Between a Rock and a Camera Lens

The Finn Class in Photos at the Rio 2016 Olympic Sailing Competition

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The 2016 Olympic Sailing Competition was all it was anticipated and headlined to be – and a lot more besides. The talk going into the regatta was that anything and everything could happen. It certainly lived up to that billing, but unexpectedly the whole regatta, for Finns at least, went to schedule, barring the occasional wait for the wind. Despite the early gloomy forecasts of predominantly light winds, there was a good mix of everything, light days and windy days, flat water and huge waves, sunshine and storms. No one could say the conditions favoured any one sailor in particular.

Sailors spent longer training at the venue than at any previous Olympics, many starting three years previously to familiarise themselves with the conditions and many based themselves there for protracted periods to get to grips with Rio’s idiosyncrasies. Most were fully aware it wouldn’t take much for everything to go horribly wrong for them.

Before the start of racing, what all the sailors were saying, whatever their past results would otherwise indicate, was that this would be an Olympics where past form meant very little. They all knew these Games would be very tough to manage, and very difficult to predict, and to win you had to be the best all round sailor - and perhaps a little lucky.

The fleet of 23 sailors included two former medalists from London 2012 – Jonas Høgh-Christensen and Jonathan Lobert,
the European Champion Pieter-Jan Postma, and the four-time World Champion Giles Scott, who was the absolute favourite to take gold, having won all but two regattas over the previous three years. Scott didn’t make it easy on himself with a number of uncharacteristic errors, but by the end of the week he was never going to be beaten for gold. The venue proved tricky and unpredictable, catching him out on a number of occasions, most notably in the opening race when he had a fight on just to finish 17th. After that it was sublime sailing for the four-time world champion, with just one more race outside the top 10, and eight times in the top three. Even if all the predictions were for him to win, it was still a surprise, even to him, that he managed to achieve it in quite the manner he did. Perhaps this is an accurate reflection of Scott’s calm and casual style: no stress, no drama, just get the job done in the most efficient way.

Vasilij Žbogar’s dream was to end his remarkable Olympic career with a third medal, after a silver bronze medals in the Laser class. He was the oldest Finn sailor in Rio and felt the demands of Rio on his body more than most of the fleet, but his experience paid off and the silver medal was a fitting reward for the effort he has put in over six years in the class. He put in one of his best ever performances, consistent in the light winds and just hanging on in the breeze to minimise the points. His reaction at winning silver was priceless – disbelief mixed with delight.

Compared to the other two medalists, Caleb Paine had an inconsistent week, dramatically survived a potentially decisive protest, and then, despite several high scores rallied towards the end of the week to put himself right back into contention for a medal. Regardless of the ups and downs he held his
The 23 Finn athletes in Rio were the youngest, fittest, strongest and tallest group of Finn sailors ever assembled at an Olympic Games. The line-up included seven former World or European Champions, six former Junior Champions and four former Olympic medalists (two in the Finn, one in the Star and one in the Laser).

Of the 23, just seven were sailing their first Olympics, seven were sailing their second, five were sailing their third, two were sailing their fourth and two were sailing their fifth: Vasilij Žbogar and Allan Julie. Facundo Olezza was the youngest at 21, while Žbogar was the oldest at 40, while the average age was 29, down one year from London 2012. The sailors ranged from 88 to 102 kg in weight and from 1.81 to 2.04 metres in height.

Looking at it qualitatively, based on earlier performance, about 10-12 sailors could be said to have had the capacity to medal, and around 18-20 had performed well enough to make the Medal Race. In spite of all the form predictions, several favourites failed to perform and the final results paints an interesting picture of diverse conditions and inconsistency.
The opening day was a day in which many of the favourites saw a different end of the fleet than expected. Sailed under the Sugarloaf mountain it was always going to be the hardest day of the week, but no one expected it to be as hard as it was. It was a day full of shocks as the fleet suffered 40 degree shifts and pressure changes that mixed the order on almost every leg.

