

How NOT to Prepare for a World Championship

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I think the way John Bertrand would have described it is that “The mood was grim”. For those of you who haven’t read his brilliant book “Born to Win”, on how he and the crew of Australia 2 came to win the Americas cup, I will set the scene:

Five months ago things were going ok with my moth sailing, in fact quite well. I won’t be arrogant and pretend it was a campaign or a program, or whatever else people say to make their sailing sound more than what is frankly a hobby, but I was doing my best to get ready for a World Championship that was going to be held at my home club, Hayling.

A club I’ve been a member at for nearly 15 years and sailed at more than anywhere else over the years. A once in a lifetime opportunity to nail a good result in the boat I’ve been sailing for a few years. Not win it or anything overly ambitious but do it right. Prepare properly, turn up with the right set of tools for the job, sail against some fine sailors and know at the end of it that you raced a good series you could be proud of.

After a few years of frustration at sailing events I’ve given up the lame quest to re-live past success and I have a much more relaxed level of expectation nowadays. Essentially that boiled down to one clearly defined goal at this Worlds that I had to achieve, make the Gold Fleet, or “beat the w’anchor line” as Jof so calmly put it. After that I was just hoping to put in a good series and see what happened. I just had to make that line....

The mood was grim

...so right now, it was grim. It was grim because that one clearly defined goal was barely in reach. In fact you could easily see why I was balling this up but that was down to a number of factors.

Right now I had 2 high scores out of 4 and I was definitely not putting together a series I could be proud of. There was probably only going to be one more race as the sea breeze and the northerly gradient were going to get in a fight and we’d all be floating around like beginners in Picos.

One more race meant only one discard so I was pretty much dicing with the dreaded line. I needed a good result, it absolutely positively HAD to be a good result. The alternative didn’t bear thinking about. As the time sequence got going I took a judgement that the left was the way for the first beat and I wanted to start on starboard at the Pin, or thereabouts. I sat just off the port end planning the port tack approach I’d learnt from saltyballs 20 years ago and came in on the foils with about 2 mins to go.

Only the wind had dipped a little. I hadn't seen that coming as I'd been too caught up planning my approach. Idiot. Ok, no worries just get in there. I only got past the pin at just over a minute, now going head to head with a bunch of boats foiling on starboard gunning for the pin. Still, I really want to go left so I decide against staying foiling on port and finding a gap to go right. So I thought I'd tack a bit earlier and get back on the foils quick.

Great idea, but when you tack in the middle of a bunch of boats on the line, there's much less breeze than there was 200 yards off the line. I suddenly realised I'd made a massive mistake tacking and getting back on the foils was going to be nigh on impossible. Don't panic, keep calm and get foiling. Be smooth, re-set the controls, cunning off, vang off it'll be ok. The time ticked away, I was down to fifteen, no, ten seconds and only doing 5 knots, 3 short of take-off speed and it's not building. The last couple of boats popped up at the pin, including Graham Simmonds, where they had clearer air and that was it.

The Gun Goes

The gun goes and I was sat with a Bladerider for company, still doing 5 knots. As my chances of making the gold fleet quite literally sailed off up wind at 15 knots I started to panic. I look at Pocket Bullets in abject terror as if to blame her. She simply looked me straight between the eyes and said "you can't pin that one on me mate, you f***ed that up all by yourself". I knew she was right but she didn't have to be so blunt. I guess that's what you get when you buy a boat built an Aussies.

The Preparation

Why was it going ok 5 months ago? Well, a number of goals were being ticked off.

I had all the kit I was looking to get for the Worlds at Hayling: Foils, Sail, Boat. Before I'd even got around to putting it all together I was ripping it up when training with the other guys using what I thought was the slower kit. More often than not I'd be at the front of our incessant boat runs at Queen Mary over the winter and I was now foil tacking as much as I wasn't.

That was a big improvement to tick off. I can promise you it takes some time to get good at tacking a Moth if you have to go and do a pesky job on week days. Gybing takes about 3-5 sails if you get the technique down but tacking is much harder.

