

Up through the gears

Steve Smith writes a short story about his recent sailing racing adventure in Newhaven and Seaford, East Sussex. Steve is a keen sailor within the Chew Valley Lake Laser Fleet.

Newhaven and Seaford was my first Master World Qualifier event. Having recently turned 34 I was eligible to participate and establish my first master level ranking for the 2015 Master World Championships in Canada. By the time of the 2015 event I would be 35. I would be eligible to compete formally provided I achieved the required qualification criteria or ranking.

I had made good preparation in the run up to this event. However, I had little experience at this level; with only a single Masters open event at Grafham under my belt.

It turned out that I was to be in for a great weekend!

Friday 6th June: Travel and Arrivals



Lasers dinghies of Peter Sherwin and Steve Smith (picture) on the double stacker; pulled by my beloved van!

Peter Sherwin and I travelled down together as 'Team Chew Lasers' in the van with the double stacker trailer in tow. It was a quite an honour for me to be able to go along with Pete. I was able to benefit from his enormous amount of experience at big sailing events around the world. We had a few good laughs too!

Pete and I arrived at Newhaven and Seaford Sailing Club (NSSC) into beautiful sunshine and a perfect moderate to fresh breeze. We had spotted the breeze on the way down and had even mused about a Friday evening sail. Alas, an inspection of the pebble/shingle beach/mountain that we would need to overcome each day soon put that idea to bed. Or maybe it was realising that the NSSC seating area had a wonderful location right on the edge of the beach...and that we had arrived 2 minutes

before the café shut? Either way a cup of fruit tea and monster home-made cookie soon followed. There was also time for some friendly chatter with other Laser Masters that had already arrived.



A view of the sailing club from a short distance down the beach (looking North East)

Peter is a dependable sea of emotional calm and good social etiquette in these situations. I can never decide whether it is experience or just the way Pete was made. Either way, I am tremendously envious! The difference in our mental states was marked. With me doing my best to appear cool, but obviously excited and filled with an anxiety to make sure that every aspect of my preparation was going smoothly. Attending this event and not letting down myself, family, friends and fleet...well it mattered a great deal to me!

After refreshment I nipped out for a quick spin on my road bike. I find it helps my body recover from a long drive (I am not built for long distances in vehicles!) and it helps to quieten my over active mind!

I returned from my bike ride to find that Peter had already got his small camping burner out and was warming up the pasta meal I had prepared the evening before. Others were enjoying tapas and refreshments in the bar and being sociable!

Pete probably knew that there would be a meal available and that it would be much nicer than what I had cobbled together from the larder; but nonetheless he had accepted my plan for a pasta meal over a camping stove. So there we were, sat on some fairly uncomfortable rocks eating pasta out of plastic bowls with the happy smell of the beer and tapas periodically wafting past us. I looked at Pete and thought to myself 'what a great friend I have here'. Cheers Pete!



Clockwise from Top Left: View North East into dinghy park; View South East along the sea front towards Seaford from NSSC; View South West straight out to sea from NSSC; View West along to Newhaven from NSSC



The Ferry returns into Newhaven from Dieppe on Friday evening

Saturday 7th June: Race Day 1

The forecast for the Friday night had been grim; heavy rain. I had done my best to help Pete erect his tent in the way that I thought would give him best chance of staying dry. As it turned out, there was barely a drop of rain and we awoke to sunshine again!

The racing scheduled to start on time and I was now in full pre-race routine 'checklist' mode. This is not the most sociable or attractive side of my nature I'd say!

An enormous dark sky formed and attracted the attention of all the sailors making preparations to go afloat. A monster thunderstorm duly arrived! It was quite a sight seeing lightning flickering over the coastline! I think that all the sailors presumed at that point that the conditions would subsequently stabilise and that we'd get a reasonably consistent breeze for the day...(ha ha!).

Either way I was mightily relieved when the signal to go afloat was made. I could finally stop being anxious and get on with doing what I feel most comfortable doing; going on the water and racing sailing dinghies...!



Launching on Day 1

Racing begins; Race 1

Those who know me won't be surprised to hear that I was first onto the water! Peter and I worked together collecting and sharing our data and ideas as we formulated our individual plans for the first race. Peter in his Standard rig would be off first in each race; with me following 5 minutes later in the Radial (*great – as I could take a sneaky peak at where Peter had elected to start and where he was heading up the first beat!*).

