

Finn Gold Cup 2006 Split, Croatia - 8-16 July

New world champion guaranteed in the 50th Finn Gold Cup

[1,189 words]

On Sunday 8th July, the 50th Finn Gold Cup will get underway in the picturesque Adriatic port of Split in Croatia.

In recent years, the Finn class has twice enjoyed the town's great weather and wonderful hospitality. The European Championship was held there in 1997 and the World Masters in 2002. In 2006 it is the turn of the Gold Cup to complete the hat-trick of major Finn championships.

The Finn Gold Cup is one of sailing's most prestigious trophies and has been sailed every year except one since it was presented to the class – by FR Mitchell of Burnham-on-Crouch in the UK – in 1956.

With 108 entries from 29 countries entered for the regatta it will be the largest for 24 years as well as perhaps the closest. In fact the class is guaranteed a new name on the cup as no previous winner of one of the toughest events in yachting is taking part, although the line-up includes a string of former European Champions and Olympic medallists.

The absence of the current World Champion – and the winner of the last four world championships – is considered by many to be a shame, but it may also open up the competition enormously. Ben Ainslie (GBR) is sorry not to be there to defend his title, but commitments with Enza Team New Zealand take priority.

Ben said, "I'm not competing this year as it is during a vital testing time in Valencia with ETNZ. Like the rest of the team my focus has to be on the AC next year. Having said that, I'm disappointed not to have the opportunity to defend the Gold Cup."

He continued, "Since the last Gold Cup in Russia I have sailed twice here in Valencia. Not as much as I would like but as I said we are working very hard at ETNZ and right now it is paying off. It's hard to plan the future at the moment but the next big regatta I intend to compete in is the 2007 Gold Cup."

Commenting on the form of current sailors, he said, "From the outside it looks as though Ed Wright (GBR), Dan Slater (NZL) and Emilios Paphansiou (GRE) are the on-form sailors. Rafael Trujillo (ESP) has been training hard here in Valencia and I expect the Croatians, especially Ivan Kljakovic-Gaspic (CRO) and Marin Misura (CRO), to be strong on their home waters. The class looks wide open at the moment so it is anyone's for the taking. I hope it is a great event and the best sailor comes out on top. They will have to earn it in such a tight fleet!"

Favourites

In fact the 2006 season has been one of the most open for many years. With Rafael Trujillo winning in Miami in January, Jonas Hoegh-Christensen (DEN) winning Pricessa Sofia in March, Ed Wright winning Hyeres in April, Emilios Paphansiou winning Holland Regatta

and Dan Slater recently winning Kiel Week, no one sailor has dominated proceedings, although five or six have been consistently in the medals.

Since finishing as runner-up in last year's Gold Cup in Moscow, Emilios Papathanasiou has continued to show good form, winning the ISAF Grade 1 Holland Regatta and a number of others, although he is currently only ranked fourth in the world. He placed third in the 2000, 2001 and 2002 Gold Cups and is still seeking his first world championship win. While the memory of the 2005 last race showdown with Ainslie in Moscow may still haunt him, he has to be one of the clear favourites this year.

Meanwhile, the sometimes inconsistent Jonas Hoegh-Christensen, currently ranked first in the world, has had a successful season winning in Palma, finishing third in Hyeres and second in Kiel Week. The winner in Kiel, Dan Slater, has been sailing Finns for only one year and has made rapid progress to a world ranking position of second, and is sure to figure at the front of the fleet in Split. He said of the regatta, "It's a great venue and we are expecting good sailing in Split, with sea breezes and great temperatures. There are maybe five guys that can win but the top 10 could be made up of any out of 20 sailors. So it's quite open. Anyone who has won a race this year is in with a chance. It would be great if Ben was here. It's a shame, especially as they moved the regatta for the Cup guys."

The silver medalist from Athens in 2004, Rafael Trujillo is also back for more. Third in Holland and in Hyeres, Trujillo remains a major force within the class, despite having a day job on board +39 Challenge. His recent form and a win at the Miami OCR leave him ranked third in the world.

Following in Ainslie's footsteps is not an easy prospect, but this year Ed Wright has managed to pull out some of his best results to date. Winning Hyeres with apparent ease, he narrowly finished second in Holland and could be the surprise of the regatta. The locals could also be a force to be reckoned with. Last year's junior world champion, Ivan Kljakovic-Gaspic is currently ranked 9th in the world, with Marin Misura not far behind in 16th.

Other faces to watch for at the front are Gasper Vincec (SLO), Anthony Nossiter (AUS), Guillaume Florent (FRA) and Chris Cook (CAN) – who took the bronze medal in Moscow last year. Daniel Birgmark (SWE), now up to fifth in the world ranking, said "From what I've heard we could have any wind conditions, and it will be very warm. I have never sailed in Split before but I'm told it's a nice place. I think it will be quite an open championship and there are certainly lots of people capable of doing well."

And then there are the old hands. When the class held its 1997 European Championships at the same venue, Luca Devoti (ITA) surprised himself and everyone there by winning. Now head of the +39 America's Cup challenger, he is back again – along with several of the crew of +39 Challenge, including Iain Percy, 1999 Finn European Champion and 2000 Olympic Gold Medalist. Percy has not sailed a Finn competitively since the Sydney Olympics, but has done some Finn sailing in Valencia with many of the other Finn sailors taking part in the America's Cup.

The racing

The first race will be a sad affair. It has been decided to make this a commemoration race for Zvonko Bevic, who died in motorcycle crash in June. Zvonko was a great talent in sailmaking

and revolutionised Finn sails from the mid 90s, working with Victory Sails. He will be much missed.

The 2006 Finn Gold Cup officially opens on Sunday July 8th with the practice race on Monday July 10th followed by a nine race series commencing on Tuesday 11th. A maximum of two races per day can be sailed with no warning signal being given after 15.00 on Sunday 16th July. This event is also the last chance for country selection for the 2007 Finn Gold Cup in Cascais, Portugal.

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