**An Old Yachtsman with New Resolve – Don Cohan, 66, has overcome a lot.  Now he’s plotting a last hurrah.**

By Bob Ford, Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Writer, May 05, 1996

SAVANNAH, Ga. — As Don Cohan ambles along the large, wooden dock, his floppy hat riding atop a smiling, open face, other sailors look up from their sanding and fitting work to wish him an honest good morning.

The others are young and trim, with stomachs as flat as the transoms of their racing yachts. They are men with a purpose, fine-tuning their boats for the U.S. Olympic selection trials taking place on the roiling ocean waters of Wassaw Sound this week.

At the age of 66, listing slightly to portly, Cohan doesn't appear much of a threat to their ambitions. He won an Olympic bronze medal in 1972, but the crop of young sailors regards that as the age of Viking ships.

``There's a certain fondness toward me,'' Cohan says, ``as if I don't belong out here.''

The odds are certainly against him. If he and his two-man crew win the trial for Soling-class boats, one of 10 classes contested in the Games, he will be the oldest U.S. Olympian in history, and the oldest U.S. sailing Olympian by 17 years.

But the Wyndmoor resident has broken the laws of probability with impunity in the past.

Cohan has survived Hodgkin's disease, enduring intensive chemotherapy to rid him of the cancer, and is back on the water after giving up sailing for four years while he recovered. Any racer who takes him lightly is making a mistake.

``I've got a few plans for them,'' Cohan says. ``They like old Don right now, and they aren't too worried about him. But I'm not here just to have a nice outing. I wouldn't be here if I didn't think I had a good shot at it.''

As a result of the chemotherapy, Cohan lost 20 percent of his lungs, his legs aren't always as sure as they once were, and his arms and hands are usually so swollen that the lines on his boat must be thicker than usual so he can grasp them.

Also, there is a large tumor in his head that is working slowly south, a mass probably brought about by the chemotherapy. It has broken through the bone structure separating the brain from the eye cavities and is insidiously wrapping itself around the optic nerves. At some point, the slow-growing tumor, which is noncancerous, must be removed in an eight-hour operation that will cost Cohan his senses of smell and taste, cause his eyes to recede into their sockets, and perhaps do more.

``It's very tricky,'' Cohan says flatly. ``I could go blind. I'll probably get meningitis from the operation. I'll probably come out of it with tremors. It's going to be a rather unpleasant experience.''

But adversity brings perspective. When the wind is screaming across Wassaw Sound this week and Cohan must decide on a tack through the crowded course, he won't shy away from one that might be a little risky.

``You take the 10 best Soling boats out here and if you make a mistake, any of them can cut your throat,'' Cohan says. ``But I'm one of them. I can stay with these guys. And I will never give up. Never, never, never. When I'm in last place, I know I can still win.''

Against all reasonable expectation, Cohan's boat has been ranked among the top five in the country the last two years. Cohan is the only amateur out there among a school of professional skippers who attack like piranha.

This is his seventh trip to the Olympic trials and almost certainly his last. It also is his likely farewell to a quarter-century of competitive racing that has netted him his Olympic bronze medal, 12 Atlantic Coast championships, various regional titles, and 14 appearances in the world championships.

``I'm not sure how much longer my body can take this. All my friends say, `Go, Don, go. Stay with it.' But the beating is exhausting, and it can be dangerous if you're sailing without the body and the reflexes to get you out of bad situations.''

Two weeks ago, training for the trials during the U.S. championships off the west coast of Florida, Cohan and his crew were rushing along with a 20-knot wind when another skipper lost control of his boat and rammed them.

``Put a huge hole in the boat, and their bow went right up through my mainsail,'' Cohan says. ``A foot either way and my middle man or I would have been killed. The spinnaker pole snapped off the boom, hit me in the head, and if I hadn't been strapped in, I would have been knocked out of the boat.''

The boat was quickly repaired, but Cohan experienced severe headaches, and something menacing began draining down through his nasal cavities. His doctors, fearing that the tumor had broken loose, told him to go to bed immediately.

