

sweet sixteen



An immersion approach at the 2004 Hobie 16 World Championship in Mexico is the best way to find the secrets of the cat's enduring popularity.

Beach captain Matt Miller switches on his microphone as he looks out from his seat at the competitor check-in table, tucked under a bright red 30- by 30-foot frame tent. Spread before him is a wall of white-hulled Hobie 16 catamarans and a swarm of sailors and shore crew. Latino disco music fades from the half-dozen loudspeakers spread along the Hobie Worlds Beach, a short stretch of gritty sand and palm trees at the south end of the Barceló Mayan Beach Resort in Riviera Maya, Mexico. "Attention racers on the beach. The AP will be dropped shortly for Race 1 of the Hobie 16 Open Worlds qualifying series. If you haven't signed your boat out yet, please do so now. Swimmers and kayakers, please clear the launch area."

The music returns as our Australian neighbors stretch their measuring tape from rudder to rudder. Their toe-in is OK. While they're checking and changing their batten tension, mast rake and trap height, we're getting a crash course on who does what on the boat. On the eve of this 120-team world championship qualifier, the sum of my Hobie 16 experience is a two-hour crewing tutorial a month earlier. My skipper, Peter, has 30 minutes on a Hobie-16, though he does have plenty of cat experience.

"You guys'll do fine," says Dan Mangus, Hobie Cat Company's marketing director, whose job for the world championship is to assist on-the-beach boat rotations. Having given us a "journalists' entry" into the regatta, he's one of the few who knows how truly green we are. "Just follow these rules," he says, extending his thumb, and then his index and middle fingers to drive home



BY DAVE REED
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Two-hundred and forty-one teams from 28 countries combined with 10 days of solid breeze, balmy water, and unprecedented parties made the Hobie 16 class's 16th world championship its biggest ever.

each point. "Stay upright, don't hit anyone, and most of all, have fun."

Mangus' encouragement allows an ounce of hope to sneak into our psyche as we get ready to go—who knows, maybe we will do fine. But some final uncouched words from one of the Hobie factory team members and beach-traffic controllers, Jacques Bernier, brings us back to reality: "You guys are screwed," he says with sheepish grin, "but good luck."

Soon, a megaphone horn moans over the PA system and the factory team releases, in near-single file, 60 new Hobie Cat-supplied 16s from the beach (no one gets to leave early). With a balmy, 15-knot sideshore breeze, it's a quick, 5-minute tight reach to the racecourse, where the northeasterly wind heaps steep, 3-foot waves as it blows against a fast-moving, northbound Gulf Stream.

When we reach the starting line, most teams are doing the normal pre-race routine: getting line sights, sailing upwind, etc. Not us. "Let's go upwind," I suggest. "We have to at least figure out how to tack this thing."

"We're not going anywhere," says Peter. "We're going to hang here and wait. I just want to stay out of everyone's way and get a good start. We'll learn as we go."

Wait we do, and as signal flags go up and down, we're hovering on the start line with huge gaps above and below.

"Ten seconds. We're looking good."

"How far off the line are we?" Peter asks.

"It doesn't matter. Everyone's going. Put the bow down. Let's go."

At that moment, a boat behind reaches into the gap below us at high speed and T-bones the closest boat to leeward, its bows riding up the trampoline and plowing into the unsuspecting crew. That boat pirouettes into ours, chaos ensues, and we're instantly rolled. By the time we get going, we're so deep it's laughable. Naturally, we do the irrational thing and clear out on port tack, heading the opposite way of nearly the entire fleet.

Peter eventually stumbles his way out on the wire after sorting out the tangled mess of mainsheet and traveler (a job I later learn is mine) and we're blasting along in a groove, the leeward bow klunk, klunk, klunking through the waves, the weather hull occasional dipping into wave crests. In the back of my mind, I swear off hiking forever.

We're a good 70 pounds heavier than the 16's combined competitive weight, so with the bows "pressed" in the windy conditions we're powered up and reeling

in one team in front of us, and passing one below. But the fantasy ends when I take a wave in the forward shoulder and bump my highly unbalanced partner. Off he goes, tumbling off the back the boat, dragging between the hulls by his trap wire. It's the first of many "tea bags" to come. In that race alone, we also capsize twice—once in a dramatic upwind pitch-pole, which luckily no one witnessed.

