

## **How we saved the fireball worlds**

This August my brother Tim and I attended the 2005 World Fireball Championship in Teignmouth, Devon.

Initially things did not go quite according to plan. We had left Newhaven at the insane hour of 6 a.m. in order to beat the traffic that was sure to develop on the way to Teignmouth. All was going swimmingly until, just past Wimbourne on the A31, a suspicious sound came from the engine of Julia's Land Cruiser and then there was a cry from Tim, "I have no control!". The timing belt had gone, and we knew this, not because of any uncanny ability with engines, but because a red light appeared on the dashboard saying "Timing Belt". We looked for a layby but all we could see were walls and just came to a gentle stop in the middle of the A31. I called the AA immediately and was told someone would come in a hour or so. An hour! By that time the Mother of all traffic jams would tailing back all the way though the New Forest. Already there was a sizeable queue developing. Then, amazingly, a car that overtook us stopped, bucking the trend of screaming on by hooting irritatedly. They were towing a fireball! Fellow fireballers had come to our aid. I felt a deep empathy to all fireball sailors, all over the world. They unhooked their boat in a farm a few hundred yards down the road and came back to tow us down to the farm layby. What a relief to get off the A31. They were Nick and Caro. Friends already. We agonisingly went all the way back to Chichester, courtesy of the AA, to pick up Tim's old Daihatsu Jeep and then spend the next 6 hours attempting to avoid horrendous traffic via a labyrinth of B-roads on the way to Devon. We had asked Nick to tell the measurers that we were coming and not to put away their rulers.

I think the state of our boat must have generated a certain amount of shock as it lay waiting to be measured in front of the marquee. Was it possible that anybody could bring an such old tub like that down and expect to compete with the world's best? We in turn were shocked to find that the beach master, our first contact with officialdom at Teignmouth, was not the measurer and that measuring the boat did not just involve checking that it was approximately 16 ft long. A team of at least 6 measurers in smart Holt uniforms were poring over every nook and cranny each fireball checking numbers against a list three pages long. We went off to have a cup of tea. In the meantime, somebody called Richard had taken pity on us and in our absence had shepherded Fernando, our fireball, through the process. In fact the next morning, Richard showed us how to properly rig and tune our boat getting rid of in the process a mainsheet "fit for a battleship warp", jib and spinnaker sheets as well as horrible almost useless jib cleats. In their place were new proper ropes. I was especially pleased with the jib sheet since it now had a fancy bobble on the end which made attaching the sheet to the clew a piece of cake. Tim's homemade main jammer was considered a laudable effort but unlikely to make it through the first race.

### **Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> - Race 1**

The other NSSC entrants, Steve and Sam Duncan, were unfortunately not sailing today since Sam had hurt her knee in the Nationals the week before. So, for now at least, it was up to us to uphold the honour of the Club. I finished off rigging the boat and making

adjustments (like shortening the trapeze wires by 10 inches) and generally getting to know the mobile chandlery man Steve. Tim went to the 10:30 briefing. The race was to start at 1:00 pm and we were to get on the water by noon. It took about 30 minutes to get to the race area, even in the force 4 that was blowing from the North, and the 170 or so boats took nearly an hour to launch and get there. We had been told that this was the largest ever fireball fleet, and there really were a lot of them about. Although the water had been smooth by the shore, three miles out at sea it was quite choppy and the wind was stronger, 4-5, and quite gusty. The start time passed without any guns or flags from the committee boat and it seemed that the starters hadn't quite got their act together. After an hour of sailing around in reasonably challenging conditions the committee boat then began to move, with its occupants faffing about with the anchor. After another hour of sailing around getting tired and cold, during which time we managed to capsize twice, the start sequence gun went off. Finally. Even though the start line was a big one there was little room for 170 fireballs and everyone had to be extra-vigilante to avoid collisions. By the one minute gun all the proper sailors were luffed up on the line and so we tried to do the same. Then off we went. Then we all came back. A General Recall. After an incredible 30 minutes more waiting we started again, only to be recalled again. A black flag start was now indicated which means that anybody over the line would be shot, or at the very least disqualified. At last we got off cleanly and in no time half the fleet was several hundred metres ahead of us and we were now in a lot of dirty wind. The windward mark was so far away it was very hard to make out. This was to be by far the biggest course I had ever sailed. Then Tim complained that there was something wrong with the rudder and that the top pintle was pulling out. We would have to retire. Unbelievable. As a guard boat towed us in we were treated to the frustrating but beautiful sight of scores of fireballs strung out on the next leg with their multicoloured spinnakers up.

