

To finish first, first you must finish.



Mat Hix

One of the first and very valuable lessons that I learnt from my P Class days down at the Waimak, was to finish first, first you must finish. Simple advice but time and time again it rings true, especially on those fresh to frightening days. Simple things like making sure your gear is in good order, you know the course and you don't take unnecessary risks could be the difference between a DNF and a trophy. No matter how hard it seems, how far you are behind the leaders or how many times you capsize, you should always make your best effort to finish the race. This mind set might not necessarily win you regattas straight away but it will give you valuable lessons just by staying out and braving it.

I remember one of my first regattas in the P-class was the Stewarts Gully Age Group Championships. I was what you would call a nervous "battler" lacking a lot of skill in the gusty conditions. Sixteen capsizes later and I finished every race and placed 10th out of 15 boats (I think). No trophy but that was the last time that I capsized 16 times in a regatta and I sure learnt a lot!

Those lessons paid off last month when me and my team mate Tim Bartlett won the 12 Foot Skiff National Championship which was sailed in the face of Cyclone Gabrielle on the Waitemata Harbour in Auckland. We were one of only 2 boats to get around the course in all the races. I am very fortunate to be sailing with a very skilled and experienced sailor that Tim is. Although in the twilight of his skiff sailing days, Tim won 7 interdominion championships in both NZ and Aus in his heyday and has long been a trailblazer of the class. He was also an ex skiff moth sailor who use to compete against well-known Waimak legends Andy Holland and Melvyn Selwood in their Scow designs.

As some background, the 12-foot skiff unsurprisingly based on its name, is a 12ft long skiff (just in case you couldn't work that out). For comparison they are very similar to a non-hydro foiling R-Class which is 12ft 9 inches. The main 2 difference between the 2 classes is that R-Classes are allowed hydro foils but have a sail size restriction where 12 footers are not allowed hydro foils but have no sail size restrictions. Because of that most 12 footers have 3 choices of masts with 4 different rig selections so that you can select the optimum rig for the conditions. This means that we can be twin trapeezing in all conditions above 6-7 knots. The 12-foot skiff was an Australian class which evolved in New Zealand from the unrestricted Q class and later the Cherub class which met the class rule. Due to the lack of waterline length the 12 footers do struggle upwind compared to other skiffs like 49ers and 18 foot skiffs, however downwind they would be described as "ballistic", known for jumping clear from the water and clocking up to 25 knots down hill. I have tried crewing on 18 foot skiffs before and I would liken them to sailing a very difficult air craft carrier when comparing the liveliness of the 2 classes.

The 12 foot skiff fleet in New Zealand is a small but quality fleet with many ex interdominion winners and the majority of the class working in the sailing industry which makes for very challenging racing. We tend to get 10-15 boats at a national championships and 30-40+ when we compete at the interdominions in Australia.

This year's national regatta was planned over three days with the third day being completely blown out with Cyclone Gabrielle (with 50+ knot winds) meaning that we only managed to get 4 eventful races completed.

Day 1 and we only had 5 knots while rigging and not too sure when the imminent cyclone was going to hit. We all took a chance and decided to put our BIG rigs on. We started the first race in 6-8 knots, just enough to get 2 wires on upwind and by the end of the race it was a good 15-18 knots (which is the absolute max that you would want to sail with the big rig on). Most boats finished but some boats had to retire as they had reached the peak of being able to handle the rig. We managed to finish 2nd. Race 2 was to be a challenge! We started the race in 20 knots and it slowly got windier and well beyond conditions that the big rigs are designed for. Sails flogging upwind and cartwheels downwind, slowly the fleet diminished with only 3 boats managing to get around the course. The Big rig masts are about 8 meters (26 ft) tall, so more than double the length of the boat. Skiff rigs are rigged with 3 sets of stays, side stays, backs stays and lowers. The side stays hold the mast up (just like on a p-class or starling), the back stays go to the top of the mast and prevent the tip breaking with the spinnaker up and also create mast bend in the top section of the mast and the lowers are only designed to reduce bend in the lower section of the mast when you pull the kicker on. Anyway, we go around the top mark all we needed to do was get downhill to finish the race and get 2nd. We bear away in a 25 knot gust, which you can imagine creates a significant amount of load on an 8m mast when the boat is only 12-foot long. In doing so, our starboard back stay and side stay broke clear from their attachment to the boat. This meant that there was nothing holding the mast up other than the lower, which only went 1/3 of the way up the mast. To prevent the mast snapping we did not fly the spinnaker and we used my weight on the trapeze to hold the mast up (which was a very scary feeling every time we got a gust). We managed to limp our way down to the finish and retain our 2nd placing.

Day 2, and leading the regatta, all we needed was to finish the races with reasonable placings. It was blowing 30-35 knots and we had wind against tide. The sea state was petrifying knowing that we had to sail downwind in that. We all did the smart thing and rigged up our 4th rigs (the smallest rigs). These rigs are equivalent to an R-Class rig. We finished well in the first race and it got windier in the second race and the tide flow got stronger making it even more of a task to get around the course. A

number of boats pulled out not willing to risk a major crash. Knowing the forecast for the following day, we knew that all we needed to do was finish this race to win the regatta. We were doing alright for the first lap sitting in 2nd place until Tim's trapeze bungy on the port side broke. There was no way of us being able to grab the trapeze as it had wrapped its self around a spreader and was blowing in the wind. As we did not have to win the race we decided to carry on with one trapeze upwind (which I can tell you in 35 knots is not very fast). We got to the top mark still in 2nd and so long as we had one trapeze on each side we were comfortable that we would be able to get downwind safely to the finish line. We round the top mark, I hoist the spinnaker and I leap on to the wire in the reasonably flat water by Mission bay beach, as we scream across towards North Head and the channel, the waves quickly double in size threatening to gobble us up. We look for a flat spot to throw the boat through the gybe but it never comes so we decide to just chuck it through going full speed down a wave. We survive the gybe to find that Tim's loose trapeze line had fully wrapped itself around my trapeze, so we now had no trapeze wire, 35 knots and 2-3m chop. This was not safe! We quickly dropped the kite and floundered our way to the finish in 3rd place.

It felt a bit like the tortoise and the hare but we got around the course in each race despite many things going wrong. At the end of the day it came down to experience and knowing what to do just to get around the course. Looking back now, it kind makes those 16 capsizes at Stewarts Gully seem worth it given the lessons I learnt that day about persevering just to get around the course.

This year's interdominions will be held in Brisbane in 2 weeks time. It will be the first regatta since COVID. The weather is forecasted to be quite variable at this time of year so Tim and I will be hoping for a top 10 finish if we sail well. Keep an eye out on the class and the NZ team through the regatta website and Live Sail Die who are sponsoring the team and promoting the event on their website and Facebook page. Photos courtesy of Live Sale Die.



