

FOREVER AN OPTIMIST

The Optimist is the undisputed proving ground of Olympic champions, but with over 200,000 boats worldwide also appeals to a huge range of sailors – **Georgie Corlett** turns the spotlight on a very small boat with a very big following ▶



Little boat, **BIG NUMBERS**

1947 designed

2.31m LOA

2,500 regular sailors in the UK

200,000 boats worldwide

120 countries with fleets

1,055 sailors at the 2012 worlds

20 out of 24 medallists at 2012

Olympics were former Oppie sailors





ABOVE Milo Gill-Taylor on his way to winning the 2013 Nationals

To a casual observer, the Optimist's modest proportions and boxy design belie its international appeal. Yet this dinky dinghy has enjoyed phenomenal success in its 67 years, with more than 150,000 boats registered. It's the boat that has offered countless world, Olympic and America's Cup champions their first taste of the sport.

At the 2012 London Olympics no less than 80 per cent of the 200-plus sailing competitors had begun their

Sailing for life

It might have been designed in 1947, but the Optimist class is all about the future. In the UK the class association has formulated a five-year plan aiming to boost numbers and, ultimately, increase involvement in sailing. In a class which already saw 499 boats at the 2013 nationals, it may not seem as though the Optimist fleet needs boosting – 300-plus volunteers and 60-plus RIBs are already needed to host an event of such an enormous scale. But as Simon Rogers, chairman

that, whatever other classes our sailors may go on to sail.' Ultimately, the focus of IOCA is to give as many young people as possible the chance to do as much sailing as possible, at all levels, from messing about in a boat to representing their country.

National coach, Alan Williams, adds: 'It's not just about the here and now, it's about taking a longer term view. It's about developing basic boat handling, the ability to sail faster, and understanding rules and tactics, but most importantly for the sailors it's about understanding themselves.'

Much of this is born through the opportunities the class provides. Olympic 470 women's silver medallist Hannah Mills was the first ever girl to win the UK Optimist nationals in 2001, and in 2003 she was first girl and fifth overall at the worlds, Britain's best ever result. Looking back she says: 'The Optimist class for me was, as I'm sure it was for many other sailors, instrumental in my love for the sport then and today. The balance between pushing yourself as hard as you can and the social element of the class is what I loved, especially at that age.'

'The tactical close racing in a huge fleet as well as the many opportunities to race abroad, means from a young age you have the excitement of international

Sir Ben Ainslie is proud of his Oppie roots, yet in four attempts he never won the Optimist worlds

career in the class, with an alumni list that includes Ben Ainslie, Iain Percy, Sarah Ayton, Hannah Mills, Dean Barker... The humble 'Oppie' is a unique boat which has, for generations, been loved by kids of all ages and all abilities.

of the International Optimist Class Association (UK) explains, the plan extends well beyond the class itself.

'Our main objective is to develop a lifelong passion for sailing,' says Simon. 'Hopefully Optimist sailing is just the beginning of a long pathway towards

competition as well as (probably without really realising it!) the basis from which all your future sailing will come from.'

Following in the footsteps of Hannah and her Team GBR teammates is the dream for many young Optimist sailors, but the IOCA believes that, whatever level any individual achieves, setting the standard high from the outset ensures a good grounding for a lifetime in the sport. Coupled with that is a pragmatic realism that's designed to safeguard against too much pressure at too young an age.

Class development officer Michelle Gent says: 'Just because a sailor hasn't made it to the top in the Optimist class doesn't mean they're not going to make it to the top.'

'Conversely, just because they have made it to the top in the Optimist class doesn't mean they're going to continue being at the top beyond that. We have a system that works for producing really good sailors. It's important that our sailors – and their parents – understand that you don't have to be at the top of that system to be really good sailor.' As an example, Sir Ben Ainslie is proud of his Oppie roots, yet in four attempts he never won the Optimist worlds.

That said, Ben did convincingly take the title at the 1992 nationals, at the age of 15 – the maximum age at which sailors can compete. At worlds level, approximately 80 per cent of sailors fall into the 14-15-years age bracket, but the class is sailed from the age of eight, sometimes even younger.

Hence it's imperative to keep the emphasis on the enjoyment of sailing. 'The most important thing has to be fun,' says Michelle. 'It's encouraging children to enjoy their sailing, because we're trying to convert sailors for life;

it's not just about Optimists. We're looking always at the bigger picture.'

The concept of racing is introduced through impromptu point-to-point races. Progression quickly follows, even amongst reluctant racers. From handfuls of Haribo to a coveted national squad place, there are incentives at every stage. 'The transparency of progression also continues beyond the class; one thing we are doing a lot more of is showing children what happens to those who leave Oppies and move on to other classes,' adds Michelle.

Onwards and upwards

Talking to parents in the class, there's a sense it operates as a conveyor belt, transitioning children onwards and upwards. There's a comprehensive support structure to nurture each child and help them fulfil their potential. For the past 15 or so years, a class specific logbook and certificate scheme guides newcomers through the basics, with mum and dad or a club instructor able to sign off each step.

