

Merlin Rocket Nationals 2017

After 6 and a half long hours in the car, from our home town of East Grinstead, West Sussex, we arrived at Pwllheli sailing club; the venue for the Aspire Merlin Rocket Nationals 2017. Sunshine and a light sea breeze greeted us, with almost perfect sailing conditions, we were led to believe the whole week would bring a similar backdrop to the event. Once through measurement and a welcome from Ian McKenzie, the organiser of the event as well as coordinator of the NSSA teams, it was time for our evening meal supplied by the sailing club. Before the meal, we were very warmly welcomed to the fleet by showing our faces in front of the crowd and receiving our aqua blue sponsor bibs.

With the conditions looking so good on Saturday we were very excited to get into our borrowed boat, named *Never Been to Salcombe*, (kindly provided for the week by John Roberts, a Merlin sailor from Blithfield SC) on the Sunday morning. However, the wind did not live up to our expectations and the airs were very light come Sunday morning. Regardless, eager to get out, we got up nice and early so that we could get a practice sail in before the first race of the week at 12:55. We spent a considerable time with our mentors and Andy Davis, co-owner of HD sails, during the morning, who all chipped in to help us rig our boats and helped to explain how the rig set up could all be changed on the water. With plenty of people giving their advice about how to sail and how to control the boat, our heads were swimming with information. Luckily, this did not carry over to our practice sail and once we had launched, we rudderless sailed out of the bay (a skill I had not used in a long time!), popped our fixed rudder down and got sailing. The boat felt amazing to sail in the light airs, it was very reactive to all movement of the rudder as well as all movement of the helm and crew. It certainly is a very technical boat and takes delicacy compared to the laser standard, that I usually sail.

The first race in light airs was great fun and after a slightly slack start, we were near the back of the fleet for much of the race. This emphasised the fact that we really were sailing with essentially the 40 best Merlin sailors in the country. In the end, we gained a respectable 34th place, which both of us were happy with considering this was the first time we had stepped into the boat! The boys team from Derbyshire came 2 places below us, and the Girls from Cumbria finished 32nd. Only one race was scheduled for the first day so we headed in with the rest of the fleet to enjoy dinner, again laid on by the sailing club. A great first day was had by all despite the light winds making for tricky and unforgiving racing.

Monday, Day 2 was again a day with conditions unexpected by our original hopes, this time the breeze was exceeding 30 knots in some gusts with a sea state so severe that sailing was unfortunately called off. However, the fleet made the most of the conditions and over 20 of us were seen surfing off the coast just past Abersoch in a small bay called Hell's mouth. The conditions were obviously brilliant for surfing and a good time was had by all.

Day 3, was a day of almost perfect conditions for racing, with a steady 10-15 knots and building was forecast. Three races were scheduled to catch up for losing a day on Monday as well heavy winds forecast for Wednesday. The fleet was as competitive as ever and our first race and first beat of the Sausage Triangle course was very promising. After a bet had been placed with Simon Potts the day before we were very hesitant not to capsize on our first gybe downwind! Fortunately, we avoided the capsize but stuffed it up into the wind coming out of the gybe to avoid the intense heel we had on the boat. We recorded a last position in the end after finishing the course trailing the whole of the fleet for the rest of the race, at least meaning we picked up the Endeavour prize for race 2. This fleet meant business and didn't once consider taking prisoners!

Wednesday had always been a touch and go day for sailing and assuming the day was called off, Angus and I were in complete disarray when the launch flag went up at 9:55. One race was scheduled due to winds around 20 knots were forecast, with a large swell and heavy winds due to pick up throughout the day. The broad reach back in was particularly great fun in a nearly 6ft swell and gusts of 25+!

Thursday morning was A level results day. This saw me holed up inside the spacious club house ringing universities to organise my undergraduate study. Luckily all went well, despite this, Angus crewed for James Cokayne in *Light Fantastic* for the day, as his original crew was not feeling very well. The boys had a storming day with a 28th in race 6, a 24th in the Ranelagh champagne race (just missing out on a bottle of champagne for their efforts) and another well-deserved 24th in race 8 of the week. The joke was made by Ian McKenzie, owner of *Light Fantastic*, that the boat never normally sees the front of the fleet so close! Sadly, for the girls from Cumbria, they snapped their mast in race 6, resulting in an abrupt end to their week of sailing.

One race was scheduled for Friday morning so that we could complete the full set of races, something that seemed impossible when we observed the forecast at the start of the week! A long week of sailing came to an end in a rather embarrassing swim back in, when the boat capsized on us just inside the shallow bay. This meant it was too shallow for the power boats to rescue us and too shallow for us to use the rudder. This meant we had to take the boat in on its side as when Merlin's capsized they fill with water!

Angus and I both had a very enjoyable week not only sailing in a top fleet, gaining invaluable tips from top sailors. We were very warmly welcomed into the Merlin family and we have every intention to return at some point. We would like to thank everyone who made it possible, including Rooster, Dinghytec and HD sails who paid for our entry fees and sponsored us throughout the week, as well as Ian McKenzie, John Roberts and Guy Winder who took the risk of lending all three teams a boat to use. Some particularly big thanks goes to Ian McKenzie and the NSSA who worked in tandem to get us involved in such a brilliant class.

By George Colcomb, from the West Sussex Team



NSSA Sailors with mentors Chris Gould (Creation Covers) Caroline Croft (Virtual Rigger) and Tom Lonsdale (North Sales).