By the time we reach the second weather mark of our four-leg affair, race winners, Juliano Viana and Gomes Sebastiao, are already sitting under a palm tree recapping the race with their Brazilian

turn the corner and head upwind with embarrassing ease. Somehow it feels better to retire than to be lapped.

Later, as we drown our embarrassment with self-serve Corona at the swim-up bar at the unofficial Hobie Worlds Pool, more than a few legitimate competitors confirm our claim that the Hobie 16 is no sissy cat. True, it may not be the speediest twin-hulled racer going, but in 15 to 20 knots and waves, it demands as much skill, finesse, and athleticism as any recreational cat. At this world championship, most of the 262 teams have all of the right stuff and more. The word around the



teammates. But through some miracle we're not DFL; other teams are behind us and officials on the weather mark boat give us our place (51st) and send us to the beach. It's a hard one to swallow; in our first 30 minutes of Hobie 16 racing, we've been beaten and outright humiliated by what we mistakenly thought was a simple, clunky, 30-year-old beach cat.

Miller and his team move racers swiftly through the rotation, and we barely have time to bandage our wounds before we're en route to the racecourse again. Now the breeze is up to 20 knots and we psych ourselves up by agreeing aloud that we'll "bump it up a notch." But things get worse in hurry. We capsize before we reach the course, we get stuck in irons at the start—an excruciatingly slow experience in a catamaran—and we even manage to add a capsize-to-turtle to our list. We're dog slow downwind, and by the time we reach the second leeward mark, we graciously bow out and spectate as race leaders Robbie Lovig and Glen Douglas, of Australia, hot on our transom,

pool is that this is the best fleet of 16 sailors the class has ever assembled. We may be way out of our league, but at least it's a major league.

What's also amazing is there are more—lots more—who never made it here. In 15 open world championships over 28 years, organizers had never closed registration, but three months out, says Doug Skidmore, Hobie Cat Company's president, organizers were turning competitors away. "I don't know what it is," says Skidmore, unable to explain why the class is so healthy internationally, "but whatever it is, it's been infectious."

The most likely source of infection is the people themselves. With a competitive combined crewweight of 285 pounds, there's an abundance of youth teams, family teams, women's teams, and co-ed combinations spanning across the age range—all athletic and incredibly fit. (Six of the top-10 teams in this year's Worlds had female crews.) Consequently, the after-racing scene is more socially balanced than any testos-



Clockwise from left: With 29 teams on hand for the preceding Youth Worlds, there were plenty of young faces in the Open fleet, keeping the old guard trapping off their toes. With long, square starting lines, general recalls were the exception, not the rule. Hobie factory repair team chief Steve Fields keeps the boat rotation running smoothly, allowing enough time for teams to check their rigs and their rudders. For the semifinal "Cut Party," an elaborate stage was erected and the beach transformed into a sprawling buffet and nightclub.



terone-laden big-boat gathering could ever dream of.

It also helps that the 37-year-old company recently renewed its commitment to the class, making a number of physical improvements to the boat (stronger, laminated rudders, a better jib-car system, and upgrades in the hull construction process). They've even begun marketing it for the first time in 30 years, designating 2004 as "The Year of the 16." They've stepped in to provide charter boats for the Worlds, this summer's North Americans, and US SAILING's U.S. Multihull Championship (for the Hobie Alter Cup). Hobie's European builder supplied 16s (with retrofit asymmetric spinnakers) to last July's International Sailing Federation Youth World Championships in July. The attention from Hobie, and the injection of new, improved boats, is like adding tinder to coals; the 16's fire is roaring and sailors are being drawn to its heat.

Whatever the reasons, the 16's revival couldn't have happened at a better time—the year of the Cancun Worlds, when 37-year-old Hobie 16 fanatic Alberto "Beto" Ponce, from Progreso, Mexico, would throw the biggest and most sophisticated regatta the class had ever seen.

"When we put in the bid in 2002 [Worlds are biennial events], we said we'll do it once and we'll do it right," says Ponce, whose family has ties to many of Mexico's largest companies, including Coca-Cola, the event's title sponsor. "Mexico is a country struggling to be better every time. So my family and I wanted to show we are capable of great things."