I probably should have been training at Hayling but I couldn't be bothered with the journey down the A3 every weekend. Also, the plan was to go back to Hayling come March and start training on the sea. In the meantime I wanted to get my new kit all working and fast then I could practice sailing in the bay for a few months before the worlds. I knew Queen Mary was an easy place to sail but I wasn't kidding myself, I knew it would be harder on the sea but I felt getting the basics nailed at QM was a good plan for the winter.

The Kit

The choices on kit for the moth class are half the problem AND the fun.

Sometimes you think it's great to have all the options and sometimes you wish it was all one design.

On the whole the class has always been one with an ethos of clear, simple rules. If something comes along that isn't clearly illegal in the rules then it is legal until a clear interpretation is made. This happened with the Wing Sails made by Adam May and Bora Gulari back in 2011. It also happened with the hydrofoils made by bloodaxe back in the 90s. By strapping them on the wing bars the class decided he had effectively made a trimaran. However, some smart Australians came up with an effective bi-foiler concept in the early noughties and (in all probability) saved the moth class... And that's why we have the biggest world championship ever happening at Hayling this week.

Fundamentally I agree with the rules as they are, the principles are undoubtedly correct and should never change, however it does create some problems which are easy to see, arms racing being one of them. I'm learning that you need to know what you are doing if you try and play that game. I, it would appear, clearly don't. Frankly, this is where it started to go wrong in January. All explained by talking through the 3 main components, sails, boat and foils.

The Boat

I'll start with the boat as that's the platform that you have to start with and, despite a lot of general opinion, is the most important bit of the kit.

Some people will disagree but read the rest of this and you may see where I'm coming from. There are 3 main choices of Hull you can buy and then there is the option of building your own.

If your idea of sailing is to spend nearly a year getting high on epoxy in your garage and then running your own personal test and learn program for another year then good luck to you. I like the sailing part of sailing so I will buy a boat thanks.

The 3 choices are:

1. a Rocket from Aardvark built by Mike Cooke in the west country
2. a Mach 2 from the McConaghy/McDougall China/Aussie combination,
3. an Exocet designed by Kevin Ellway and built by Simon Maguire in the historic Moth town of Lymington

Sadly John Claridge left the moth game many years ago, but his Magnums brought many World Champ trophies back to Lymo over the 70s, 80s and early 90s.

There are a few other people/firms who say they are going to build boats, put out press releases, talk it up, and then promptly fall on their arses. I presume they see that Mach 2 are building multiple boats per week and think they can get a bit of that action, how hard can it be? Then they quickly realise its tough, real tough. In fact, when you think about it its darned impressive the 3

builders above have lasted any time at all and even more impressive that anyone ever builds their own foiling moth at home and makes it sail competitively. Hats off to you chaps, chapeau.

The Options

So what did I get for this Worlds? I looked at the options:

The Rockets are clearly fast, a development of Cookie's last boat, the Ninja, which won a few titles, and Cookie will go to the end of the earth to help you out once you've bought it from him. However, the people that buy the Rockets seem to enjoy the constant "tinkering" that is required to make them fast. Team rocket are currently all busy making new gearing adjusters and building countless other custom add-ons with their work bench in the boat park. They all seem to love it. That is not for me.

The Exocets are also clearly fast. The latest couple of nationals and Euros have gone to them but they haven't quite beaten the Mach 2s yet at the worlds. Simon Maguire is a craftsmen and the boats are stunning. You get them ready to win, not just race. Everything is perfect. He sets up the foils and the control systems within mm of specification and the boat practically sails itself according to the owners. They also have a great reliability record. The only challenge here is that to get that level of quality you have to put time into building them. Simon won't rush it and won't risk the quality through volume. This means you wait, and if you didn't put an order down by mid-2013 you would not have a boat for the Worlds, let alone with enough time to practice in it.

So, the Mach 2. It's won the last 4 worlds on the trot and it clearly works. There are no excuses for not winning in it and you can order spares from their webshop and expect them in a week or two. That is brilliant service. Better yet they can build boats at about 10 times the rate Cookie and Simon build them so the lead time is just a couple of months.

