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The rookie and the veteran

Pontus Gäbel talks to Niklas Edlar and Charlie Cumbley

Many OK sailors had been waiting for the big regattas after years of restrictions, so Marstrand provided a glorious venue for international racing to make a comeback. It is known for its natural beauty and for sometimes challenging conditions where the wind, waves and currents can play tricks with the best of minds. Marstrand also comes with the mystique and history where many of the world's best sailors have battled it out. Previously, the 1972 OK Worlds were held here with 75 participants, making it one of the premier one-design racing stages just like Kiel, Newport, Cowes and Sydney.

Charlie, congratulations on winning the Worlds. You had come close before; just how often did you narrowly miss the top of the podium?

CHARLIE: Finally - in the 2015 Worlds I capsized and broke the centreboard and finished second. In 2016 I was leading the Medemblik Europeans going into the last day when I

“ I HAD THE PLEASURE OF MEETING WITH CHARLIE CUMBLEY AND NIKLAS EDLAR A FEW WEEKS AFTER THE 2022 WORLDS ON MARSTRAND AND HEAR THEIR REFLECTIONS AND LEARNINGS FROM THE FIVE DAYS OF INTENSE RACING. INTERESTINGLY, CHARLIE IS AN OK DINGHY VETERAN AT THE YOUNG AGE OF 41, WHO HAS BEEN IN CONTENTION FOR ONE OF THE COVETED TITLES SINCE HIS DEBUT IN 2015. NIKLAS ON THE OTHER HAND WAS THE ROOKIE ENTERING HIS FIRST WORLDS IN THE OK CLASS AT THE TENDER AGE OF 50. NEITHER ONE OF THEM ARE NEW TO SINGLEHANDED DINGHY RACING, BUT BRING A WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE TO THE CLASS, AND ARE BOTH SOFT SPOKEN AND OUTSTANDING SPORTSMEN. ”

PONTUS GÄBEL

broke my rudder, which was followed by a third in the Worlds in France the same year and two second place finishes in the 2017 and the 2018 Europeans. Back home in England I learnt that winning in Marstrand comes with a special admiration from other sailors.

Niklas congratulations being the runner up in your rookie Worlds. What were your goals going into the regatta?

NIKLAS: I wanted to be in the contention and do well, but I did not know how I compared. The Nordics in Varberg earlier in the season was an indicator that I was on the right “tack”, where I finished second. My ambition going into the Worlds was to finish in the top 10 and be in the contention for a top 5 finish. A place on the podium was a stretch. So, finishing second was great.

QUICK FACTS ON NIKLAS

When did you start sailing?

I was about 6 or 7 years old, and my sister got me into the Optimist

What was your first regatta?

It was the club championships at my local club in Bjärred, south of Sweden

How did you finish?

I was last, but I got a prize!

Did you have any idols in sailing when you grew up?

All the older sailors in the club sailing the nationals and the big regattas. Later also Kent Carlsson, who sailed the Finn and the Star in the Olympics. He also helped me with rig and sails when I sailed the Europe.

Where other classes have you raced before the OK?

Europe, Laser/ILCA, Star and a few more.

When did you start sailing the OK?

I bought my boat OK in 2018 and had it delivered in 2019. The 2019 Swedish nationals on Marstrand was my first regatta.





How did you find the sailing conditions in Marstrand?

CHARLIE: The day I arrived I went out sailing with Thomas Hansson-Mild in good sized waves and 16-18 knots of wind and I improved a lot in those few intense hours. When the Worlds started it was lighter and it suited me as I had not practiced as much as I had planned. There was shifting current over the racecourse, but nothing unusual for someone who sails on the Solent. The big fleet is a beast in itself.

NIKLAS: It is always challenging with a big and strong fleet. The big fleet and the long starting line set the scene for the first upwind leg, and you really must get it right to be in contention. There are no passing lanes if you get it wrong. The fjord of Marstrand is always challenging with the combination of waves, wind and currents that vary across the racecourse and over the day.

What was the key in finding your race pace at the Worlds?

NIKLAS: I had a good and proven setup: Ovington hull, C-Tech mast. I had been training with both Green Sails and North Sails, with good result and decided to go for Green at the Worlds. I knew I was reasonably fast in all conditions, and I could focus on the tactics and driving the boat. It gave me confidence. I always want to be well prepared physically to be sure to cope with all conditions and to have perseverance during the whole regatta.



CHARLIE: The OK rewards accuracy in the trim and steering; as the week progressed, I improved.

Niklas, what was your strategy?

I wanted to go out early and get an understanding of the situation and start at the favoured end and place on the line. I prefer to start close (10-30 metres) to the pin end or the starting vessel to find a good lane with clean air and make sure I was close to the starting line. This is also how I executed. At one time I felt that I was lacking a bit of bite upwind. Thomas Hansson-Mild suggested that I drop the mast back a bit and that got me back on track with more confidence.

QUICK FACTS ON CHARLIE

When did you start sailing?

I was about 7 years old when I joined my parents on their small keelboat. They sailed and raced around where we lived in Southwest England. I did not go down the Optimist track but sailed what was available at the club. Believe I started in the Mirror and then on to the 420, until I got too big.

