

Go Omega Go!



They say you're never too old to sail and many of our members can attest to that but I wanted to see for myself if I, a middle-aged, slightly delusional woman, could put my knowledge of keel boat sailing into practice on a dinghy. The seed was sown when Christine Headey, Office Manager for TYPBC, mentioned she'd love to get out in a dinghy again to which I replied keenly 'Yeah, I could crew for you!' Next minute she had us entered in the Tauranga Regatta held on the weekend of 25/26 February 2012. Thanks to Peter Head of Elements Watersport we also had a suitable dinghy to sail in – the Topaz Omega – rigged for gennaker and one crew on the trapeze – me!

Having been in a dinghy only a handful of times and on a trapeze twice I had to put my complete faith in the ability of Christine to keep us upright on the water as capsizing was not an activity I aspired to. With one quick practice on the Monday I arrived on the first day somewhat nervous. Feeling like a white whale I squeezed into my 30 year old wet suit with holes strategically placed for quick drainage. Luckily the BOPSAT harness I borrowed covered the biggest butt-revealing one. Wearing a merino skivvy for warmth plus a hat, sunnies, spray jacket, life jacket & harness I waddled over to the Omega with my water bottle & muesli bars, stowing them safely onboard.

After the briefing we launched the boat quickly before the rush. Feeling like all eyes were upon us we slithered as gracefully as two oversized old girls could into the dinghy and headed off to the course area for some more practice. Christine was in her element while I was quietly apprehensive, constantly reassuring myself – ‘I can do this!’

The conditions were testy as the breeze gusted 15-20 knots. Race 1 and I was out on the wire. I gingerly released my leading hand to place it behind my head for maximum leverage. Maintaining a constant heel angle was the aim which meant constantly stretching & crouching horizontally on the wire. Concentration was vital for failure meant you hit the water & got dragged off the boat. Of course, it wasn't long before this actually happened but luckily I'd heeded Christine's advice to always hold onto the headsail sheet 'Cos it's your lifeline!' In an instant I found myself fully drenched and dragging behind the boat while Christine nonchalantly continued sailing but with lightning speed I hauled myself back up the rope, slung my leg onto the boat and rolled back in – wahoo! Nobody even noticed!

It was frustrating not being able to keep up with even the 420s but without flying the gennaker we didn't stand a chance. We'd only had one quick practice with it on Monday in light airs so in these shifty, gusty winds we decided to play it safe for awhile. After Race 2 the race officer took pity on us (got sick of waiting for us, more likely) and told us we could do one less circuit than the rest of the fleet. Well, that was all the encouragement we needed – ‘If we fly the gennaker this time we might stand a chance of passing someone’ I thought.

This was it! The second rounding of the top mark, our last leg, and last chance to show them we could do it! Christine hoisted while I got ready to sheet on and hang out. But, oh dear, as soon as it filled we went over – ahhh! Momentarily, I perched on the side of the hull while Christine floundered in the water – ‘Bugger, this wasn't meant to happen!’ as I walked down the boom into the wet stuff. Christine pulled the retrieval line to suck the gennaker back into the sock while I swam around to the underside to lean on the centerboard. Finally, after much huffing and puffing, we managed to reach the rope under the gunwales so we could get better leverage and with our combined weight on the centerboard, the Omega finally stood upright again. But our biggest challenge was yet to come – getting back onboard. I tried first but what energy I had left was not enough to lurch my torso over the stern. Christine's attempt was equally as feeble so it was time to call in the cavalry - ‘Help!’

Suddenly, like a knight in shining armour, our hero appeared before us leaping onto our ride with dazzling agility. Sir Chris Orr was his name as he clutched our up-stretched arms and hauled us to safety onboard the not so trusty Omega. ‘Orr’ struck and extremely grateful we were again enthralled by his ‘Bond-style’ leap back onto his trusty white steed and hasty retreat into the distance. ‘Ahhh, our hero!’ we sighed as we quickly regained our composure.

The 4th and last race of the day we finished our two circuits ahead of three boats and headed for the shore with our dignity intact. A nice hot shower and a couple of hotdogs had us feeling much better although my body was starting to complain. 'I hope I'm up to it tomorrow' I thought as I headed home for a rest.

Day 2 dawned in sunny splendor and no wind but by noon a light sea breeze had formed just in time for the last two races of the regatta. My body had recovered, to my surprise, and I was starting to feel like a pro – hoisting sails, donning wetsuit, harness and life jacket just like the rest of the kids. Christine seemed none the worse for wear as we headed out to the race area full of confidence and suffering slight amnesia of the day before's events. 'We'll be fine today with these winds' Christine assured me. And we were....

But this time the course was a triangle Olympic course just for a change. We hoisted the gennaker beautifully, gybing and running angles and even keeping up with the 420s, almost catching them at one point – a real boost to our confidence. Unfortunately, at the wing mark, Christine forgot to mention that it's just a gybe of the gennaker not a drop which I hadn't envisioned, but we hoisted it again without too much loss of time. So we completed each race last again but it didn't matter. We'd executed everything to the best of our ability and didn't capsize and that was all I expected but what a great experience for me – my first dinghy sailing regatta, ever! I can proudly cross that off my Bucket List now and move on to the next awesome experience – doing aerobatics in a bi-plane, hopefully.

Thankyou Peter and Jules from Elements Watersport for allowing us to sail the Omega – a great boat to learn dinghy sailing in especially for a keel boat yachting like me. Thanks Christine for giving me the opportunity – I'd do it again any day!

Cheers for fears!

Megan Harris