

NOT SO MUCH A REGATTA, MORE A HAPPENING!

By John Roberson

The Brewin Dolphin RS Elite Grand Prix held in mid-June was a regatta like regattas used to be, great competition on the water, fabulous social scene off the water. No quarter given or expected afloat, but plenty of drinks, laughter and banter ashore afterwards, with the whole fleet coming together in the evening to enjoy camaraderie, and memorable entertainment.

The fleet of 40 boats on the start line comprised teams from far and wide, including crews from Antigua, the USA, Norway, the Channel Islands and a strong contingent from across the Irish Sea, as well as from Burnham on Crouch and both ends of the Solent. This was the biggest fleet of RS Elites ever gathered for a regatta.



This was an amateur championship of the highest calibre; amongst the list of entrants were those who could cite Olympic medals, World, European and national championships galore, not to mention an impressive list of achievements in the bigger world of offshore racing. There were close battles throughout the fleet, with every place in every race fought for all the way to the finish.

The eventual winner, Ossie Stewart and his crew of son Tom and multi-class champion Geoff Carveth, established themselves near the top of the leaderboard on the first day, then sailed a consistent series and fought off a spirited challenge on the last day. Ossie, who is 68, picked up a Bronze Medal at the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992, sailing in the Soling class with Laurie Smith.



His other sailing successes include winning more than 30 championships as a crew, and finishing second 12 times as a helm, including three times in RS Elite championships. This is his first national championship win as a helmsman. He is based at Hayling Island Sailing Club and the previous weekend had finished second in the Southern Area Championships, losing first place to Tom Hewitson on a countback.

At the end of the first day of the regatta, Tom Hewitson, also from Hayling Island Sailing Club and defending National Champion, topped the leaderboard two points ahead of Stewart. Also putting in some strong performances on the opening day was Russell Peters, boasting Royal Yacht Squadron, Hayling Island and Royal Thames allegiance, with a first and a third on the scoreboard, but also carrying a disqualification.



Completing a Hayling Island monopoly of the podium positions at this stage was Toby Strauss, Chairman of sponsor Brewin Dolphin. Newcomer to the class and Squadron member, Martin Jones, also showed good form, with two good results out of three races to sit in fourth place.

On day two Russell Peters, who was sailing with James Grant and Greg Wells, shot himself in the foot by attracting another black flag disqualification in the first race of the day, to set himself a big mountain to climb if he was to win. Ossie Stewart was another of the seven boats black flagged in this race, but he then put second and third places on the scoreboard to lead the series by six points at the end of day two, with Tom Hewitson in second place.



Martin Jones continued his consistent performance to end the day in third place overall. However, Russell Peters issued a warning of his intent by winning the second and third races of the day, yet was still carrying a disqualification in his score.

On day three, Russell Peters blasted his way back into contention by winning the first two races of the day, making it four wins in a row and five out of eight races so far. Then in the last race of the third day Peters and his crew slumped to ninth place, but were able to discard their second disqualification to come ashore at the end of the day with a two point lead over Ossie Stewart. The Hayling Island team had put third and second places on the board before an uncharacteristic 14th in the last race of the day.



At the end of the second day, when on top of the leaderboard, Ossie has prophetically commented, “it’s obviously going to be a very close series; it could all come down to the last day.” Assessing the situation with one race to be sailed on the final day, Russell Peters quipped, “it could be a bit tense tomorrow”. Then commenting on the forecast light winds he said “I think the conditions will be better than predicted.” He summed up his string of wins saying, “we seem to have good speed; if we can get off the line cleanly and go the right way the boat is quick.”

With third placed Tom Hewitson ten points adrift of Ossie Stewart, the final race of the series was a showdown between Stewart and Peters, with the two boats engaging in a classic match race, almost oblivious to what the rest of the fleet were doing. Ossie and his crew managed to control the game from the start, taking Peters deep into the fleet. Eventually Russell would get past his opponent but the damage had been done and he crossed the finishing line in 17th place, with Stewart 18th. However Stewart could discard this result, while Peters had to carry it, giving the championship to Ossie Stewart by one point.

While this duel grabbed the attention, there were other battles throughout the fleet. All down the leaderboard there were clusters of boats where just one or two points separated them and the tactical fight was on to try and climb a place or two, or to defend a delicate position. A case in point was the struggle for the third step on the podium, with class stalwart and defending national champion Tom Hewitson just two points ahead of the Squadron’s Martin Jones.



Although Martin Jones won the final race, Hewitson and his crew of wife Jo, who had been elected Chair of the Association the day before, and Colin Smith finished second, so holding onto the third step on the podium by just one point.

No account of this event would be complete without huge thanks to the ebullient Charlie Egerton-Warburton, who put in such a prolonged effort over the last three years to make it happen, despite the initial delay due to the pandemic. A fervent Islander eager to showcase the best of the local produce, he pulled together an extensive array of businesses to support this regatta, ranging from the Isle of Wight Sweet Manufactory in West Wight to Adgestone Vineyard in the East, and excelled himself with the variety of entertainment he laid on each evening, which will live long in the memory.



One must also thank the Squadron staff, who were magnificent to a person - friendly, helpful and welcoming, not to mention ruthlessly efficient. Of course, the faultless race management reflected the vast experience that the Royal Yacht Squadron has in running such regattas.

The RS Elite Association were delighted to raise just shy of £4,000 over the four days for local charity, the Andrew Cassell Foundation, which helps disabled people experience the life-changing benefits of sailing.

This was indeed a regatta to remember.

