
Sailing: Olympian's bad luck robs crown of gloss

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TIKI-ING ALONG: Luke O'Connell with the "Tiki" award after winning his third consecutive OK Dinghy Nationals title in Napier yesterday. PHOTO/Warren Buckland

By Anendra Singh

THE gloss of victory may be a few sheens lower but the silverware will still find pride of place in Luke O'Connell's lounge in Wellington.

Napier-born O'Connell, who hails from Worsler Bay Boating Club, cruised to victory at the OK Dinghy Nationals in Napier yesterday for his third successive title.

"Unfortunately Dan Slater broke his tiller on his rudder so he couldn't come back because it was shaping up to be a great race," said the 29-year-old "water-cutting" engineer and rigging retailer, who was alongside Olympian Slater when the mishap occurred in the Napier Sailing Club-hosted regatta.

"The boat just let him down but then we've all had those issues sometime or other."

The Murray's Bay Yacht Club member was a point ahead of O'Connell on Saturday night in the fleet of 30 after the pair were tied on day one with a win and a second placing each on Friday.

"It was a pretty uneventful day," lamented race organiser/sailor Rob Hengst, of Napier, as yesterday served up fickle and shifty nor'northeasterlies on a balmy 30C but cloudy day.

Hengst said had Slater stayed on the six-nautical-mile course yesterday it would have come down to the wire.

O'Connell, who was even superstitious about touching the trophy before the prizegiving ceremony

because of "bad karma", didn't find the conditions ideal for his style of racing either.

However, the former Taradale High School pupil claimed three wins, as many runner-up positions and a third place for a title-winning nine points (lowest-points scoring system) from the best of six out of seven races over three days in his vessel, Kermit's Middle Finger.

Another Napier-born and home club-groomed sailor, Ben Morrison - now competing under the Wakatere SC banner - was second overall but on a yawning eight-point margin.

Aucklander Morrison, whose father Andrew also is a lawyer and ex-Napier club member, registered a win in race 6, two seconds along with third, fourth and fifth placings.

However, it was a tenacious finish for the regatta runner-up, who had capsized in the last race yesterday but still managed to finish fifth.

His brother, Guy, a horticultural engineer, is a club stalwart who marshalls and operates a rescue boat during regattas as a volunteer, according to club New Year's Day Regatta official Graeme Robinson.

Robinson, who was a marshall on a boat for the club regatta, said efforts were made to ferry steering parts to Slater but they were in vain.

Slater had three wins, a second and a third but failed to score anything yesterday to finish sixth overall on 33 points.

O'Connell, who would have preferred a royal hammer-and-tongs battle at the Ahuriri waterfront, said: "I definitely felt for him when his tiller broke because it took a little bit of gloss off the final day."

O'Connell now has his eyes on eclipsing the records of the late Clive Roberts of Auckland, who has won the OK Dinghy crown four consecutive times, and 10 times in his career.

"Clive won something special so I'll definitely try to get his record," said the champion, who has grown fond of seeing his spoils next to his TV at home.

O'Connell also claimed one of the two "interesting" awards that most sailors have etched their names on at some stage of their careers. He won the "Tiki" that is awarded to the best-placed Kiwi sailor in a last race, which he duly won yesterday.

"So it [Tiki] has been throughout the world," says the man who won it in Germany in 2008, although the award is always handed back to the "tiki guardian" for safe keeping at the conclusion of each regatta.

The other "interesting" award is "The Golden Harpoon", often presented to the sailor who "picks up the ugliest" partner for a date at the bar.

"That award has not been presented to anyone for a while now because we don't have too many single young people," a laughing Hengst said last night.

O'Connell now has his sights on the Interdominion Championship in Auckland during Easter Weekend before turning his attention towards the horizon and the World Championship in France later in the year.

Having competed at several world champs, he finished runner-up to business partner Matt Stechman, of Napier, at the world champs in Melbourne in 2014 although the latter didn't defend his crown in Puck, Poland, last year.

Mark Perrow (Wakatere) was third overall on 23 points and Steve McDowell (Worser Bay, 29 points) was fourth.

Robinson said "lovely guy and very good sailor" McDowell was a little off the pace.

"Steve's been rather busy with the new baby and shifting to Hawke's Bay so he had other things going on as well," he said, revealing McDowell's father, Jamie, of Wellington, used to be the national sports authority chairman of Yachting New Zealand.

Paul Rhodes, of Worsler Bay, was fifth overall after becoming a big mover from his seventh place on Saturday night.

Napier club brothers Adrian and Nigel Mannering, finished seventh and eighth, respectively.

Hengst was 10th, ahead of two-nation Olympic medallist and former Team New Zealand member Rod Davis.