Steve in the chandlery, after looking in his box of rudder parts for a top pintle saying ruefully "I really thought I had one", amazingly did find one in the back of his van. "Its only a two screw one though" he said, looking like he might refuse to sell it to us on account of safety or class rules (section III, part 2a, Top rudder pintles must be of the 4 screw type). Tim told him that 2 would be fine, and rushed back to put it on Fernando. Initially we were flummoxed by how to get the old one off completely since we couldn't see a hatch cover for the rear compartment. Tim was just about to crudely cut a hole in the transom when I spotted the hatch cover on the outside of the rear compartment. What a stroke of luck. We did the repair and put the rudder back on, which now required the strength of Hercules since the bottom pintle was slightly bent. Back on the beach we discovered that the main halyard had disappeared up the mast, something that we fiercely blamed on each other. All was not lost because we had learned a cunning trick off Rupert and Chris: we took out the halyard completely, pulled up the main by hand, and tied it off directly at the mast head. Ingenious. At our request, a Worlds official on the beach radioed the Committee boat to find out when the next race was going to begin. Fifteen minutes. It would be close.

## Race 2

We rushed out onto the water, threw up the spinnaker, and sailed like demons for the start area. We were only a few minutes away when the fireballs began to ominously cluster

around the start line. Then we heard a start gun. It was too cruel. But no! A general recall! We were saved! Tim said that he would never complain about the starter again (later to be proved not true). We got to the first mark in about 150 place and then dithered about whether or not to put the spinnaker up. Due to the gusts and the fact that it was a tight reach, boats with kites up were capsizing all about us. We chickened out (although we would almost certainly have capsized with the spinnaker up) and put it up on the next leg which was a broad reach. What was shocking was how far ahead the leading boats were already. I could see a group of about 10 that had pulled away from the rest and already on the sausage.

When we finished there were about 20 boats behind us, which was encouraging. We finally got back to shore by 8 pm! Eight hours on the water.

That night in the marquee we discovered that we had come 131<sup>st</sup>. Not bad. We also found out that Rupert and Chris were the National Classic champions, and we attempted to gain a bit of reflected glory from that “We’re from NSSC, same club as the new Classic champions”. “Yes, they are pretty good, but we usually give them a run for their money” etc.

### Race 3 - Monday

In the morning we found Steve and Sam by their boat, spraying silicon stuff on the hull and generally tweaking. They were going to go for it today hoping that Sam’s knee would be OK. We were supposed to start at 1:00 pm but there was no wind. At 3:00 the sea breeze kicked in and we were allowed to launch. It got up to a force 4 by the time we started and this time there was no recall because it was to be black flag from now on. Tim and I opted for the least crowded end of the line, and for once got a great start actually getting to the windward mark about half way down the fleet! Remarkable. For once we were with all the shiny Winders. Then, on the beat, the new main sheet bobble came loose from its hole on the transom. The hole where the rope should tie through was blocked by the bobble and a piece of rope. It looked hopeless until I remembered that I had a knife in my smock. Tim cut the rope loose and retied the main in record time. Nevertheless, 20 or 30 boats had past us as we wallowed about. Despite this setback there were still 30 or so boats behind us at the end. All because of a good start.

Back on shore we found a dejected Steve. He had been holed before the start. The good news was that the incredible mobile chandlery was going to have it fixed by the next morning. In the marquee that evening we found that Tomas Musil and Jan Stantejsky were leading the standings and that we were a close 142<sup>nd</sup>. Nothing to worry about, there were six races to go and we were confident of a top 10 finish.

