

The Comet Nationals that Never was – Racing at Bala

The 2020 Nationals should have been at Bala over the August bank holiday, but along with the entire 2020 Comet season, it was cancelled due to Covid. However, as I already had my accommodation booked I spent the weekend at Bala. The lake at Bala is very large, with the sailing club at one end – a superb sailing location. Therefore, I was pleased when Bala agreed to run this year's Nationals over the August Bank Holiday.

As it is a long trek to Bala from the Thames Valley I decided, like many others, to travel up the day before. I arrived to be met by Steve Gregory, our events organiser. Have you heard the news, he asked? Bala had cancelled the Nationals along with the D-Zero Open and their August Bank Holiday regatta at the last minute due to an outbreak of Covid.

It turned out the Bala organisers had met up the week before, but then found that there were people with Covid present. They were now all self-isolating, which left them with no race committee, safety teams or club officers. Therefore, they had no choice but to cancel the Nationals along with all the other events.

By mid-afternoon it was clear that a number of Comets, like myself, had made it to Bala before being told about the cancellation. Bala had enough people left to put out a safety boat and a club member offered to put on some racing on the Saturday and Sunday for those who had travelled. I dropped off my boat as planned and then checked in to my B and B. In the evening I met up for a meal with Steve Gregory and the Winsford Comets.

By Saturday morning twelve Comets had made it to Bala. The format for the racing was set as three races Saturday and three Sunday using the club line. There would be a single start for the Comets, the lone D Zero that had arrived, and a few club boats consisting of a range of dinghies – a Solo, Pico, Osprey, Javelin, Fireball, Shadow Catamaran and Laser SB3 keelboat.

We started the first race in very little wind and the Comet was able to keep up with the other boats. Despite a reasonable start I lost concentration as the wind dropped to nothing on the first downwind leg and I ended up at the back of the fleet. However, the next mark couldn't be easily seen as its blue/green colour merged perfectly with the background. I followed the boats ahead until they suddenly changed direction. It was at this point I realised we had all been heading to the wrong mark! This worked in favour of the boats behind and I was able to catch up with the fleet. Steve Gregory, who had done the sensible thing and followed the local boats went into the lead. Finally the wind finally filled in a little, which allowed us to sail back across the lake to the finish. Peter Coop caught Steve on the last mark to take the win.

As the wind filled in it had also changed direction, so the race officer changed the course, also shortening it considerably as the first race had taken one and a half hours to do one lap. The port end of the line had the most wind, but would mean coming in on port to the windward mark at the end of a very short beat. Most boats started on the starboard end of the line hoping to make it in one to the mark. I elected to start in the middle in clearer wind and managed to find a gap between the starboard boats at the windward mark. This put me in third place, but on the downwind leg I sailed lower than Nigel Austin and I overtook him. To get back on time the race was shortened after one lap, so this left me in second place behind Peter Coop who had won again.

The wind was holding up, so the course was kept the same. The first three to the windward mark were the same as race two. However, this time the three of us sailed clear of the rest of the fleet. Unlike race two Nigel kept ahead of me on the runs, so I stayed in third place. The Race Officer elected to let us sail a second lap despite the dropping wind. On the last run the inevitable happened and the wind filled in from behind allowing the boats behind to close the gap to the top three. John Sturgeon started to overtake to windward, so I sailed high of the mark, which allowed me to bear off and break the overlap at three boat lengths. This also had the advantage of bunching the chasing boats so that they took each other's wind. Therefore, I had enough lead over them on the final beat that I could easily cover them to the mark to take third place behind Peter in first and Nigel in second.

Bala had cancelled their evening meals along with the rest of the regatta. However, the club has a separate Café on site and they stepped in and provided an evening meal.

Sunday morning, as the weather forecast predicted, had no wind. However, as we set off from the shore it began to fill in. Unfortunately, there was also a 180 degree wind shift so we had a downwind start. Despite a reasonable start and a good first lap, I chose to go high on the last run, which dropped me towards the back of the fleet. Peter won the race followed by Steve Bellamy and Henry Jagers.

A new course was set for race five. Having been too far behind the line in the previous races I was more aggressive at the start. However, sailing past John Sturgeon, who had tacked underneath me left me, further towards the line than I intended. Looking at my position I was sure I was over, but it was too late to do much about it. Therefore, I hardened up and hoped that either I was mistaken about being over the line, or the Race Office was asleep or would call a general recall. To my relief it was a general recall. I lined up on the starboard for the re-start, but was t-boned on the start by John with thirty seconds to go. The bang was loud enough that I felt sure my gunnel must be damaged. However, an inspection by Andy Simmons after the race showed just a small scratch – a testament to how well the Comet is built. However, after the collision John ran over my mainsheet locking us together. By the time we had untangled ourselves the fleet had started and it was a case of catching up. The wind was continued to build in strength so we had some good sailing. The wind was very steady, but there were still wind shifts and the wind did vary in direction and strength across the course. Peter won again followed by Charlotte Coop and Andy Dale.

The last race had a short beat to the first mark. It was possible to make this from the starboard end of the line, where most of the boats started. However, I hadn't spotted this and started from the other end, but fortunately managed to tack through the fleet on port without a problem. The first leg of the course was dominated by the Comets as the other larger boats didn't have the manoeuvrability to tack through the fleet. However, once on the off wind legs they were able to get going and quickly disappeared into the distance never to be seen again. The laser SB3 keelboat made quite a sight with its spinnaker pulling it over onto its ear despite the three crew being on the windward rail. The wind continued to increase, so the Race Officer let us sail for three laps, which made it the most enjoyable sailing of the weekend. Steve Bellamy got into the lead early on and kept ahead of Peter, denying him the grand slam.

The café put on a second evening meal, and the prize giving, organised by Norah Jagers, was held just before dinner. Peter Coop was the winner, followed by Steve Bellamy and Charlotte Coop. These three are all from Winsford Flash, so Winsford will be the club to watch for the Team Trophy next year. The results in the middle of the fleet were really close with only one point separating each place from second to seventh.

Overall everyone who made it to Bala really enjoyed themselves. The close racing and enjoyable company was what we came for, and this is what we got – it just wasn't 'the Nationals'. Our thanks go to the Bala members who jumped in at the last minute to put the racing on for us. Bala is a fabulous place to sail and I hope we will be able to have the Nationals there in 2022.

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Please see the Bala SC website for some images of the racing.