Once they reach major championships, there's still a lot of hand holding to be done. Of the five fleets at the nationals, three are known as 'Regatta Fleets', where the focus is firmly on learning to race in a fun and friendly environment; the most junior fleet offers an incredible 1:6 coach to sailor ratio – with coaches often recent ex-Oppie sailors.

In a class that is so very transitional by its nature, the amount of time that kids – and parents – spend at the top of the class is limited to a year or two at most. As a result, knowledge easily passes out of the class, and this can leave big holes, particularly at the intermediate levels.

Part of IOCA's five year plan is to tackle this issue. Simon says:

Lessons learned

Thirteen-year-old Hattie Rogers is the current girl's UK senior national champion, having finished seventh overall at last year's nationals. She describes her early Oppie experiences: 'I started competing aged nine at the inlands, in the Regatta fleet. I remember it was great fun but really windy and tiring, blowing about 30 knots. When you are little, you are very light so that makes it quite hard plus there are the challenges of getting over the big waves. And learning to sail against big fleets, that's hard too.'

Hattie has since gone on to qualify for the National Squad at the age of 11, with a little help from her all-time hero Sir Ben Ainslie, who often takes time out to pay a visit to Oppie events. 'I remember he told me about the "reset button"; learning to press that has been another big challenge. It means if you are having a bad race you can wipe it and go onto the next one. I've applied that advice on many occasions! I have also learned from experience not to get distracted – and to hike, hard!'

For Hattie, success at national level has brought the chance to sail around the world. But ultimately, what holds most appeal is the opportunity simply to make friends, whether on or off the water. Hattie says: 'The Oppie fleet is really competitive because there are so many boats. The atmosphere is incredible and the friends you meet are amazing. My advice to new sailors would be to make lots of friends and enjoy the experience because you've only got it until you're 15!'

'Historically, committee members have focussed on the top of the fleet because that's where their kids have been. What we have done over the past three years is to push down towards the bottom end of the fleet and really nurture and develop kids at that level.'

'Typically, if you get three keen families together at a club, it generally means there is always someone on site who knows what they're doing. We want to support them further and develop more 'flotillas' (club fleets). If, for example, we get six new members at a flotilla we will supply a specialist Optimist coach for a day free of charge.'

Michelle adds: 'Parents learn from the coaches as much as the children. When the coach goes, that knowledge is still there; it keeps the learning curve steep, and helps children to enjoy their sailing.' From there, 'vertical training' kicks in, where sailors involved in RYA zone squad training are actively encouraged to sail alongside their fellow club sailors at home, in order to share knowledge.

Of the 2,500 estimated children regularly sailing Oppies in the UK, only around 550 are members of IOCA. Setting aside the natural attrition rate of a youth class Simon hopes to see membership grow by 10 per cent in the next two to three years.

LEFT There are around 2,500 Oppie sailors in the UK, 499 of which competed at last year's nationals



PHOTO: PAUL WYETH

Youth sailing

RIGHT It's a versatile boat that gives young beginners confidence, yet is still able to challenge more experienced and older sailors



PHOTO: MATIAS CARZANO/PPR

Spreading the love

A current focus for expansion is the north-east of England, one of the few areas in which Oppies have traditionally been thin on the ground. At Derwent Reservoir SC, 12-year-old Ruben Stokroos has recently qualified for the North Zone Squad. He describes himself as 'the forerunner of the group'

Doing it for the kids

For mums and dads seeing the enjoyment and benefits their children gain from sailing in the class, at every level, is incentive for weekends spent hauling trolleys up slipways and watching from the sidelines. Michelle says: 'In a singlehanded boat, when it goes wrong they can't pass the blame, it's down to the individual. But when it goes right, there's a sense of "I did it!" As a result of that, you can see shy children really developing and coming out of themselves.'

'The most important thing is that children are learning for themselves, whether sailing recreationally or competitively,' says Alan. 'They develop self-awareness and venture outside of their comfort zone, and in doing so they find their own strategies for coping with pressure.'

And it's not just the kids who learn from the experience, as Alan points out: 'No-one ever prepares mums and dads to be perfect parents, or tells them how they should feel and cope with their child's successes and disappointments. We work hard to help parents take a longer term view, and realise it's not all about what happens in any one race. Much the same as with the children, we encourage them to react in a balanced way.'

and will this year be joined by six or seven of his friends as he embarks on the national circuit for his second year.

Dad Jelle explains that the Oppie fleet at DWSC has grown steadily in the last couple of years, alongside the club's current fleet of RS Teras. Sailors have quickly progressed from games of capture the flag and rigging stick races, to competing at the local North East Travellers Circuit. This year they have the loan of a six-boat trailer from IOCA to take sailors more easily to events further afield.

Ruben comments, 'It means a lot to me having been selected for the Zone Squad and I am really looking forward to seeing how much I move on during the training. One of my biggest challenges at events is that I am still not used to the size of the fleets and I get incredibly nervous at times. But I am learning that you will always get bad races at events and that's why you get the discards!'

