

**“OH NO, THERE’S WEED ON THE KEEL AGAIN”**  
**aka THE SONATA BRITISH NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS**  
**STRANGFORD LOUGH YACHT CLUB 22-25 AUGUST 2013**

For the fourth time this millennium Strangford Lough Yacht Club in Northern Ireland hosted the British National Sonata Championships. The event was held over 4 days from 22-25 August. Light to moderate winds and fair conditions prevailed as 21 competing boats, including 10 that travelled from Great Britain for the event enjoyed the beautiful surroundings of Strangford Lough, a designated Marine Nature Reserve and Area of Outstanding Natural beauty.

The visiting boats arrived on Wednesday 21 August and were launched by crane supervised by the host club’s Clyde Markwell and John Hagan. Many of the visiting crews then set up tents in an impromptu campsite situated in the front garden of Eoin Rogers’ house just across the road from the yacht club.

The first day of racing dawned misty and with very light and variable winds. However, Race Officer PJ Gault, working from Alan Marten’s Stack Polly as the Committee Boat, managed to set a windward-leeward course, and start on time. The wind progressively weakened as the fleet made its way slowly up the first beat and by the time the leading boats had reached the windward mark it had almost died completely. The first downwind leg initially saw boat speeds below 1 knot, but those that chose the south side of the course benefitted as the wind shifted from east to south. Eric the Boat, helmed by Andy Tunnicliffe reached the leeward mark first and thereafter the race was a fetch followed by a fetch as the wind increased to F2. Four rounds should have been sailed, but the race was shortened to 2 because of the light conditions. Eric maintained her lead with Helensburgh YC’s Jazz, helmed by Neil Manderson, finishing second and White Magic (David Matthews helm) from Sunderland YC, third.

The curse of the Championship over the four days revealed itself to several boats during the first race: floating patches weed, which attached itself to keels or rudders. Weeks of relatively light winds on the Lough meant it had not blown ashore. Local sailors reported they had never seen anything like it. Tactics quickly evolved to keep a sharp lookout for the larger patches. Among those affected on the first race was the leading boat from the host club, Apache, helmed by Brian Corry.

The second race, also a windward-leeward, followed immediately from the first by which time the wind had increased to a steady F2-3 SSE. Three different boats took the line honours in this race with Ballyholme YC’s Gareth Martel taking first place followed by Poole YC’s Presto (helmed by Joe Cross) and Apache in third place, demonstrating that an absence of weed on the keel can make a difference to performance.

For day 2 of the Championship the wind once again was SSE F2-3; the day was mostly grey and occasionally drizzly. The first race was another windward-leeward and at the first attempt there was a general recall at the start. At the second attempt the start was clean. After four rounds the race was won by Presto with Eric the Boat second and White Magic third.

The second race of the day was the distance race. The course took competitors to the southern end of Strangford Lough past the drying shoals known as Pladdies and through the green, rounded islands that make the Lough such a delight. After the start the fleet split, to pass around or through the group of islands to the south of the main race area. Some boats went eastwards past Deadman’s rock into the middle of the

Lough, while another group went west around Roe Island; some went through the Minnises. As the groups converged on the waypoint at the eastern end of Long Sheelagh it was clear that the boats that had taken the most westerly route through the islands had benefitted, with local boat Triad (helm: Robert Darnley) enjoying a commanding lead. However, as the fleet crossed to the east side of the Lough with about 20 minutes to high water, the tide close inshore was running south while a little further out it was still flooding north. Eric the Boat went close inshore with SLYC's Mouse (helm: Ian Smyth) close behind and both passed Triad, who had stayed further out. There followed a reach to Don O'Neill Island and a run against the strengthening ebb tide through the yachts moored in Ringhaddy Sound. Eric seemed to gain her own private wind and sailed away from the rest of the fleet, arriving back at the finish off SLYC with a commanding lead. Presto had performed well on the run to finish second, with Mouse in third place.

A barbecue was laid on at the club immediately after the crews came ashore.

Day 3 of the Championship; a glorious sunny morning turned progressively cloudier. The campers across the road from SLYC have now got used to their situation and provide entertainment for passers-by as they perform their ablutions in the front garden.

The wind had gone round to a WNW direction, F2. The racing is to consist of 2 triangular courses. In the first race, a wind shift just before the start favoured the boats starting at the port end of the line. Mouse started at the port end, had the lead at the end of the first round and managed to hold her position to finish first after 4 rounds closely followed by Saraband (helm: Mark Taylor Prestwick SC) and Eric the Boat in third.

The second race started with 2 general recalls. During the race the wind gradually dropped. The light wind makes it more likely that weed will be caught on keel or rudder and the only cure is to sail backwards, which is very depressing for those obliged to do so in the middle of a race in which forward momentum is quite important. Light winds again mean that Race Officer PJ Gault is obliged to shorten the course, the leeward mark of the third round becoming the finish mark. Eric was first, followed by White Magic with Cove SC's Gallus (helm: Murray Caldwell) third. There followed the sound of engines as most boats motored back to their moorings at SLYC.

The evening featured a Championship dinner at SLYC, with entertainment provided by a popular music combo and a Glaswegian competitor in a skimpy red frock. The latter never explained why he thought such attire was necessary and the following morning he no doubt swore "never again".

The final day of the event provided the best sailing conditions. The wind was a little fresher, becoming a welcome northerly F3 with clear blue skies and warm sunshine. Typical Irish weather at last.

The start of the day's first race, a windward-leeward, saw a general recall. At the second attempt there was a good start. PJ Gault had set slightly shorter legs than before to make sure that the event finished as scheduled. At the first leeward mark 6 boats arrived together and the resulting shouting and 2 collisions provided entertainment to some, frustration to others. Presto sailed her way through the mayhem and went on to win the race followed by White Magic in second and Eric in third.

After a short break for lunch on the water the final race of the series started at about 1300. This time there was a clean start and perfect sailing conditions for the afternoon. Jazz won the race followed by Apache and Eric.

A swift move back to SLYC was followed by the visitors being craned out of the water and prize-giving to those deserving.

The consensus was that it had been an enjoyable series, although more wind and less weed would have been welcome. The class owes its thanks to all those at SLYC who assisted with the event, especially PJ Gault, Alan Marten (owner of Stack Polly, the committee boat), ferryman Chris Boston and others.