What was your first regatta?

I was 15 or 16 and a sailor in my club let me borrow his Finn. My mum drove me there and I got some quick coaching from the other sailors before setting off.

How did you finish?

I think I was ok, mid fleet, not last!

Did you have any idols in sailing when you grew up?

Iain Percy is only a few years older than I am. We met at the Finn regattas, and he was always happy to share and explain.

What other classes do you race?

I'm active in the J70 and the Etchells

When did you start sailing the OK?

I borrowed a boat from Nick Craig to sail the Nationals on Mersea Island in 2015 as a one-off. In 2016 I bought my own OK.



Charlie, you have sailed a few Worlds and Europeans, how did you plan for this event?

I wanted to get as many single digits finishes as possible and avoid horror shows. I had done little sailing in the OK this year, the competition was strong, and my boat handling was a bit rusty. I avoided tight spots and tried to get into open positions where I could decide where I want to go. It worked!

What were your thoughts on the type of sail that would do well on the waters outside Marstrand? Charlie you are also a sail maker, can you share your thoughts?

CHARLIE: I knew I needed a sail that could work in a wide range of conditions. Thomas Hansson-Mild, who also uses North sails, always wants to push the boundaries and we had developed a new version together. The design is more like a Finn sail with reasonable depth throughout the foot and belly sections and into the head providing good grunt in the light medium conditions as well as reaching, which was a key section of the World's racecourse, while still being manageable by using the Cunningham when overpowered. It turned out to be a good choice.

NIKLAS: When I started sailing the OK, I did not get the speed with the deeper sails and opted for flatter sails to feel confident. In the spring I had the chance to spend a day training in Jörgen Holm's boat against Fredrik Lööf on Lake Garda. Jörgen suggested that I try a deeper sail. This also proved to be the right choice at the Worlds.

There was only 0.4 points separating the two of you going into the last day. What were your thoughts when heading out to the racecourse and waiting for enough wind to get the start sequence going?

NIKLAS: I had good confidence, and my performance trend was on the rise. I knew I had to sail my own race. Of course, I also wanted to race on the last day.

CHARLIE: I was only 6 points ahead of Lars-Johan Brodtkorb, so there was no possibility to go out and match race. I was a bit nervous when they sent us out – what were they thinking, are we going to race in this almost non-existent wind? Niklas was sailing up and down in front of the committee boat showing it was possible to race and I was parked below the line showing that it was too light to race.

You have both sailed many different dinghies. What do you find most intriguing about the OK?

CHARLIE: I like singlehanded dinghy sailing; it's my cup of tea. You are in charge of your destiny. The OK is fun and

addictive to sail and it rewards accuracy. It's not the fastest and latest class but it still attracts a lot of good sailors.

NIKLAS: After 3 years I am still learning a lot. There are many possibilities to trim the boat and there are many good sailors that know all the tricks in the book. The OK is fascinating and one of the old classes that have been constantly updated to stay current and take advantage of the new materials. The carbon masts make it great to sail. The boat is developed for the right reasons and not for conserving how it once was.

How can we keep the OK class strong and thriving?

NIKLAS: The base in the class is very important. Well organised local regattas and challenging bigger events at nice venues to aim for make the training sessions easier to motivate when the rain drizzles. We have had a few sessions where we invited a coach to work with us. This spring we had Wilma Bobeck who recently finished second at the 49erFX Worlds. It is possible for everyone to learn more and invite other sailors to test the OK Dinghy.

CHARLIE: Well written race reports, captivating photos and easy to access information that reaches all sailors. Good venues where sailors want to race is a great attraction for the class. Having good kit from reputable suppliers makes it easier to start in the class. There have been great developments in the last years.

Where do you see the new sailors coming from, what classes?

CHARLIE: It is the same challenge in all classes, we are not unique. Finn, Laser/ILCA and Solos sailors are curious to try it out. Even more important is to have good venues.

NIKLAS: I have a few friends that sail the Laser who are curious and may be interested. We must agree that it's not the youth sailors that will be attracted, but rather the ones that are a "bit" older.

POSTSCRIPT

At the end of the interview, we had a chance to reflect on how sailing and racing is a big part of our lives and how it has shaped who we are. We remembered how we started sailing and shared our stories. Charlie's short speech at the awards ceremony in Marstrand was moving as he shared why he has GBR 6 on his sail. It is a tribute to the late Andrew "Bart" Simpson who had the same sail number on his Finn when they were both competing in that class. I had the benefit of spending time with Bart leading up to the 2012 Olympics when he was crewing for Ian Percy and unselfishly shared his knowledge of how to be the best crew in a Star. At that time, I was sailing the Star with my long-time friend Tomas Franzen (SWE 58) who also sailed in the 2022 Worlds. Niklas shared that on the third day of racing he was met by a large group of older sailors on the water after the finish, some of them OK sailors. They were in Marstrand to revisit the venue where they had sailed the Worlds in 1972. Niklas frequently meets some of them on the dock at his home waters outside Stockholm. As a bonus, Niklas turned 50 during the Worlds, 50 years after it was last raced on the challenging Marstrand waters. We have come full circle as we are all making the OK equally challenging and rewarding to sail now and in the next 50 years.