They do have a few things you need to sort out to be race winning and they aren't quite as perfect as the Exocet but they are clearly fast if you do the right things to them, like remove play everywhere, and I knew what many of these things were having had a second hand one already.

I ordered my new one straight after last years nationals and had it delivered to my front door 6 weeks after. Brilliant, don't you just love that feeling when you unpack a new boat? I named her Pocket Bullets, me and the boat, 2 Aces in the hole. Maybe there was just a little hope left of re-living past glories.

The Foils

The next thing I thought about were the foils.

Simon Maguire won't sell you his foils unless you have an Exocet. Cookies foils didn't have a track record of working on a Mach 2 and I wasn't in for risks.

The Mach 2 foils are obviously fast, in fact small anhedral rudder is a beaut of a piece of carbon. However, tacking on the small Mach 2 foil is tricky and takes a lot of practice. People with jobs struggle to find the time for that compared to all the people that win on Mach 2s. I, annoyingly, have a job.

The Exocets seem to glide through the tacks like they're on rails with their big wide, high aspect, foils. The Mach 2 large main foil is simply not on the pace now so you have to go small and learn to tack on it. UNLESS! There was another option.

The Macita

I'd seen that this chap Luka Damic had designed a foil and it was made to fit a Mach 2, he had called it the "Macita". He had made the rudder that Josh McKnight used to win at Garda in 2012 and I'd seen it. It was a nice foil. But I had the new Mach 2 Anhedral rudder so I was happy with that. But could this main foil be worth a look. It was high aspect and had fixed tips with a slight tilt on the end, like an aeroplane wing but downward so you could foil high and not get any ventilation, which is slow and often painful. So could it help you tack?

I had a couple of email conversations with them and soon after I saw Bora doing well on it at the Hawaii worlds. I ordered one before the end of the worlds as I knew there'd be a waiting list. There was, I did well to get in early as I didn't get it till after Christmas.

When I got the Macita it looked great, lovely in fact. The finish was far better than the carbon that is simply lacquered that Mach 2 do. You basically have to finish a Mach 2 foil yourself if you want to be at the front of the fleet, or spend a few hundred quid with a boat builder to get it done for you. This foil was actually good value when you take that into consideration.

The only problem is fitting it. This turned into some real work. I had a few goes myself but then I heard a few of the other guys who had had them go loose or even fall off. In the end I got P&B south to sort it for me. They did a lovely job and set the angle of attack very nicely. I went to the Queen Mary and Weymouth Opens with it and managed to foil tack in the races and come top ten. Things were going to plan.

The Sail

Finally there was the sail choice.

I'd made the choice early to stick with the KA 10. KA is the aussie firm run by the people that run Mach 2, Amac basically.

They make a 10 for small people and a 16 for everyone else. No other fly weights, I weigh 67kgs, had any other sail so I stuck with the 10. However, the other fly weights started to change in the spring of 2014 which threw me.

I was going ok but I still couldn't keep up with the really fast people. I started think that the sail was the only thing holding me back. Surely it had to be, I couldn't not be good enough after all??? It came to a head when I got nuked in some training runs by Mike Lennon and Ricky Tagg at Hayling. Instead of reminding myself that they're both world class and I'm not, I started to think I should be up with them.

I looked at the North option, over-priced in my book, the KA 16 was being used less and less and so I went with the New Lennon Sail. It did look fabulous and as Mike is just starting on his own I wanted to support him too. I bought one the week before the worlds.

How NOT to Prepare for a Worlds

And that is why this article is about how NOT to prepare for a Worlds.

Changing some vital pieces of kit that late is plain daft. I'd broken the rules that John Bertrand had set out so clearly for the crew of Australia 2: Don't go looking for something that isn't there, panic, and screw up so badly you make it worse.

He learnt that the hard way through a few cup campaigns. I thought I'd learnt from his mistake. I was certain I wasn't falling into the same trap. I was happy that I was simply improving my platform through slow and deliberate gains. Just like Team Oracle USA back in that fantastic Americas Cup last autumn.

