Following requests to trial a ‘first across the line’ race format, the Finn class carried out trials at two events early in 2017 – the Trofeo Princesa Sofia in Palma and the European Championship in Marseille. Both were designed around a winner-takes-all final race where the first boat across the line was the winner. As expected, both events produced a lot of feedback, good and bad, and after the Europeans the Finn Class organised an online survey to assess the success or otherwise of the trials and gather further feedback.

The purpose of the trials was to investigate new formats to try and make sailing easier to understand for media and non-sailing spectators, and to try and add some extra excitement and thrill to engage more viewers. This was attempted through creating a final race format where the winners were the first across the line. The first three across the line in the final race won the medals.

Of course, this is widely contentious because it goes against all yacht racing tradition where the winner of a regatta has to perform consistently over a range of conditions over a long period and perhaps leads to the question: do we want sailing to be sport or entertainment?

**Events**

There were a few differences between the two events. Palma was the more complicated system. After an eight race opening series the top two boats progressed to the final and the next three to the semi final, to be joined by the top five boats after a final full fleet race (the semi final qualifier). The top three in the semi final progressed to the final for a five-boat winner takes all race.

This was simplified in Marseille with a 10 race opening series followed by a semi final of seven boats, of which the top two would join the top three from the opening series in a winner takes all final.

On the water, the title in Palma came down to who made the final gybe in very windy conditions. The best sailor of the opening series and the leader up to the final mark, Alican Kaynar, slipped up on the final gybe, and let Max Salminen, one of the biggest critics of these trial formats, through to win the race and the event. Kaynar ended up with bronze. However he proved himself two weeks later in Hyeres by winning a traditional format event, which ended with a 10 boat medal race.

In Marseille, the overall winner, Jonathan Lobert, ended the opening series three points behind the best sailor of the week, Anders Pedersen. However, in the semi-final, fourth placed Ed Wright and ninth placed Ben Cornish qualified for the final and then took silver and bronze. This dropped Pedersen dropped to fourth overall, a result many sailors regarded as unfair after he had sailed the best week of his career, and would have won a medal under any other format.

**Survey**

The survey initially focussed on the demographics with responses from a good mix of sailors and coaches as well as spectators watching both on the water and through the media. Although other areas were discussed the pertinent questions focussed on the fairness, excitement and preference of the sailors when comparing the two format trials alongside the World Cup in Hyeres, which had a standard medal race format.

Opposite are the results from six of the questions asked. It is quite clear that the majority of respondents did not think the trialled formats were either fair or more exciting than any normal race. The final ‘crunch’ question “should we use this format again” was particularly clear.

The survey also provided ample opportunity for respondents to feedback with comments and it is these that perhaps are most illuminating.

The majority of comments from the respondents were unfavourable. From nearly 350 comments received, around 15 per cent were positive, while 85 per cent were negative and often quite lengthy. Many of these comments have been included below. Though it was not an anonymous survey, for simplicity, names have not been included.
Positive comments largely focused on a few key words and phrases: exciting, easy to understand, simpler, everything to play for until the end, easy to follow and broadcast.

- Creates a focus for TV and media
- Creates some excitement at the end
- Creates interest by emotion and high stakes
- Easier to follow as non-sailor spectator
- Easy to understand
- It makes the sport simpler for non sailors as the person that wins the race wins the gold
- It provides interesting medal races, that are void of people that can’t win
- Removes chance of match racing at the back of the fleet and second or third placed being sailed out of the medals
- Was engaging to watch and not complicated to understand who would win, as when there are points to calculate
- Winner takes all gets away from someone having wrapped up a championship prior to the medal race.

Negative comments largely focussed on lack of fairness, devaluing a championship title, less spectacular with smaller fleets, potential randomness of the final result, consistency and performance not rewarded, going against the traditional nature of sailing.

- Unfair system that does not reward a sailor who has sailed well in a variety of conditions
- I feel the first across the line final format is terrible, and leads to a devaluing of the title of champion. I do not like the medal race either, but it is infinitely fairer than the final format.
- Turns sailing into a game of luck; may as well pick the winner out of a hat
- A sailor could win every race up to the final and miss a medal
- A format should reward a week long performance. It’s the whole reason why sailing events are held over a number of days, to mitigate the influence of luck
- Goes against the traditional feeling of fairness, on which is what our sport is based
- ‘Winner-takes-all’ in the final is grossly unfair on the sailor who has raced a consistently good regatta, building a lead in a series of races.
- Anyone in the top 15 could still win after a week’s hard racing. Is that fair?
- A fleet of 5 boats is less exciting to watch than 10
- This is a bad attempt to make sailing popular in media. Instead you take away the joy of racing from the competitors. It’s selling the soul of sailing.

