

Sailing: Weekend Warrior's hanging tough

Saturday, 02 January 2016



TAKING CHARGE: Luke O'Connell steers Kermit's Middle Finger to victory in race 2 yesterday in Napier.
PHOTO/Duncan Brown

By Anendra Singh

THEY are tied after two races yesterday but former homeboy Luke O'Connell is under no illusions about who should be the underdog whatever happens at the prizegiving ceremony at the Napier Sailing Club tomorrow.

"I had a good start to the [last] year but he's a professional sailor and I'm just a weekend warrior," said O'Connell last night, dismissing any intangible tags of favouritism draped around his neck before the OK Dinghy Nationals began along the Ahuriri waterfront yesterday.

"The Olympian should always be the favourite, shouldn't he?"

The 29-year-old Napier-born sailor is locked in equal first place with Olympian Dan Slater, of Auckland, after two races.

O'Connell, racing under the Worsler Bay flag, was runner-up in the opening race to Slater, of Murrays Bay, by a relatively yawning distance.

However, the Wellington convert bounced back on his vessel, Kermit's Middle Finger, in the second race to beat Slater by a couple of boat lengths.

Despite the gulf in experience and class, the former Taradale High School pupil relishes the challenge, after winning "just about everything" in the Ok dinghy class last year.

"It's great thing to have them in the class because you can learn a lot from them," he said of the fleet of 30 which also includes US-born Rod Davis, a former Team New Zealand member, who won gold for America in the soling class at the 1984 LA Games and silver for New Zealand in the starling class in

Barcelona in 1992.

O'Connell, who is in the "water-cutting engineering business and runs a yacht-rigging shop, moved to Wellington in 2008 not long after graduating with a diploma from the Eastern Institute of Technology.

"I don't consider it my home anymore. I love it down there," said the man who built Kermit's Middle Finger three years ago as the first vessel he ever built and is proud that design is now finding traction overseas.



UP THERE: Olympian Dan Slater, of Murrays Bay, is in equal first place on day one of the OK Dinghy Nationals in Napier.

He said yesterday's conditions weren't his favourite but he was mindful he had broken the mast of his boat here during the east Coast Championship early last month.

"So I've put in a new mast and a new sail so I'm just coming to terms with those changes."

O'Connell said he was fluctuating between second and third place in the second race yesterday but luckily caught some downwind before zipping past Slater and holding him out.

"There's still a long way to go but it was a good start."

Regatta organiser Rob Hengst said the 15 to 18-knot winds made for very enjoyable racing and they expected that today as well despite forecast for rain.

Davis was among those who took a dunk in the ocean yesterday, tumbling a quarter way into the race where the gibe sails are tuned, to finish 11th overall.

Adrian Coulthard, of Napier, capsized in the first race as well at the half way mark on the course to plummet 13 places to sit 23rd overall.

Mark Pero, of Auckland, was third overall, Steve McDowell (Wellington) was fourth and Adrian Mannering, of Napier, was fifth.

Paul Rhodes (Wgtn) was sixth, Ben Morrison (Auckland) was seventh, Nigel Mannering (Napier) eighth, Hengst was ninth and Napier's Peter Scheuerl was 10th.