

World Champion Travis Odenbach



I stared at my computer for thirty minutes, trying to figure out how to recap the last eight months. After talking to a few people, I realized my story would focus on what made this year different from others. As a good friend put it, "You've been on the podium before, but what the heck changed this year?"

Well, quite a lot. I turned 40, my wife and I have two kids (one now in kindergarten and riding the school bus), and I changed jobs. I left my position at a sailmaking company to take over the junior program at the Rochester Yacht Club. The coolest part? The club allowed me to continue my passion for racing. Of course, this meant pursuing the J/24 World Championships. For me, the J/24 remains a rite of passage in sailing—learning what makes a J/24 go fast (believe it or not) provides valuable knowledge for racing other boats. That's how I justify still sailing those darn J/24s.

What changed in our approach to major regattas? Our J/24 team's organization reached new heights this year. The whole team, Jay Miles, Monica Morgan, Jeff Sullivan, and Dave Hughes—committed to our game plan and executed it flawlessly. My mental state shifted too; I switched from "must win" to "let's give ourselves a shot to sail well." The final piece was the incredible support both on and off the water that helped keep me focused. This combination led to Team Honey Badger winning the J/24 North Americans, US Nationals, and J/24 World Championships.

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After eight months of racing, training, and boat maintenance, Danny Lawless and I were driving home from Seattle to Rochester, New York—a 41-hour journey. We were beaming with joy, having achieved the unimaginable trifecta in the J/24 class. Danny, who helped get our boat to Seattle and back, was instrumental in Team Honey Badger's organization at the Worlds. About six hours in Montana, Justin Demore called and asked if we were doing the J/22 Worlds in two weeks. Though exhausted, I thought, "Why not? A top five finish would make this an incredible year."

I called Geoff Becker, who confirmed he could sail. Suddenly, I had 35 hours to shift my mindset from overwhelming joy to focusing on the J/22—a boat I hadn't sailed in two years. First, I needed my wife Catie's blessing, which she proudly gave. I retrieved the boat from storage, stepped the mast, checked everything, and wet-sanded the entire hull twice. The boat's proven speed over the past three years gave me confidence.

In Annapolis, we developed a new tuning guide for our first time using North Sails and practiced boat handling for three days. The J/22 Worlds felt more relaxed winning the J/24 Worlds had lifted a huge weight from my shoulders. That changed on day two when we somehow maintained our lead! We treated each day like Groundhog Day, maintaining the same routine from wake-up to bedtime. Having my wife, two kids, Duke (our puppy), and our babysitter there was a new dynamic for a major regatta.

During the final race, as we crossed the finish line to win the J/22 Worlds, I looked ahead to see my wife and kids with their arms raised high. I nearly lost it—I hadn't known they were watching. Even now, writing this, I'm overwhelmed with joy. My oldest daughter finally understands what passion means and why Daddy is often away.

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As I write this recap, I'm still processing that I won the J/24 Worlds, North Americans, US Nationals, and the J/22 Worlds in just eight months. This isn't about bragging, it's about gratitude and joy. The support of hundreds of people over the past decade and the dedication of both teams made this possible. Though I'm superstitious and feel alone while competing, discovering the unexpected support I had is truly wonderful.

I'll end with this: Listen to those who say you can't do something, you won't succeed, or simply say no. Take that negativity and work twice as hard to prove them wrong. Trust me, it's worth it!

Travis

2024 Results (skippering)

- J24 Midwinters 2nd
- J24 North Americans 1st
- J24 US Nationals 1st
- J24 Worlds 1st
- J22 Worlds 1st
- Melges 15 Winter Series 1-5th
- Melges 15 Midwinters 9th

2024 Results (crew)

- J70 Copa Del Ray 5th
- J70 Worlds 17
- J70 Bacardi Winter Series 2-1st
- J70 North Americans 2nd
- J 70 Canadian Nationals 3rd
- J 111 HH/SW Detroit 1st
- J 111 Cleveland RW 1st