

The Favoured Tack



STRINGS, WINGS AND OTHER THINGS... KINGS?

Vancouver's Six Metre Worlds lives up to the hype

BY ALEX FOX

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When I wrote my Six Metre Worlds preview a few months ago, it was based on a little bit of what I knew, but mostly on research and historical evidence. Having never lined up against another Six or raced in a Six Metre regatta before, it felt a bit strange writing from outside of my own personal experience. Well, I've now taken a crash course in this wonderful class, and it was both an education and an eye-opening spectacle. I've loved every minute of the journey and I've hopefully learned a thing or two as well. Here's a bit of a review of some of our team's trials and some of my own take-aways from our short time competing in this venerable class.

THE SIX METRE rating rule, as some of you may know, has been challenging designers and racers for more than a century. This long and varied history has arguably influenced our sport as much or perhaps more than any other rating rule conceived

since. I've always had a keen interest in yacht design and so it was fascinating to see the historical developments within the class and just how different the design solutions are from boat to boat and from generation to generation. This is a class that's attracted sailors, scientists, architects, artisans, builders, technicians and sailmakers from every corner of the planet.

I could quite happily have walked the docks for a week just taking in the nuances of each and every one of the 21 classics and 24 open sixes that were in attendance. This fleet of boats, every one unique, is

in such contrast to modern design trends that feature plumb bows, straight sheer lines, thin vertical appendages, non-overlapping headsails, asymmetric spinnakers and cookie-cutter deck layouts. This fleet is not that, and it's somewhat ironic and a testament to the longevity of this class that it continues to celebrate historical traditions, while still encouraging the very latest in innovation, cooked up by some of the most fertile minds and imaginations in the sport.

For our quickly assembled

Royal Vic team, sailing a loaner boat, *Wildcat II*, there were many more questions than answers, and we were focussed on figuring out some of the basics... quickly. Our team was bookended by the youngsters Fraser McMillan on helm and Aidan Koster on bow. These guys are part of a very successful Melges 24 team, yes, pretty much the opposite boat to a Six. The three of us in the middle of the boat were, well, let's just say more experienced, code for NOT youngsters. Dave Richardson had a Six Metre Classic Worlds win under his belt, crewing for Eric Jespersen, and he brought a keen eye and a calm head to the program... unflappable would be a good word. Nick Banks, our in-house MacGyver, was late joining the team and

quickly earned his way by troubleshooting the below-deck primary winch handle connection. Not only does Nick love problem solving, but he also towed the boat to Vancouver from Vancouver Island. His other job was to handle the pit and the myriad of control strings, plus hydraulics. I myself was tasked with mainsail trim, runners and for-better-or-worse, making the best guesses on where to go on the racecourse. We all seemed to mesh very well together when it came to figuring out boat speed solutions, and because we're all used to looking around on the race course, we were never short on observations, and good information and friendly advice... helpful hints... strong suggestions... ha ha!

One thing that the Six

Metre crew, that's us, figured out pretty quickly, was the many crossovers in our jobs, especially when gybing and rounding marks. Our practice sessions were in a pretty controlled environment, but when the pressure ramped up during racing and things occasionally went slightly sideways, some improvising was usually required. An extra hand here for a second, a quick turn of a winch handle, a word of warning or a flip of a line to avoid catastrophe. These seemingly small things were potential race savers and we all tried to be hyper vigilant and aware. These inevitable fire drills seemed more important to team building than perfectly executing every time... Not buying that eh? OK, in our case it was more a testament to everyone

being engaged and aware, a valuable reminder and a lesson for any crew looking to compete at a high level.

ON TO SOME more specific lessons from the racing. Right from the get go in the warm up regattas, it was pretty clear that this fleet was going to be aggressive on the start line and that getting away clean and in good shape was not going to be easy. The Six Metre is a relatively heavy boat that takes a good bit of time to get rumbling upwind, on the flip side of that equation, once up to speed there's really no way to slow the train down when early for the line. We experimented with timed approaches, slightly late approaches, setting up early, starting away from traffic. It was all very valuable practice in learning

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The Six Metre Worlds boasted multiple Olympic and world-champion sailors.

how not to start, who to start next to and how to scramble when in a less than ideal position. Our quest for the killer start would surely continue as a work in progress right through the last race of the worlds—it was tough!

Also very tough was keeping patience as our friend and ally. One of the more difficult pills to swallow was to simply foot for clear air or just survive in a less than perfect lane rather than force a down speed tack or worse, two down speed tacks into more dirt... sigh!