Only I'm not a pro and I don't really know if anything in particular is making a difference from one sail to another. That is what I learnt slowly and painfully over the last few days. That is why I was sat there on the start line of race 5 watching the gold fleet chance sail away from me.

The Sail

I put Mikes sail on and I haven't got it to work. It clearly should work as Mike just won the nationals. I made a few tweaks to bits but I'd clearly left it too late and decided to go back to the trusty KA 10 this morning. I will get that sail working for the next event.

That wasn't the only reason I was in this situation either. I'd clearly not been able to apply any kind of acceptable level of race craft. The opens this year have been run in light winds with hardly any races. I am totally out of practice and this really showed as I try to line up for the races and perform starts like the one mentioned earlier.

The Foil

In the light winds with plenty of boats I've found the one weakness of the Macita. It's high take off speed.

Being light I can get it to pop earlier than others but it still goes later than the Mach 2 small and in this kind of racing that can kill you. Especially if you're not Bora Gulari, double World Champion!

After my poor showing at the Nationals and the first two days of the Worlds I just faced into it and went back to the Mach 2 small. Within seconds of leaving the beach I realised it was the right choice as I popped up earlier than several boats around me and foiled out to the start. I then foil tacked too. FFS.

The Last Race

Still, I'd managed a poor start and got the shifts wrong in the first race so I still had to get one more good result in to make gold.

Yet there I was, sitting in the piss with the fleet sailing away once again. The one thing though was I knew that with this kit I could race, well I had to. Pocket Bullets calmly reminded me that sitting there wasn't going to help and would I like to get the **** on with it.

In a mix of rage at myself and the dying of the light I ghosted her up on the foils and set about the task ahead of me. Despite the relatively light winds I seemed to feel the urge to pull the kicker on harder than ever before. It nearly crushed my hand as I wrapped the rope around twice and pulled to the point where I thought the king post might snap.

It didn't, in fact I found another gear as I squeezed the pants out of the Cunningham too. The speedo leaped up to over 15 knots and somehow stayed there until I came to tack. The several hundred yards to the boats in front seemed to have halved by the time we got to the layline and I slammed in the biggest foiling tack I've ever done in a race. I didn't really have a choice did I?

The speed barely dropped and as I got back to 15 knots again on port I looked straight under the boom to see the boats that were in front of me a minute or two ago.

Things change fast in a moth race and a foiling tack helps a lot. I'd probably taken 20 boats back already as it got a little light in to the mark but I foiled through the next tack and nailed it off down the run like a man possessed. Apparent wind I'd never thought imaginable was coming out of nowhere and I took chunks out of a big gabble of boats in front. Then, as if a little help came from somewhere, a bunch of the boats at the right hand mark came off the foils. I managed to ghost around without plonking down but not before Graham over took me again in his Exocet. Fair play I thought. Not a small man to be foiling in zephyrs.

By the halfway point of the next beat I was back in the top twenty and the top ten were in sight. I was on for my best result yet despite touching the void at the start. I lost 2 boats at the finish as I fell off the foils for a few seconds in the fading breeze but I snuck in with 20th place which was enough. Graham bagged a 13th and was chuffed to bits.

I knew at that point it was enough and I felt like I'd won on the scratch cards for about 5 minutes. I also felt a surge of confidence coming back that if we did get another race I'd be ok. I gave Pocket

Bullets a tap and said well done. In her usual frankness she pointed out that most of that had, somehow, been down to me. Maybe buying an Aussie boat has its benefits too.

The Gold Fleet

We didn't get any more races in yesterday but we did get a couple of abandoned/postponed starts. I smashed it one of them, I won the pin and was the only boat foiling 10 seconds after the gun. Maybe there is a chance of doing something good this week after all.

Probably not, but that thought of how a race win would be fricking awesome is pretty much what keeps me going in sailing. Wins feel so good don't they? Imagine winning one here in the gold fleet. Just imagine it.

HA, fat chance!



Figure 1 Neil at Queen Mary Sailing Club