**FAIRNESS**

The lack of fairness and potential randomness of the first across the line format also prompted a few comments:

- Many nations and sailor might give up sailing if they perceive the final as a lottery
- Risk factor in finals is great: the winner of all previous races, even having a 40 points advantage, can lose medal if for example a halyard breaks. That reduces fairness a lot.
- Unfair. And too much racing for all class events. Too much to follow. Reporters would be too busy to report.
- We still insist on racing far too close to the shore, if we want to showcase our sport, then flat water and shifty wind is not the correct way
- There is no reason to sail ten 75 min races if everything is decided in a 20 min race.
- If the press and public can understand that a Formula 1 driver can win the championships by coming higher than seventh in the last race of the season, they can understand the same about a sailor in a 10 race series.

One lengthy comment was, “Sailing is not like other sports in the Olympics with a winner takes all final race of the top 10. For track and field (other than decathlon) the winner takes all format works, as there
is no major influence on the podium by weather conditions through the week. Also track and other winner takes all sports have a continuous elimination throughout the event, but this is not the case with sailing. Sailing is unique as results are weather (wind, waves and current changing race to race) dependent and that plays directly into the tactics and strategy as well as the preparedness and skills of the crews involved. It is a test of the best over a number of races spanning six days. To have it come down to a winner takes all final race is a disservice to all competitors in my opinion.”

**Future**
As shown by these comments, the overriding response from the sailors was negative. The feeling expressed was that a winner-takes-all final race was too big a price to pay, it doesn’t reward consistency and can certainly punish the best sailor of the week.

In contrast, others felt that the final race format added excitement and made the racing easier to understand for non-sailors and spectators.

A much-aired view was that it is the media that should change its coverage of the sport, rather than changing the sport to ‘dumb it down’ for media and spectators.

One sailor said, “Poor coverage has led to people thinking there needs to be change, when there doesn’t. We need good commentators who knows the sailors and can explain the sport properly.”

“Rather than trying to change our race formats to suit TV and media coverage and having to race on tiny land affected medal race courses, why not use new technology such as drone photography and graphic overlay to showcase Finn sailing at its best, in big fleets on offshore courses? Stadium racing does not work and does not suit the boat - it needs wind and waves to show it at its best; racing in the lee of huge mountains does not.”

So is the format actually the problem?

Another comment, “It doesn’t matter what race format you use if the TV coverage is rubbish. Millions more people would have watched the Rio Games if we got to see the big winds, big wave courses outside of the bay. Race format will not fix this. For over 100 years we have raced boats over a series to find the best all-round sailor… how much of our sport’s soul are we willing to sell, just to make life easier for people who will never sail a boat?”

“Should there be no reward for consistency? The best sailor should win, I think we all agree on that. Isn’t that best achieved over a pretty long period of time where we can get different conditions and really put the sailors to a test? Some may say that is too boring, but look at one of the world’s biggest sports events when it comes to TV viewers, Tour the France. Lasting for a month, watching people suffer on a bike. They never say: Hey, let’s bike for shorter time in major cities. No, go to the most deserted place in France, top of Alp d’Huez. Why, because we want to see if they can do it. We want to see them being put to the test and do stuff we ordinary people can’t. We have examples in the world of sailing as well. Volvo Ocean Race and Vendee Globe. Consistency is rewarded.”

One Olympian said, “Sailing sucks live. It is really hard making sailing look good live, and somehow keeping some degree of fair racing. If we bring sailing to the crowd (the arena) the conditions will probably be lighter and shiftier in flatter waters, which is not spectacular to watch.”

“Technical development can help us here. Cameras are getting better, cheaper, lighter and smaller. Why not put them on all boats, not just top three in the last race of the Olympics. All boats, each race, all week. Then top that with two or three drones. It can’t be that hard or that expensive.”

“If the America’s Cup can do it we can dream about it. But when World Match Racing Tour, Star Sailing League and 18’ Skiff Worlds have ten times better coverage than the Olympics you start wondering what’s going on. We want graphics with speed, distance to mark and heart rate. Audio together with cameras on board; we want to get on board.”

“I would bet on that the sailing audience is the most loyal of all sports. Simply because there is so little to watch, there’s a screaming need for televised sailing. I’m sure the sailing audience want to see all races at the Olympics. I mean it’s a once-in-every-four-year chance to watch Olympic sailing on TV. But today we somehow still manage to disappoint these guys by having a live-tracker that doesn’t work and really poor coverage from the medal race.”

And, “The mainstream audience want to see their guy race. If you are from Sweden you want to see your Swedish hero race. If he is not in the televised Final the Swedish broadcaster will show something else. So why then cut the fleet to five instead of ten? Half the national broadcasters will be interested.”

In this report we have tried to reflect the feedback the class received from the survey, even if perhaps it seems a bit biased against the new formats. But, the responses against far outweighed the responses for, both in number and in length.

But the whole argument can perhaps, in this writer’s view, be summarised by one comment received. “I don’t believe it’s about the format but more about how we deliver it to the audience.”