

Coaches? National teams? Speed testing? Sailing federation funding? It's an alien world to most kites – anathema to some – but that's what happens when the so-called "Olympic rings effect" kicks in. National pride and the desire to boss the Olympic stage unlocked undreamed-of resources for kiteboarding. YOG is just a small foretaste of what lies in store when mixed Formula hydrofoil racing graces the Paris 2024 Games. So, the pricey Upeksha Gawa boards – International Kiteboarding Association (IKA) registered prices of US\$1,500 and US\$1,550 – became a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of that Olympic quest.

Uniquely among kite brands, Upeksha grabbed the YOG ball and ran with it, creating a thoroughbred TT:R machine finely tuned to the downwind slalom format. Founder, Kiwi engineer Craig Chandler, after losing his job in Thailand's oil and gas industry in the downturn of 2016, began tinkering with board design which is his biggest passion. He had first set out to fine-tune twin-tip boards for jumping, a personal obsession the long-time kiteboarder is destined to revisit. But he progressed to TT course racing boards. With the announcement that TT:R Slalom would take to the YOG stage, he set about adapting his

designs to produce the fastest, lightest board specifically for the purpose.

Testing and re-testing shapes with Kiteboard Tour Asia's (KTA) champion Narapichit "Yo" Pudla, a neighbour and long-time friend on south-west Thailand's palm-fringed Paknampran beach, the pair hit on what they hoped would be a winning formula. Initially, the goal was nothing more heroic than giving a local young Thai hopeful – Sarun "Nai" Rupchom – a weapon to take on the world's TT:R best. But with the publication of the YOG rules, Chandler realised he would have to make it available to all comers in the interests of Olympic fairness. The rest is history.

Yet, it was a close thing. Upeksha flirted with disaster as Chandler's inexperience told and the fledgling production process was beset with problems. After Upeksha's first foray at TT:R Youth Worlds in Brazil in November 2017, Chandler had the first flickers of interest. Thailand's "Nai" rode the board and picked up a respectable seventh overall, while his coach "Yo" made a Gawa available for other riders to test on the event's sidelines. Italy's Tomasoni, who lifted the girls' World Title, was the first to subsequently get a Gawa.

But as other competitors also sought out the board the race was on to meet the tight IKA criteria on the design's specifics and demanding production schedule to ensure wide availability. Crucially, moulds for the Gawa kept breaking – seven in succession at a cost of around \$3,000 a piece. So the production line had to continue using the first set of moulds (used to produce the first ten of each board for IKA registration) for the duration of the YOG campaign. Even the board's graphics proved an enormous headache as Chandler eschewed established production techniques in a bid to innovate and save weight – 500gms to be precise. "We had so many problems," said Chandler. "It was just panic trying to meet the criteria. I would have said we had six months of 18-hour days, with no time off."

TT:R requires riders to clear obstacles at speed. Argentinian YOG competitor Geronimo Lutteral flying on his Gawa
Photo: Matias Capizzano / World Sailing



IN BACK-TO-BACK TESTS NATIONAL TEAMS FOUND THE GAWA BOARDS BETWEEN ONE PERCENT AND THREE PERCENT QUICKER, EVEN UP TO SIX PERCENT FASTER THAN OTHER REGISTERED TWIN-TIPS, DEPENDING ON THE CONDITIONS.



Girl's YOG gold medal winner, Italian Sofia Tomasoni
Photo: Matias Capizzano / World Sailing