It was a monumental undertaking, to the tune of \$250,000. When Hurricane Isadora destroyed the original site in his hometown of Progreso, last fall, Ponce moved the event to the Riviera Maya, a newly developed stretch of coastline an hour's drive south of Cancun. He brought in earth movers from his construction equipment rental company to lengthen the resort's existing beach by one-third of a mile, replanted a dozen coconut trees, and even talked the owners of the 1,000-room all-inclusive resort to change their soft drink selection from Pepsi to Coke.

In addition to Volkswagen, Cummins Diesel, and Bancomer (Mexico's largest bank), Ponce scores with Telemex, Mexico's largest telecommunications company, and Dell, which provides 35 computers for the always bustling wireless Worlds Internet Cafe. He has a professional video team documenting the entire two-week affair

from the water and the air, and on the beach, top salesmen from Ponce's companies work long hours at the Hobie Worlds Store, hawking T-shirts and regatta memorabilia, and even manning the refreshment stand, restocking iceboxes with free ice cream bars, water, and soft drinks. Add to this, a team of DJs on the beach and three epic nighttime parties, a massive stage, a Cuban dance troupe, and food and drink spreads copious enough to fuel a small Mexican army. This is Ponce's party, and representatives of the 2006 South African Worlds openly admit it will be a tough, if not impossible, act to follow.

The same cannot be said for our act on the water. The second day of our pathetic attempt to make the semifinals is not much different from our first. Suffice it to say, we don't make the "cut" thanks to the 215 points we accumulate after four races. Viana and Sebastiao, winners of the qualifying round, rack up only 11 points. It's the end of the road for us, but 46 teams advance to the three-day semis to go up against 65 pre-seeded teams that have qualified by winning their national or regional championships. Only 61 advance to the three-day finals, and all scores from the semis carry over.

A low turnout at the resort's only disco, which doesn't open until 10 p.m., is convincing evidence that the game is much more serious now. The tall and lean 27-year-old defending world champion Gavin Colby, of Australia, is the odds-on favorite, but teams from England, France, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Tahiti, Fiji, Brazil, South Africa, Germany, Guatemala, Mexico, Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Sweden, Austria, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates and many others are all gunning for him. However, the pair Colby must watch out for in particular is 18-year-old Axel Silvy and 19-year-old Pauline Jupin, from Guadeloupe, runners-up from the windy Youth Worlds preceding the qualifiers.

At the end of the six-race semis, Colby and crew Simone Mattfield are second behind fellow Australians Andrew Keag and Naomi Angwin. Lurking in third are Silvy and Jupin. "Axel and Pauline are incredibly smart," says their coach Claude Thelie, who finished second in the 2000 Worlds. "They have studied all the top guys and have developed their own style. For them, speed is not a problem."

Thelie knows his disciples well: in the semis, their worst finish is a tenth and



everything else is top five. Then, in the finals, the young pair from Guadeloupe hit their stride, winning the opening race with a healthy lead. They're followed across the line by youth world champions Jerome Legal and Vai Delevalux, of France, and Colby and Mattfield sail their worst race yet—a 23. Silvy and Jupin continue to extend their overall lead race by race, winning three more, including the final race. After 14 races, they've accumulated only 51 points to Colby's 126.

As Silvy and Jupin lead the parade from the finish line to the beach, a small crowd migrates to the water's edge and then parts to clear a path as they drive their cat clear up on the beach from a 10-knot beam reach. When it comes to a dead stop, Silvy coolly steps off the boat, the youngest Hobie 16 world champion yet.

Eds. Note: Winners of the other titles were Women's (18 boats)—Pamela and Martha Noriega, of Mexico; Masters and Grandmasters (58 boats)—Jens Goritz and Simone Montreal, of Germany. The top U.S. finisher in the Open finals (20th) was Hobie Alter's son Jeff, sailing with his 11-year-old son Cody.



Four Fijian teams made the trek to Mexico and two advanced to the 60-boat finals, including the top Fijians Shayne and Torika Brodie (above, 19th overall). World champions Axel Silvy and Pauline Jutin, of Guadeloupe, (right) made Hobie 16 sailing look deceptively easy. They were fast in the straightaways and in the turns, in all conditions. Alberto Ponce, not just the organizer, but a competitor, too.