### Tuesday

Racing cancelled due to lack of wind. The sea breeze failed to materialize even though that morning the race officer reckoned he could set his watch by its arrival at 1:30. In the afternoon we pottered about the boat admiring our new main jammer that we bought the previous day to replace Tim’s, as it turned out, completely useless Heath-Robinson contraption. Then someone, another fireballer, in super-cool shades ambled up to us. “No sailing then” he said, looking wistfully across at the flags now flying robustly in the

filling sea breeze. The race officer had been a little premature we agreed. His name was Keith and he invited us over to look at his state-of-the-art Winder. We oohed and aahed and I admired the new Kevlar main rolled up on the ground. "That? Its three days old and to honest with you, its shagged out." To my untrained eye it looked a splendid piece of kit. Keith bent down and felt the sail. He grimaced and said "Nah. I wouldn't even wipe my bum on this." Tim supposed that Keith wouldn't even wipe his dog's bum on our sail, which was considerably more that a week old. We said, half joking, that we would love a brand new Winder. He took us over to an Italian boat that was for sale after the Worlds. We had a look under the cover and it looked great. "It's mint this is. A steal for seven grand, honest it is. If you're interested I know the geezer who owns it." "Look" he said as he caressed some of the fittings "All Harkened up. I'd only change this one here for a Holt. Otherwise it's mint, really sharp." Then he took us over to another Winder, which belonged to one of the top ten contenders. It too looked fabulous. "This boat's completely trashed." Clearly if we were going to get a Winder we would need some expert advice before shelling out the readies. "What do you think of our boat?" I asked. Keith was honest with us "I wouldn't give you 2 buckets of cold piss for that." At least, as Tim pointed out later, it was 2 buckets.

#### Wednesday

Lay day. A good choice since there was no wind ALL DAY.

#### Race 4 Thursday

No wind. Where was the sea breeze? A front was supposed to be arriving by 5 or 6 pm but it was already 4:30 and still nothing. Tim and I couldn't bear it any longer and pushed the boat out onto the beach. An official came over and asked us not to raise the mainsail for some unknown reason. We told him that the wind would definitely come and if we didn't launch now we would run out of time. He went off to speak to the race officer and suddenly we were all allowed to launch.

The race started at 5:30. The front had arrived and the wind was force 3 and increasing. By the windward mark it was a good force 4 gusting 5 and there was wild confusion as a huge melee developed around the mark. Spinnakers went up, boats went over. By the time we got onto the beat again it was force 5 gusting six and we were clearly overpowered. We did the sausage without disturbing the spinnaker since it was 5-6 now and quite choppy. In fact, almost everyone was 2-sailing the reach. On the final beat it was survival mode since it was now very windy and of course we capsized. There were many capsized fireballs, some turtle, and the ribs had their work cut out. We finished, just beating IRL13323 which we considered a tremendous mini-victory, but we still had to beat back the 3 miles to shore and if anything it was getting windier, with very nasty gusts.

In the marquee a bunch of knackered fireballers clustered around the results board to discover that Andy Smith and Jonny Mildred were in the lead. Chips Howarth and Vyv Townend were second. We were overall 145<sup>th</sup> or something. Steve and Sam, on account of their unfortunate repeated no shows, except for today's race where they finished 150<sup>th</sup>, 8 places below us, were about 160<sup>th</sup>.

There could only realistically be 2 races on Friday because the rules say that the final day's race must begin by 2:30 pm. The series, therefore, since there was definitely going to be lots of wind tomorrow, would be six races allowing only one discard.

#### Friday

Windy again, 4 gusting 5. We were on the water at 9 am and the first race started at 10 am. We had a terrible start and in truth a rubbish race. The same was true for race 2. Steve and Sam, on the other hand, did well in both races, 130 and 131. By the time we got back to the beach I had had enough sailing for a while but the week had been great fun.

So how did we save the worlds? I suppose it would be more accurate to say that we determined the identity of the winners. Because we forced race 4 to go ahead in time, there were enough races to allow a discard, and without this discard the eventual winners, Chips and Vyv, would not now be World Champions!

*Kingsley Cox*