The youngest sailor, Facundo Olezza won the first race, while the oldest sailor, Vasilij Žbogar won the second. Alican Kaynar was the early leader in Race 1 before Deniss Karpak took the lead downwind after a huge shift turned the first run into a reach. Olezza was next in the lead on the following downwind to lead through to the finish from Kaynar and Žbogar.
Racing off Niterói on the ocean, the Finn fleet excelled in the huge waves and big winds. Giles Scott put his worries first day behind him to win the day and move into the overall lead. The conditions were full on. With a persistent rain, a strong, cold wind, and big, breaking waves catching out the unwary, the lights along Copacabana shone brightly through the murk. It was definitely not the Rio in the brochure, but the Finn sailors loved it all the same. Ioannis Mitakis led round the top mark in the first race of the day after some confusion in the bad visibility over the marks. Zsombor Berecz took the lead downwind, but then Jonathan Lobert, who had rounded third, moved ahead on the second upwind to lead into the finish from Scott and Mitakis. Four sailors later requested redress after heading to the wrong set of windward marks, but to no avail.

“It was incredibly windy, top end that we would be racing in. 20-25 knots, big seas, made for really full on racing, but to come away with a second and a first is a lot more pleasing than my day yesterday.”

– Giles Scott
“I think the four races so far show two things, the level of the fleet and how difficult the conditions are here...it’s tough as everyone is on peak form and racing really well. That provides its challenges but it’s really enjoyable.”
– Jake Lilley

“It was a nice breeze for the Finns. I had two really good races. Normally I am not in the top three in these conditions but I knew that I had good speed, so I knew I had to have good starts and then you are out of the pack.”
– Ioannis Mitakis
Giles Scott went one better in Race 4, to lead at every mark to win by 50 seconds. Ioannis Mitakis again produced an outstanding performance in the challenging conditions to cross second, while Caleb Paine made up for a poor first race with a third place finish. After all that, Scott took the lead, Vasilij Žbogar dropped to second, and Alican Kaynar dropped one place to third.

“I didn’t really have my best groove on and got a little bit of the phasing wrong early in both races but managed to grind away and get two keepers.”

– Jake Lilley
The third day was a spectacular day of sailing with big winds, huge seas and even bigger stakes.

A change to the schedule to put the fleet on the Copacabana course area outside the bay. With the wind pushing past 25 knots, and 2 to 3 metres waves, on an even larger swell coming down the course, it was no day to be shy. Giles Scott moved into an 11-point lead with Vasiliy Žbogar fighting hard to hang onto second. Zsombor Berecz moved up the fleet to third after a great day.

In the first race, Jorge Zarif knew where he was going and led round the top mark from the right corner. But Berecz was not far behind and took the lead on the second upwind to take the win from Zarif and Tapio Nirkko. Scott made a crucial mistake and was too far back to catch the leaders.

"...the greatest day in my sailing career. I can’t be happier than this. I was a bit disappointed in the morning when they moved us from the inside course to the outside. We knew it would be windy and choppy again today as we expected more wind and bigger waves. But as we were on Copacabana we only had the waves coming from one direction so it was more manageable than yesterday. I had a great first race. We had a plan. We executed it, and it worked, because I won the race."

– Zsombor Berecz
“I think the secret today was to find a good line to cross to the right and I had a good line and good boat speed and I was lucky to cross fully to the right. And that’s it. Less current, and more wind. And then in the second one I tried to tack as soon as could after the start, but I was too late already.”

– Jorge Zarif
"It was great to be able to go out and enjoy that race today. Winning four World Championships is great, but this is one that everyone wants and everyone remembers, so now to have an Olympic gold is a great feeling."

– Giles Scott
FROM START TO FINISH, THE RIO 2016 OLYMPIC SAILING COMPETITION WAS A FEAST FOR THE EYES, WITH SOME OF THE MOST DRAMATIC SAILING EVER PHOTOGRAPHED, ALL SET AGAINST SOME OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR SCENERY ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.

IN THIS COLLECTION OF PHOTOS, THE REMARKABLE BACKDROPS OF CORCOVADO, SUGARLOAF, COPACABANA, NITEROI AND RIO DE JANEIRO PROVIDE SOME MAGNIFICENT BACKGROUNDS TO THE EPIC STRUGGLE BEING PLAYED OUT ON THE WATER BY THE 23 FINN SAILORS COMPETING FOR THE ULTIMATE PRIZE OF OLYMPIC GOLD.

THIS UNIQUE BOOK COVERS THE ENTIRE RIO 2016 COMPETITION FOR THE FINN CLASS IN A RACE BY RACE ANALYSIS IN PHOTOS, COMPLEMENTED BY THE DAILY THOUGHTS OF THE SAILORS.