

Nathan Handley

“Enjoy the Olympic journey”



Nathan Handley is considered as one of the most successful 470 coaches, well known for his Zen-like peaceful character and at the same time much efficient and active. His Olympic coaching continues beyond 2020 while being an Optimist dad of two.

Nathan started sailing at the age of 8 due to his father who was a top catamaran sailor and encouraged him into sailing. Nathan was following him to different regatta venues around New Zealand for years. Nathan loved being out on the water with mother nature and despite having always the oldest boat he still managed to go fast and excel.

His first nationals were with a NZ only class called the P Class where he got a taste of what it was like to start in a big fleet. As an athlete, Nathan was one of the top kids in the NZ junior classes regularly placing in the top 3. Then, he progressed through Hobie 16, Laser Radials, 470's, 49er.



with Jo Aleh and Polly Powrie, London 2012

Nathan, as an athlete won the Laser II Worlds, the Hobie 16 Master Worlds, he was 3rd at the Laser Radial Worlds, 1st at World Cup Events in 49er, 1st at the NZ Match racing Nationals and member of the America's Cup 2003 TNZ.

Nathan have been coaching consistently since 2006. Over this time, he coached some of the finest NZ sailors in most of the Olympic sailing classes including 470, 49er, 49erFX, Finn, RSX.

His top results as a coach includes the Gold medal at the 2012 London Olympic Games in 470 Women, the Silver medal at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games in 470 Women, Gold medals at the World Championships both in 470 Women (Jo Aleh & Polly Powrie and 49er FX, (Alexandra Maloney & Molly Meech) numerous World championship podiums in 470 Women & 49erFX and multiple world cup and international medals from 2006 up to now in the following classes: 49erFX, 49er, 470W, 470M and Finn!

As YNZ Roll of Honor cited, "Yachting has a proud history in New Zealand, with multiple national, Olympic and world champions and others who have made an impact on the sport both here and abroad".

Nathan was inducted to YNZ Roll of Honor and named twice as the NZ coach of the year in 2012 and 2013. His 470 Women's team Jo Aleh and Polly Powrie were named as the Rolex World Female Sailors of the year in 2013.



with Jo Aleh and Polly Powrie, Rio 2016

Rio 2016 Olympi
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The coach

How did you experience your transition from the boat to the rib?

NH: When I first began coaching, I felt that as an athlete it would have been beneficial to me to have spent more time in the rib observing other athletes. I felt I could have learned a lot more from the rib.

How do you manage to coach efficiently in different classes?

NH: At World cup level, I believe the coach skills are easily transferrable between classes. By this stage the athletes already understand their class and it becomes about regatta coaching and the mental side of things.

What is the most rewarding part of being a coach?

NH: The most rewarding part of being a coach is watching your athletes develop and grow as people. The added benefit of being a coach is the travel and friends you make along the way.

Coaching approach

What is your coaching philosophy?

NH: To enjoy the Olympic journey. If the athletes are not enjoying it will be very difficult to succeed.

How do you overcome a failure?

NH: It is important to see failure as an opportunity to learn and improve for the next challenge. Analyze what you could have done better and use that knowledge for next time.

How do you respond to a success?

NH: Success is of course something to celebrate, however it is also important to be able to learn from success and make it repeatable.

How would you determine a “talented sailor”?

NH: There are many aspects of a talented sailor. There must be some natural ability but along with that comes a will to work hard and a mental toughness. You do not necessarily have to be the ideal body weight or shape these factors can be overcome with the right attitude.

What are the keys to rig tuning and speed maintenance?

NH: For rig tuning and maintenance, it is extremely important to have a plan that is revisited and adjusted when required. It is important that you don't change too many things at the same time. Lock in what works and then move on to the next decision.

What are the keys of successful coaching?

NH: Planning and positive attitude. Be prepared to change plan when the unexpected happens. It is important to remain agile. As a coach you also need to look after your own wellbeing as well as your athletes then you will perform well as a team.

The team

How can you improve “sailor's speed”?

NH: You need to be constantly observing your own team and keeping an eye on what the opposition are doing. You will also have a lot of information coming in from others who support the athletes it is important to filter this information and take in only what is needed to improve the speed.

How do you motivate your teams to achieve excellence?

NH: It is important to know your team and what motivates them. When you know what their motivation is you can use this to achieve excellence. This includes off the water team activities as well as the on the water coaching.

How would you confront a team's poor performance?

NH: A review of a team's poor performance in a structured manner is less confronting. Structure a review as an opportunity to learn from mistakes so that they are not repeated in the future.

What are the teams' priorities towards Olympic podium?

NH: In the past my teams' priorities are ultimately success but it is also about the journey to get there. On that journey being able to have fun and enjoy ourselves has always been important.

What challenges did you come across while getting Olympic medals?

NH: There are many challenges, some of the main ones I can think of are overcoming injury, maintaining focus as a team and managing team relationships.

The person

Do you have a mentor or a hero in sailing?

NH: I do not have one particular mentor but have learnt a lot from the people I sailed with in the double handed classes and as I have developed as a coach there have been other coaches and sailors that have contributed a lot to my coaching style.

What are your favorite places to practice and compete?

NH: Nothing will ever beat my home waters in Auckland, New Zealand. In Europe both Palma and Lake Garda are both beautiful places to sail.

If you could choose to do and coach another sport what could it be?

NH: Surfing.

Do you believe in luck?

NH: Yes – sometimes you need to be in the right place at the right time.

What is your favorite movie about sports?

NH: I have just watched the “Last Dance” Michael Jordan documentary which I really enjoyed.

What are your coaching & sailing plans for the future?

NH: 2021 Tokyo Olympics – 49erFX. I am also an Optimist dad to two Optimists so this will keep me busy at a different level.



With Molly Meech and Alex Maloney