

# **The O'Tiarnaigh Topper Challenge**

This weekend past was our inaugural Topper Challenge event at Donaghadee Sailing Club and what a weekend we had!

The event was the brainchild of Stuart Ogg and came from a concept first started by Ruan O'Tiarnaigh and his late father, Riocard O'Tiarnaigh, hence we have decided to name it the O'Tiarnaigh Topper Challenge.

On arrival sailors were divided into eight randomly selected flights and we also had a 4.2 flight. Ruan led a very detailed briefing which helped build the anticipation over this new style of racing.

Once afloat there was little respite for the fleet or indeed the race committee as 50 races in total were completed by the end of the day. Race duration was approximately 10 minutes each. A huge swell and light to moderate winds made racing conditions very tricky. Starts were particularly challenging and the day seen a total of 14 black flags recorded! Mind you there were 300 starters overall so maybe not too bad in context. Despite the abundance of races many sailors were pleading with the RO for a few more as they were all clearly enjoying themselves. The same could maybe not be said for some of the recording committee as they were clearly feeling the effects of the persistent sea swell and feeling a little off colour to say the least!

To round off a fantastic first day we had a visit from RYA Performance Officer and former Olympian, Matt McGovern. Matt was there to chat to transitioning sailors about the 29er. Thank you to Erin McIlwaine who kindly brought along her 29er and let some of her sailing friends have a try out in it with her. It was a beautiful evening to try the 29er for the first time and I think a few parents got their ears bent that evening regarding the purchasing of one!

Day 2 and the sun shone bright once again and to our delight every sailor had returned. Sailors were given another short briefing as the format was slightly revised for this second stage. This next stage was named the 'Elimination' round. Sailors were informed that after 5 races the fleets would be cut to just 4 remaining sailors in each and 2 only in the 4.2 sail. They were divided into Gold, Silver and Bronze fleets according to their results from day 1. Each fleet was then divided into four different flights which were determined by the sailors picking random ribbons from the pot. 4.2s remained the same.

At this stage a big thank you must go out to our beach master James and his team as launching, particularly on day 2 was no mean feat with such a huge swell rolling to shore. Thank you also to some of the parents who ended up getting wet for the cause too.

The sailors had definitely learnt a lot from the black flags dished out on day 1 as there were some fantastic starts this time round with only a few black flags having to

be issued. Our RO was particularly impressed with the gold fleet starts and urged some of the new sailors to take note in a short debrief afterwards.

After 6 races the RO and his results assistant had to retire to shore to collate this latest set of results as she was now feeling the effects of the swell too!

They arrived back afloat to many eager faces waiting to find out if they had made the 'cut'!

Finalists announced, it was time to get down to the business side of the weekend and 3 more races followed for each fleet (2 for 4.2s). Fortunately the RO managed to just about finish all the racing before the wind disappeared. So after a total of 96 races the weekend was done and a very tired bunch of sailors and an equally drained race committee headed to shore to discover the final results.

A glorious evening of sunshine meant that the prize giving was held in DSC's courtyard. RYA NI Chairperson, Jackie Patton kindly joined us and gave a lovely speech to all the sailors, encouraging them to never give up sailing and to enjoy every minute of it.

Congratulations to our very first Topper Challenge winner, Hugh O'Connor of National Yacht Club. Hugh put in some fantastic performances all weekend with a total of 16 bullets, a well deserved win Hugh. Congratulations to all of our other prize winners (full results will be posted shortly) and every single sailor who sailed their hearts out this weekend.

Thank you to Donaghadee Sailing Club for hosting such a great event and to Stuart Ogg who organised it all. Thank you to RO Ruan O'Tiarnaigh for excellent race management and to all his race committee onboard start boat and finish boat. A special mention to 'Radio Katie' for keeping all the competitors up to speed on the race course via the tannoy system, even the spectators ashore enjoyed her commentary. Thank you to all the rescue crews, the beach team, catering team and all the many other volunteers onshore who helped to make this event happen.

So I think it is safe to round things off by saying that the O'Tiarnaigh Topper Challenge was an overwhelming success! The concept is exciting and unpredictable and ultimately a huge amount of fun. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves and I look forward to this event becoming an annual fixture on the ITCA IRL calendar. Some of us may even briefly come out of our impending ITCA IRL retirement to help out at future events!

Nicola Williamson