My first ever start in a big Laser Masters event was a pretty good one! I was able to tack onto port shortly after the start and clear my neighbours. Up the first beat I prioritised clear air and tried to return to the middle as much as I could. At the windward mark I was in and amongst the chocolates in the top bunch! Very exciting!

Around the course I picked off a few ahead of me and soon enough I was in the heady rush of top 5! Then...yes you guessed it...the wind switched off half way through the final lap on the downwind leg!

The combination of swell and no wind was an unfamiliar one for me and I lost a few places...and then I lost a lot more as in the heat of the day and the frustration of the moment my 'inner chimp' got the better of me. Back and back through the fleet I slipped on the final two legs with my mind tumbling completely out of control!

I finished 12th out of 29 radials. 'Not too bad for a first time' one might say, but to be honest I just felt sick. I felt strongly that I had let myself down in my failure to control my mind.

I had a good drink from my water bottle, had a real word or two with myself and then met up with Pete afloat. I took the positive that there was clearly little wrong with my boat speed when proper racing conditions were active. I busied myself in my preparations for Race 2 in what seemed like a more stable breeze.

Race 2

As the start gun blasted I knew that I had nailed the start completely (even if I do say so myself)! My competitors appeared to have misjudged the tide along the line to leave a nice gap at the favoured starboard end. A conservative first beat and I was somewhere in the top 3 or 4 at the windward mark! I then had the pleasure of sailing through both the world master champion and then the eventual event winner to get into the lead.

I led until the penultimate mark; where my competitors anticipated an issue with the standard rig traffic better than I did. I had to settle for third place and accept my first 'masters bullet' would have to wait!

Race 3

The final race of the day was an absolute disaster for me! It left me feeling very down in the dumps.

I got the upwind strategy completely wrong! I abandoned my previous measured conservatism in favour of a charge to what I believed would be the favoured side. In hindsight there really wasn't enough concrete evidence to justify separating from the fleet. I rounded the top mark within a couple of places of the back and had my work cut out to salvage a positive result from the race.

An exceptionally good downwind leg got me back into the race but a few more errors in judgement meant that I had to accept 17th place.

I gritted my teeth and tried to put a bit of gloss on it. After all, this is meant to be fun and it is not like I'd got hurt or damaged my boat. I kept telling myself to keep things in perspective. Nonetheless the post sailing phone call home to my #1 team was extremely difficult. I had so wanted so much to be able to sound happy and to report that I had done myself and my family proud. I tried to sound like I was in control, keeping it all in perspective and taking the positives,

when clearly I was overwhelmed with feelings of disappointment and frankly doing a bad job of masking it! It was ridiculous really. My wife has been at home looking after the kids and doing a load of chores to enable me to go and have a good time and I couldn't even do a decent job of keeping a bad day on the water in perspective!

Off on my bike I went again then...



Laser Masters tackling the shingle mountain! (Pictures courtesy of NSSC Facebook Site)

Day 1 Reflections

After the spin I re-joined my fellow Laser Masters for a smashing evening dinner outside on the club patio. They were all so relaxed and happy! Once again it struck me how far I still have to go in terms of learning how to enjoy the entire regatta experience; these guys and ladies were true masters of knowing when to be serious racers and when to relax.

I reflected that sometimes it is important to consolidate gains at the series level as well as on individual legs and races. The first two races had shown me that there was little wrong with my speed. In Race 3 a conservative approach would have likely brought me a top 10 finish and a positive sensation at the end of my first day to build on.

Before I went to sleep I wrote 'chimp' on both sides of my boom...!

Sunday 8th June: Race Day 2

Sunday morning brought very light airs. It became apparent that the start would be delayed and that there was a genuine risk that no racing would take place today. As you can imagine I was desperate to go racing and leave on a high; I needed to go out and get it right as much as anybody else today! I tried to not expend too much mental energy worrying about the situation and made my preparations as normal. I felt reasonably good, although I probably still appeared like a coiled spring relative to all the relaxed masters enjoying a beautiful blue sky morning in the sun.



