it can also have its bads. To me, being competitive helped me and motivated me to be better. It also showed me that I will not always win and that losing doesn't make me a loser. It makes me try harder for what I want." She cites confidence that comes from continuing to try despite losses and fear, and the dedication that comes from setting goals and working toward those goals "is all a process that takes time and effort. So, if you're passionate about what you do, see how it can change you in life. In all of this, have fun and enjoy sailing — the wind, the waves, the sun and all that Nature gives you."

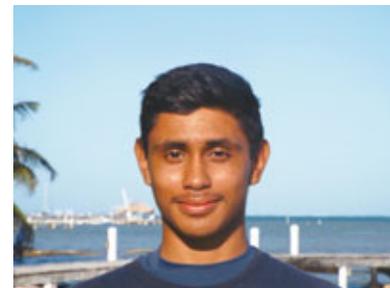
*Antonio Ricardez, 15 years old  
Junior Sailing Program: Belize City Sailing Club  
Favorite boat: Hobie Cat*

The physics of how a sail performs in the wind appealed to Antonio Ricardez from the beginning. In Third Form at Nazerene High School, physics is his favorite subject; sailing and football (soccer) his favorite activities. According to Antonio's father, no formal coaching was available. "He was self-taught. I sought coaching from Francis Heusner but was told, 'I will train you and you will train your children.'" It seemed to work. "You've got to start with the family. First thing I told my children: 'If you want to be an athlete, you have to eat good and sleep good. No staying out late. We trained the children during bad weather, sunshine, wind. They aren't afraid of tremendous wind.'"

The children who succeed have parental support.

Honey Camp Lagoon was Antonio's first regatta. He qualified in his heat to race in the first Belize National Championship coming in second behind Blanca's brother, Kevin Velasquez. In 2013, he won many races and was named BzSA's Sailor of the Year. In 2014 during the Championship, he jury-rigged his Optimist after a block failed early in one of the races, managing a fourth place finish, but it robbed him of a first place finish overall.

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