

Firebug South Island Championships 2009-10 (New Zealand)

By Tom Arthur



This was the first S.I. champs run under the new S.I. Owners Group umbrella. The venue chosen was a purpose built lake for aquatic sports in Ashburton named Lake Hood. The resident club (Ashburton Sailing Club) has a fleet of 4 Firebugs plus it was closer than a Christchurch venue should any of the Dunedin sailors enter. Although the lake has a shoreline of only 5kms it is ideal for dinghy racing.

The regatta date was March 13-14 and there were 8 races scheduled. The forecast was atrocious predicting southerly gales with rain spreading up the east coast, to the extent that the R.O. of a championship regatta in Dunedin cancelled several days in advance, wisely as it was subsequently proven.

If possible I like to try out venues the day before a regatta so I arrived at L. Hood on the Friday in cool overcast conditions with a lightish wind and rigged up for a solo sail. With the impending forecast I opted to leave my wetsuit dry for the regatta as I hate donning cold wet sailing gear. After about an hour of practicing I was right down the opposite end of the lake from my launching point when the southerly front struck. I could just see my car as a dot in the distance and was faced with a beat into a 30+ knot wind and driving rain to get back.

The reason I mention this is that these conditions provided an opportunity to test some theories that my fellow sailing friend, Ian Douglas, and I had discussed about overcoming the excessive weather helm Firebugs developed in very strong winds, and how to handle a large chop. I now had both in abundance. In a short space of time the lake had an 800mm chop so I put Ian's theory of sitting right back to keep the bow up and the boat dry. That worked great, the hull climbed over the waves rather than slamming into them. Of course it created a lot of transom drag but this far outweighed the disadvantage of a boat full of water. Our next theory was that the excessive weather helm is caused by the wind catching the leech of a sail too full for the conditions and spinning the boat into the wind. This also proved successful, after hauling the outhaul and downhaul out to their maximum

I found I could sail the boat upwind successfully, but when tacking it was crucial to over tack onto a reach first then head up when speed built or the boat went straight into irons.

Apart from being frozen and wet I enjoyed the sail back, now buoyed with the knowledge that I could race in the foul conditions forecast, plus the added bonus of sacrifices made now would result in a dry wetsuit for tomorrow. Sometimes our best laid plans never eventuate.

On day one of the regatta there was no sign of Friday's storm. The lake was serene with a lovely breeze from the north, so much for my plans and sacrifices of yesterday. Nineteen Firebugs lined up for the start, the bulk of the fleet was from Chch, 3 were from Ashburton and we were pleased to welcome our single entrant from Dunedin, James Brown. James was the youngest sailor and had a support team consisting of father and grandfather. Within this mix were 5 adults.

Our race officer, Alison Rutherford, had wisely chosen 3 courses of varying length so she had options in keeping to the schedule, we used all three. Interestingly the finish order of the first 3 placing's in the first race mirrored the final regatta placing's of the top 3, also worth noting, was their weight range. Jesse Woods is a lightweight, probably less than 50kg, Ian is about 65kg and I am 68kg, yet there was virtually no speed difference except when the wind increased for some races and Jesse was disadvantaged slightly. With 8 races the details of each are somewhat blurred so this article will necessarily be constructed of the various memories that spring to mind. During this regatta we had a wind range from 3 knots to about 12 knots, and I observed that in the 8-10 knot range the sailors in the 50kg range had a speed advantage offwind over us old heavy types, but that was negated again on the beats.

Four of the adults sailing are or were, also fellow Europe Dinghy sailors, Ian Douglas, Simon Rutherford, Colin Rossie and myself. Colin had just sold his Europe and bought 2 Firebugs for his son Hamish and himself to campaign together, but Hamish's boat still hadn't arrived from Auckland and Colin's boat although secondhand, was hastily rigged for this regatta and still untested. This would be his first ever sail in a Firebug. In fact we noted for the first few races there was no vang on it until Colin jury rigged one. The fifth adult, Kerry Estlob, had borrowed a boat and his son Sam was also competing.