``I think something got shook up when I got hit, but I wasn't about to go to bed,'' he says. ``I didn't come this far for that.''

So he and his crew kept sailing, and they are still sailing. The headaches aren't quite as bad, and the determination is even greater than before.

``I'm getting hard now,'' says Cohan, the amiable, ambling father who will stiletto these kid sailors before they know what hits them. ``I've had enough of this.''

\* Cohan wasn't born to sailing. He was born Donald Smith, to a modest Long Island family, and his father died when Donald was 8 years old. His mother then married a Philadelphia lawyer, Bill Cohan, and Donald was adopted when he was about 10.

The family lived in Elkins Park, and Cohan attended Cheltenham High School, where he was a varsity basketball player. He graduated from Amherst College in 1951 and then from Harvard Law School. He briefly joined his father's firm after passing the bar. Out on his own, he made a reputation as an expert in estates, wills and trusts before becoming bored and transferring his energy to real estate.

Always an active athlete, excellent in tennis and squash, among other sports, Cohan took up competitive sailing with the idea of making the Olympic team. He was inspired by an uncle, Hy Seldin, who had been a U.S. champion as a fencer but had been denied a spot on the 1936 Olympic team because Avery Brundage, the United States Olympic Committee president, did not want to offend Adolf Hitler by taking Jewish athletes to the Berlin Games.

Seldin never had another chance to compete in the Olympics, but after just five years of racing, Cohan made the 1972 Munich Games in the three-handed Dragon class, becoming, according to his recollection, the first Jew to earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic sailing team.

Cohan came from far back on the final day of racing to win the bronze medal. Fittingly enough, that took place during the first Olympics in Germany since the 1936 Games. Brundage, who was about to retire, hung the bronze medal around Cohan's neck - his last official act as International Olympic Committee president. Nearby, Hy Seldin had tears streaming down his cheeks as he cheered his nephew.

``I can't tell you the emotions that went through me,'' Cohan says. ``And who was I sharing this moment with? Avery Brundage, who I didn't particularly care for.''

Cohan stayed in racing, although always as a passionate hobby, and, along with his wife, Trina, raised three children. He served on the board of directors for the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Academy of Music; helped found several cultural study organizations, including the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies; and started in on charitable works. Since his illness, he has become a supporter of the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center.

Cohan's battle with Hodgkin's disease nearly killed him, but it was sailing that helped save him.

``I pushed him to go back into competitive sailing,'' says John Glick, an oncologist and the director of the cancer center. ``Getting back out there and winning was the final aspect of his recovery. He worked hard both physically and mentally so he could pursue it again.''

In the beginning, after his four-year layoff, Cohan could muster only a sympathy crew. Then he started to win. Eventually, he recaptured the Atlantic Coast championship, earning a trophy that had been renamed in his honor when no one thought he would ever hold a tiller again.

``I fooled 'em,'' Cohan says.

\* On the bright water near Wassaw Sound, Cohan and his crew function as one seamless unit. Morgan Larson, who has won his own sailing trophies, is in the bow, working the jib and spinnaker. Jim Brady, a silver medalist in the 1992 Olympics, is the middle man, trimming the mainsail and adjusting nearly all the other lines. Cohan is at the helm, making the final tactical decisions and holding the boat on course.

Heading downwind, Cohan can no longer jibe the mainsail from one side to the other with a single hand as he changes tacks. The younger skippers can do that easily, but Cohan has to have help from his crew. There are other little things, and Cohan does not accept them easily, but this campaign is more important than his feelings.

The days are grueling. During the first portion of the trials - when the 21-boat fleet is winnowed to four boats for the final round - there are two daily races and a total each day of about 10 hours on the water. Cohan is worried about his endurance, but little else.

``I know how to pace myself during a race,'' Cohan says. ``I'll just hang around and chug along, and, sooner or later, the other guys are going to make their mistakes. They've got some advantages on me, but I've got some advantages on them.

``I'm 66 years old, and I've had cancer. When I get home, win or lose, my wife is going to kiss and hug me. These other guys, their entire reputations are on the line. It's going to get interesting. I can promise you that.''