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Team NZ's super athletes powering the America's Cup challenge

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Last updated 10:27, June 16 2017

(Johnstone, D., 2017)

2017

Meet the super athletes powering Team NZ at the America's Cup.

EMIRATES TEAM NEW ZEALAND/FACEBOOK

They are the new breed of America's Cup "sailors" – super athletes who have the aerobic fitness of Tour de France winner Chris Froome and the anaerobic fitness of sprint star Usain Bolt.

...d an ability to dead lift more than 180kg, incredible oxygen consumption levels, just eight per cent body fat, and some deft footwork more akin with a dance floor, and you have the makeup of the men responsible for providing the power for the hydraulic-hungry 50-foot foiling catamarans that feature in Bermuda.

Rule and design changes have forced teams have to look beyond traditional sailors to make up key areas in their six-men crews.

EMIRATES TEAM NZ

Team New Zealand "cyclor" Simon van Velthooven wears a different sort of cycling helmet these days.

Team New Zealand, who have had champion sculler Rob Waddell involved in previous campaigns. went down that line again when they enticed London Olympics gold medal winning double sculler Joe Sullivan into their mix.

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They took that a step further with the addition of Olympic cycling medallist Simon van Velthooven to help maximise their radical move to have "cyclors" using leg-power to replace the traditional arm-powered grinding systems.

Across at defenders Oracle Team USA, Australian Olympic swimmer and champion iron man Ky Hurst is a key component of their engine room.

And Artemis Racing recruited Sweden's world champion and Olympic sprint kayaker Anders Gustafsson.

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World class track cyclist Simon van Velthooven has proven a huge asset to Team New Zealand's new approach to powering their AC50.

They come with qualities other than just their raw power. They have competitiveness, professionalism and a winning attitude.

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"You bring in a champion in another sport, the guys on the team are just blown away by their athletic ability. That just raises the intensity," Oracle skipper Jimmy Spithill said.

For Team New Zealand, it's been a way of complementing the pure sailing talent they have in their afterguard – skipper Glenn Ashby won silver at the 2008 Olympics while helmsman Peter Burling and Blair Tuke won gold at Rio last year on the back of silver medals in London. Add in Rio representative Josh Junior and there's a real Olympic feel to this Kiwi campaign that now sees them taking on Oracle for the Auld Mug.

EMIRATES TEAM NZ

Olympic gold medal-winning rower Sullivan was all smiles after playing his role in a dominant Team NZ victory.

The challenge for the code-crossers has been to adapt to their new sport. It's not as instinctive as, say, a league player turning to rugby.

And this isn't just any sailing – this is the pinnacle of the yachting's professional side, involving state of the art technology that pushes these boats to speeds approaching 90kmh. It can be humbling, even for world class athletes

"I thought I was just going sailing. Then I had to find a way to balance the fear," Gustafsson said as he battled the powerful G-forces that come with every turn and three

and "cyclor" Joe Sullivan, left, knows what it takes to win Olympics gold as he proved with Nathan Cohen in the double sculls at the 2012 London Games

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Hurst says he is revelling in his new challenge.

"I really feel that everything I've done before has been a stepping stone to this," he said.

"I've come from the top of my sports to the top of this one, by joining Oracle Team USA.

GETTY IMAGES

Australian surf lifesaving great Ky Hurst is tickled pink to top his career by joining Oracle for the defence of the America's Cup.

"I'm new in this and I've definitely had to take some steps back. But this is something I've always wanted. I've got Australian medals, I've got world championship medals, I've been to the Olympic Games twice, but the America's Cup is the pinnacle of my career. I've been an individual athlete for so long, and I've always had something else I wanted to give, to share and experience."

Sullivan has had to make double adjustments. Initially thinking he was jumping from rowing to sailing, he's since had to brush up his cycling skills.

He says his new job has similarities to his rowing though the actual physical output might not be quite as relentless. It's about bursts of power on the America's Cup boat compared to the consistent rhythm required in his double scull.

REUTERS

Sweden's champion sprint kayaker Anders Gustafsson admits he's had to overcome some fears since getting on board an America's Cup catamaran.

Sullivan said some of their training sessions were so hard the side-effects were popping ears, reduced vision and diminished taste.

"You are really pushing everything you have got. It's a really single focus – nothing else really matters apart from that one goal of putting out as much power as you possibly can.

"It hurts a lot. It definitely destroys muscle and you need a lot of recovery afterwards."

Van Velthooven has found fuelling the boat "hard, but a different kind of hard" from his track cycling work.

"I knew about sailing before I knew about cycling. It's a huge buzz to be a part of something like this," he said.

"What I brought to this team was the training needed to power the boat."

But even Van Velthooven had to make major adjustments to power his pedal station at the front of the Kiwi boat.

"It's not like a bike at all. You are pulling and pushing a dead weight and you need to train the right muscles for the right movement. It was a learning curve for me as well as the team to actually train your body to power the pump."

Van Velthooven also looked to put some perspective on the focus that has gone on the team's revolutionary development and the way the America's Cup has attracted an eclectic mix of athletes.

"It still a sailing race," he emphasised, believing the skills of the real sailors utilising the increased power source would ultimately decide who would win the Auld Mug over the next two weeks.

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