Laser Masters relaxing at the clubhouse on Sunday morning (Pictures courtesy of NSSC Facebook Site)

Lunchtime came and went; it was looking very iffy for sailing. There would now only be time for one race. Then...a gentle breeze formed. ...the RO called sailing on!

I was first afloat.

I collected my data thoroughly. Pete and I discussed our race plan perspectives together. I felt that the air was still so light that clear air and more pressure had to be the priority. The conditions meant that conservatism was not the order of the day; with a bold approach often more appropriate in very light airs. Fortunately, I was not about to let a lack of appropriate conservatism yesterday prevent me from being appropriately opportunistic today!



Getting ready to go on Sunday morning! (Pictures courtesy of NSSC Facebook Site)

Race 4

The air was very light, the heavily favoured port end was congested and the tide was sweeping us all away from the line. This was an exceptionally tricky start to get right and there was plenty of bumping and shouting! A fellow much more experienced master felt that I had infringed him and hailed 'protest' at me. I had a different interpretation, but once away I saw 'chimp' on my boom and remembered that it is better to take a penalty if you are unsure. I got on and did my turns. Fortunately I had had a reasonably good start and was able to execute my race plan. The turns didn't seem to set me back too much as people weren't making too much headway at that point.

As the beat progressed the rest of the fleet was largely continuing in a bunch on port tack parallel to the shore. I was sailing away from the fleet in clear air on starboard out to sea. All manner of alarm bells ringing in my head from the day before! However, I was in good pressure and I could see more pressure ahead further out to sea with the standard rigs making good speed. This had also been a common feature in all of my practice beats.

I held my nerve.

As I approached the windward mark I found myself in and around the standard rig tail-enders with not a single other radial rig anywhere around me. I was probably 30 or more seconds ahead at the windward mark!

I stayed composed by remembering the times at Chew that I have held a lead. The lead held.

At the penultimate mark I met Peter! He was rounding his final windward mark as the standard rig 'loop' had been larger than that sailed by the radials. Peter realised the situation and so it was a real delight to be able to sail the final downwind with my pal and to enjoy what I knew inside would be my first 'master bullet'. A very special feeling and one that will stay me for a long time!



My pal Pete; a true Laser Master

I crossed the line with a grin and then used the spring in my step to drag the boat up the 'shingle mountain' to the boat park. My first event had finished on a high!

Overall Results and Prize-Giving

I finished 6th overall in the Radials after a mixed set of results. At 34 I am still a 'Kiddy Master' rather than an 'Apprentice Master'; but my results will count towards the 2015 ranking within the Apprentice category. My 6th place meant I had finished as second apprentice (effectively). I am off to a good start to qualify for the 2015 Master Worlds in Canada.

Peter finished 8th overall and third Grand Master in the Standard rigs. Pete has really strong competition for the title of UK Grand Master at the upcoming Master Nationals at Pwllheli.

The Laser Masters have a very nice approach to the prize giving. Prizes are awarded to people who have had unexpectedly good races as well as overall category winners and the usual suspects. As a result I was awarded a very nice glass for my individual race results of 1st and 3rd. Very chuffed!

Results at: http://www.laser.org.uk/docs/uploaded/Newhaven_2014.htm

As Pete and I headed home in the van I reflected on what had been a great first Laser Masters event. A real adventure! Racing with the masters is an incredible experience and a lot of fun!



Steve showing off his prize winnings!

At this point I would like to take the chance to make an **enormous thanks** to my incredibly supportive family, employer and to all those who help and support me (you know who you are!). Special thanks are owed to my wife Laura. Without you I would not be able to do this thing that I love doing! Also thanks to Peter Sherwin for being such a good friend and for setting such an incredible benchmark in all regatta aspects!

Next up Pwllheli for the Master Nationals and World Qualifier 2.

Happy sailing and see you on the water!
Steve

If you would like to have a racing adventure in your Laser there is an exceptional regional, national and international level circuit available. It is great fun at all levels! Whilst we are lucky to have fantastic racing at Chew Valley lake Sailing Club, I personally would strongly advocate going to outside events as a way of rapidly improving your sailing. If you are interested then there is a wealth of experience available to help make this a reality for you. Please do feel free to get in contact with me either directly or through the fleet captain Helen Martin.