Figuring out where we were in terms of boat speed was also an immediate question that needed to be answered and addressed. I think we were all collectively surprised, and a bit relieved to find that we weren't far off the pace and could hang in with some good boats both upwind and

downwind. Dockside we sought out all the guidance we could and there was plenty available. As newcomers we were treated to both good advice and much speculation about our boat's sweet spot in the wind range.

Opinions seemed to lean toward our boat being weak in light air and better in a breeze. We also heard about rake, as in *increase it! Telltales, never lift the inside one or you're done!* And trim tabs, which is where the consensus seemed to end... ranging from never more than five degrees, to maximum 12 degrees in a breeze, to always use it during manoeuvres, to don't over use it, to always use more than you think to counteract the helm generated by the wings!?

It's hard to fault any of this advice and it was also hard not to take it all with a grain of

salt. Well intentioned as it may have been, at the end of the day, lined up next to the best competition, it was up to us to trim the best we know how. Adjust, observe and adjust again, observe some more and try to get the most out of our ride. We knew that we were behind and it was very important to get started on the learning curve.

AFTER COMPETING IN the two warm up regattas we felt somewhat prepared for the first race of the worlds, although we were still a bit conflicted about our rake set up (forestay length). We'd settled into a general routine for most of our sailing and that included mast step fully forward upwind and fully aft downwind, allowing for maximum forward rake. Runner tension was pretty important



This fleet continues to celebrate traditions, while encouraging the very latest in innovation.




(a half-inch made a difference), as was sheet tension. Not revolutionary, but it was a start.

Race one was shifty and puffy between eight to 14 knots, and although we sailed OK to a 12th there was much room for improvement. Race two we shortened the forestay an inch and seemed to find a better groove in a shifty six to 10 knot southeasterly. Downwind we were especially in sync and picked the correct side of a mid-course freighter on each of the three downwind legs, pulling out a solid fifth by the finish. Risk reward and fleet management would continue to be big considerations in the days to come and as the racing progressed we continued to find our way and had some fantastic close racing, surprisingly in the top half of the fleet!

We even found ourselves among the top boats from time to time, and that was pretty special. It was particularly satisfying that we were able to find consistency in a

variety of conditions, counting all but one race in the top nine and finishing a solid eighth overall in the open division and second Canadian entry. Thanks to my teammates all and to our extended team of David, Alan, Jeff, Tara, Jeremy, Mary, Deb, Andre, Gerry and many more for all the effort, support and a great regatta! Also many thanks to Rainer for loaning us the beautiful *Wildcat II*.

The Six Metre boats are certainly like no other classes and the open and classic sixes, though sharing a common lineage are very much two different boats, resembling the other above the water, yet so different beneath. The strengths of this class are in its long, storied history plus the owners and participants who fuel participation with a seemingly limitless passion. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to race on a Six and look forward to my next regatta sometime soon. Helsinki 2019 perhaps? 

THE RESULTS

The open and classic classes were both hotly contested at the 2017 Worlds in Vancouver. The cream rose to the top in both divisions and the form-book mostly held up. The open division was, for much of the regatta, a four-boat horse race with defending champs *Junior* from Switzerland continuing a remarkable streak and defending their world title. A combination of faultless starting, great boat speed and consistent tactics saw them leading and defending that lead throughout. Second place, and no surprise to those in the know, was the *New Sweden* team skippered by Ben Mumford. The very best scramblers in the fleet, this crew had superb boat handling and the most radical boat in the field. They were but a break or two from taking it all and with some more sailing time they will no doubt contend in the worlds for many years to come. Third was British super sailor Andy Beadsworth sailing *St Francis IX*. Fresh off a win at the Dragon Worlds, it looked like things might go their way until a UFD in the last race scuttled any chance. Fourth place was former worlds winner *Sophie II*, equal to all in the speed department, but crippled by a DSQ in race two. The best of the rest were *Sting* from San Francisco and *Evelina* from Finland. These boats each won a race and always found a way into the front group.

The classic worlds belonged to the King of Spain and the crew of *Bribon/Gallant*. Ross Macdonald skillfully called tactics in his home waters and they built up an almost insurmountable lead going into the final day. Things got interesting though when they posted an eighth and ninth, opening the door for a possible comeback from one of the other contenders. In the end *Goose*, skippered by Eric Jespersen won the final race but had to settle for a comeback second place ahead of sailing legends Lars and Torben Grael, sailing *Saskia*. This was a star-studded fleet with many Olympic sailors and world champions sprinkled throughout. The competition was fierce with six different boats winning races including Dennis Connor who ended up retiring from the regatta after day two due to mast issues. Also notable with two race wins was Erik Bentzen's *Saga* from Seattle, finishing in sixth.