The first 2 races were in light conditions and the ones who patiently concentrated and picked the correct side for the first beat did the best. This first beat choice was all important, looking up the course from the start area there was usually a favoured side in most races which paid off for those who went that way. One classic example of that happening was I think in race 7. Most of us went up the left side but Simon and the wise few went right. I was leading the left side idiots and Simon was leading the right side intelligentsia, but he was about 150m in front of me at the first cross and had great delight in metaphorically rubbing my nose in it. The only reason he lost the race was by taking the middle up the second beat while I bit the bullet and stayed on port tack longer to get that favoured right side, which again paid off.

In virtually all of the races there were numerous lead changes, the conditions were just shifty enough to make it important to pick them right and light enough to make it essential to concentrate and keep tacking to a minimum. It seemed to me at almost any point in the regatta I could look around for my closest rival, Ian Douglas, and there he would be, either ahead or close behind, no matter how big the lateral separation. Ian and I have slightly different techniques upwind, he points

slightly higher than I am comfortable with, but somehow still maintains his speed. Many a time I have rounded the bottom mark with a slim lead and headed off on my proper course only to see Ian round the mark and climb up inside me, this is very disconcerting and requires some radical tactical changes to try and counteract my vulnerability. On reflection, our historical results are so evenly matched that I couldn't recommend one style over another, and the results of this regatta certainly don't reflect our close finishes, many were mere seconds.

I am sorry in this article not to be able to make much comment on most of the sailors as we were getting spread out and there were numerous races which my failing memory can't distinguish between, but I can comment on my fellow Pigeon bay sailor Lauren Spyker's preference for big winds which never eventuated. Lauren is only small but she handles fresh winds beautifully and detests light winds, however, we had a ball later on back at Pigeon Bay with winds she revelled in. I can also comment on the waiting period between races with the younger sailors. These were times of fun, gone were any thoughts of serious racing, this was playtime with friends. The boats were forced to do the equivalent of maritime gymnastics and we adults kept out on the fringes lest we were sunk. One other amusing aspect of the pre-starts was that after several races Ian and I were marked men. From the warning signal to the start signal, and beyond, we each had a few boats that tracked us everywhere, no doubt thinking we would pick the right side for the first beat. For us it became like the prestart in match racing, we had to be careful all the time not to infringe our consorts plus not to get trapped up on the start line and forced over because we certainly had no room to dip back with a boat 500mm to leeward and others on our transom. The result of all this was we couldn't pick our preferred place to start but certainly sharpened our prestart skills.

Although most of my sailing is done in the more powerful Europe Dinghies, I love sailing these little boats for several reasons. The extra facet that youngsters bring to a regatta is great, not only them but their parents who support them. I find that for adults, sailing these underpowered boats for our weight makes you more aware when you haven't got it right, thus honing our tuning skills. Then there is the fact that we can have close one design racing at low cost, as the boats are all potentially similar.

Alison as R.O., the ASC and parent helpers did a wonderful job in running a great regatta, meanwhile further south Dunedin was getting hammered by up to 45 knot winds and all harbour activities were cancelled, lucky us had perfect sailing conditions all weekend. We had prizegiving at the lakeside in a sunny 25o and a sausage sizzle on the lakeside barbecues, a perfect finish to a memorable weekend. Being at an away venue gives us time to make new friends from different clubs or areas, and this was the case here.

I will close this article with 2 highlights for me from the regatta. On the final race of the regatta, 15 year old Josie Dawber finished 3rd in a tight finish with Ian and I. Josie had been having a string of middle fleet finishes and as we neared the shore where her mother, Linda, was bringing down the launching trolley, an elated Josie called out, "Mum I finished third". The second highlight was when Dunedin's James Browns parents emailed us after the regatta just to say thanks for everybody making the sole Dunedin sailor so welcome. The nice part was this, they said James absolutely loved the experience, had learned lots and was "buzzing" on the way home.