A boost to funding has seen the IOCA introduce an invitational Development Squad, intended to accommodate up to 24 talented sailors who have not qualified for the (RYA-funded) national or intermediate squads, and support is also in place for those venturing to overseas events for the first time from coach Alan Williams. Simon says:

'We are trying to break down barriers for kids and parents that might not otherwise do these events, and make it easier. If they've done it once or twice, they are much more likely to make the leap and do it off their own back.'

World stage

International competitions are integral to the Optimist class – no surprise when you consider that the class is sailed in over 120 countries. The class boasts two Guinness World Records: one for having the highest number of nations competing in a world championship (59); the other for the largest single class regatta, when 1,051 sailors from 27 countries competed at the 2012 worlds at Lake Garda.

In order to broaden participation as far as possible, the worlds and Europeans entry requirements prevent the same sailors entering both events the same year, with the exception of the previous year's European champions.

The opportunity for international competition is unmatched in any other youth class and undoubtedly helps produce champions on the world stage later down the line. Right now, British attendance is increasing at international events and in 2013 Brits clocked up top three results at the



and building confidence, it was the perfect introductory craft.

In that sense, little has changed. But as Ruben says: 'You can never learn everything about Optimists; there's never an end to it! That's why it's a great class to sail.' Alan Williams explains: 'On any given startline you can have nine-year-olds going up against 15-year-olds. That's a big age and experience difference, but they are still competing on equal terms, as there are plenty of rig options to choose from, depending on your size.'

Ian Harris, IOCA technical officer, adds: 'The Optimist rigs are exceptional now, the sails highly developed. There are many intricacies to the sails born

halyards taking some serious loading that bend the tough alloy masts surprisingly. Of course this challenges the boat's balance, but the children are taught how to set their mast rake to compensate, or they learn through their mistakes! Sailing in strong winds, daggerboard up a little and sprit halyard off takes away the excess power; it really is simple and effective as long as you know how!'

Globally, there are some 30 boat builders over five continents producing approximately 4,000 new Optimists per year. In 1995, a series of regulations were put in place to ensure the class remained a one-design in order to regulate quality and prevent

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Hannah Mills

Trophy, Belgian and Irish Nationals, and Mussanah Race Week. For the very first time, they also won a medal at the Optimist World team racing event.

So, what is the top nation in the Optimist currently? It's a tough question. Undoubtedly the Singaporeans are dominating at the moment but, in such a huge and rapidly changing class, it's hard to pin down. 'Things tend to be very cyclical,' comments Simon, 'We are beginning to climb that ladder. Last year's world's sailors – including Milo Gill Taylor (current UK national champion), Max Clapp, and Robbie King – were among some of the best sailors we have fielded in the last 10 years. A lot of people are feeling that the British sailors are a threat.'

Seventy years young

So, just what is it that attracts children worldwide? When American Clark Mills designed the pram-hulled, sprit-rigged Optimist in 1947 – at the request of the local 'Optimist' businessmen's club – he was fulfilling a brief to build a simple, low-cost children's dinghy. The result was a boat that's straightforward to assemble, easy to de-power when necessary and reassuringly stable, particularly in the crucial anxious moments after righting from a capsize. For young novices learning the ropes

through the use of the sail ties, but this simple though fiddly set up really teaches the sailors – and parents – what to look for in sail set up.'

Sail design is central. Cross-cut sails are making a comeback in popularity after years of radial and tri-radial variations. Ruairidh Scott, designer for North Sails, has spent the last 18 months working with top Optimist sailors in the UK, Australia and New Zealand to develop a new range. With thousands of Oppie sails sold every year, North Sails is just one of several sailmakers vying for the prize stakes in this competitive market, alongside American-based UK Sails and Polish J Sails.

Ruairidh comments: 'Recent trends have produced sails that are easier for the sailors to use, allowing them to focus on other aspects of the race, while going fast. To date, this has been achieved by straight line speed testing, which generally creates flatter sails than is often desirable. We have worked hard to produce new sails that are easier to use in lighter winds so they don't stall as easily, and therefore require less attention to keep going fast; the sailors can concentrate on helming and looking around while the sail does its thing.'

Ian says: 'It is surprising how brutally the rigs can be set up for windy days, the kicker and sprit

super-expensive one-off specials.

All hulls now have identical lay-up and are built to within 2mm tolerances. Today, well-maintained post-1995 boats are capable of competing at the top level.

Ian says: 'Mouldings of hulls and foils are CNC controlled and of the highest quality. It's a brilliant tough and exceptional boat. Having sailed one (I'm a 15 stone OK sailor) you would be stunned at how quickly they turn and respond. There are some clever safety features to a well set up boat too, like the quick release snap shackle from main sheet to boom which make lee shores and recovery a doddle, and progress recently with Mega Step's new mast foot that automatically locks the mast into the hull when rigging to avoid the need for the mast clamp.' □

BELOW 470 Olympic medallist Hannah Mills is one of many champions who was introduced to the sport through the Optimist class



PHOTO: AMY BRADLEY-WATSON