When your sights are set on an Olympic (gold) medal everything else – work or study – has to take a back seat. For months or even years, life is one endless round of training and competitions, strictly controlled diets and managed rest. Not to mention lots of travel. Beach volleyball Dau Spikers shepherded his Architecture studies back in the summer of 2011 to concentrate on earning his ticket to London alongside teammate Emiel Boersma. "People who claim that it's all been for nothing if they don't win gold are wrong," and as Spikers says, "even if I don't qualify, I'll have had an amazing experience. One day I'll be able to tell my grandchildren that I did all I could to reach the Olympic Games." And their studies? Most will be returning to the classroom in September. Or so they say.

Nerve-racking: everyone around me talks about nothing but rankings, points and tournaments"

London alongside teammate Emiel Boorsma. With the Games fast approaching, he is still battling to qualify. So what is it like devoting a whole year to one, still uncertain, goal? "Nerve-racking" says Spikers. "Everyone around me talks about nothing but rankings, points and tournaments. I try to stay away from all that. I look for distractions. When I'm abroad I visit interesting buildings, and I try to keep up with the latest developments in architecture on the internet. And I read a lot. Last year I was away from home for 250 days. If I'd spent the rest studying, I wouldn't have had any life left over. Ultimately, I think you have to make a choice."

Aces

Rowers Sytke de Groot, a Marine Technology student, and Chantal Achterberg, a TU Delft graduate, are also working full-time on their Olympic mission. Both have been members of the Dutch women’s eight since 2008, rowing in the middle of the boat where they provide the power and – because they are in adjacent seats – can encourage one another. Their qualification worries are already behind them, and they may even be in the running for a medal. Although both the US and Canada were a good four seconds faster in the World Cup race at Lucerne – a lead that looks difficult to mount in less than two months – Achterberg draws confidence from the fact that the Dutch boat beat strong competitors like Great Britain, Australia and Romania. "Make up four seconds! Of course we can! Anything is possible. It wouldn’t be the first time: “The Dutch women, she says, have not played all their cards yet: “We still have some aces up our sleeves’. And she knows her teammates will put in the necessary drive and effort. “In Lucerne we felt we were in with a chance all the way. Only in the last 200 metres did it become clear that we were going to be third. When that happens, you subconsciously ease up a bit. We have to be able to keep it up on that final stretch.”"Ter 200. She claims that there are too many strong pairs for her and Janssen to be in the running for a medal. But whatever happens, she says the effort will not have been wasted.

When we started, our real goal was Rio in 2016. If we continue to develop as we are now, we stand an excellent chance there. Come what may, London will be valuable experience.” Siegelaar agrees wholeheartedly with that: “People who claim that it’s all been for nothing if they don’t win gold are wrong” And as Spikers says, “even if I don’t qualify, I’ll have had an amazing experience. One day I’ll be able to tell my grandchildren that I did all I could to reach the Olympic Games.” And their studies? Most will be returning to the classroom in September. Or so they say.

Material developed by DSM and previously used in a Dutch sailing boat and in a bobsleigh described as ‘revolutionary’. Because it makes the shell 25 per cent more rigid, less energy is lost in the water. “The new boat is perfect,” says Siegelaar. “It responds much faster. If you row well technically, you can transfer more power lengthways rather than crosswise. Perhaps there’s a mental advantage, too?”

Rosiland Lievens is back in the boat, having lost his place in the Dutch lightweight coxless four for the 2008 Olympics at the last minute: just as it was poised to qualify for London at the 2011 World Championships in Bled, Lievens was struck down with food poisoning and the chance was missed. In the end he had to wait for the final chance, at Lucerne this May. So securing an Olympic place was a relief more than anything. “We were favourites,” he says, “but you still have to perform on the day.”

He does not consider his boat a serious medal contender. Although, he says, “on the other hand, there’s no clear hierarchy in this event. Form on the day is everything. It’s a question of peaking at the right moment. You have to train very hard, but not go over the top. That’s a very delicate balancing act, but fortunately we now have an excellent physio."