

# Winning ways

Antigua Sailing Week is famous for its close racing and exuberant parties, and a win in these waters is an illustrious feat. Four skippers share their Sailing Week experiences with Philippe Falle



Photo: Tim Wright/photoreaction.com

*Incisor*, Windward Sailing's Corby 45, photographed at this year's Antigua Sailing Week

## ANTIGUA SAILING WEEK



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▲ Above: a spectacular bird's eye view of Antigua during Sailing Week ▶ Right: a happy crowd aboard *Spirit of Nereus*



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hat makes a perfect Caribbean regatta? For some it is all about winning, while others have come to up their game. Whatever the reason, Antigua's feast of rum, sun, tradewinds and champagne sailing ensures Antigua Sailing Week remains the best known and most loved Caribbean regatta of all.

In a diverse fleet of over 100 boats from 27 countries there are many different approaches to success. For some, bringing a brand new prototype production boat with state of the art racing gear to Antigua is a good way to test their new yacht. For others, sailing a 25-year-old 6-metre with old Dacron sails to victory is another highlight in an already illustrious career.

Winning on home soil might be an unfulfilled lifelong ambition for some, while for others fierce and close racing at the front of the fleet is the most rewarding part of the week to bring an exciting season to a close. Taking a class victory on a charter boat while introducing newcomers to the sport might seem like an unrealistic goal, but not an impossible one.

Aboard *Quokka*, a Grand Soleil 43 and the yacht I was skippering, we were defending our title from last year. Although the team only come together once a year, the commitment and focus is more like that of a seasoned race crew than that of a charter team. We were battling hard for the podium against a

works team aboard the brand new Solana 44 and the well-sailed J/122 *El Ocaso*. Also in the mix was *Lancelot II*, a Beneteau First 40 with former Oyster boss Richard Matthews at the helm and Harold Cudmore calling tactics.

Aside from our own competition, watching the formidable *Tonnerre de Breskens*, a Ker 46, take on and thrash the mighty *ICAP Leopard*, a Farr 100, was fascinating. In a David and Goliath battle, *ICAP Leopard* did not get a look in as the immaculately sailed *Tonnerre* got eight straight wins. They claimed the Lord Nelson Trophy, for best yacht of the regatta.

Regular competitors commented that this has been the best Antigua Sailing Week in many years. David Cullen, skipper of *Pocket Rocket*, summed it up: "This regatta is back there as one of the regattas of the world."

But how do so many diverse teams achieve a podium place in Antigua? We asked four skippers for their insights.

### A race in hand

Geoffrey Pidduck is almost apologetic to his crew for losing their undefeated run this year, which had seen them dominate their class for the last three years at Antigua Sailing Week. Nevertheless, this year they were still good enough to win their class with a race in hand.

His 6-metre *Biwi Magic* was built in 1988 by Pendennis, Falmouth and designed by Neill Howlett for Peter de Savary's Blue Arrow Challenge Team. It was originally known as *Pride of Pendennis*. In 1998 the then captain of the superyacht *Adela*, Steve Carson, bought her and commissioned Tony Maidment to convert her into a fast cruising boat. The conversion included a cuddy, engine, fuel and water tanks, bunks, sink and galley. Upon completion Maidment sailed her across the Atlantic to Falmouth Harbour in Antigua, where she has subsequently claimed a place in Antiguan folklore.

*Biwi Magic* was dismantled in 2005 and replaced with an aluminium fractional mast. She is powered by four-year-old Dacron sails from North Sails and the most notable improvement in recent years has been removing the antifoul and meticulously race-preparing the bottom.

Clearly a very talented sailor, Pidduck points out that: "Simplicity is the key to our success. We have no runners, no mast adjustments; she is not a proper 6-metre. We can tack instantly and not lose any speed, even in the waves."

He understands the strengths of his yacht and as an astute tactician he uses these to exploit the weaknesses of his rivals with devastating effect.

Sailing with three other Antiguans, Pidduck is full of ▶

“As an astute tactician he uses his yacht's strength to exploit the weaknesses of his rivals with devastating effect”



▲ Above: Geoffrey Pidduck's *Biwi Magic*  
◀ Left: a wave from Shirley Heights, where the America's Cup trophy was on display

Linden Joseph © Photo Fantasy Antigua



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◀ Left: Pinel and Best Times racing in Bareboat 1  
▲ From top: Rick Weslund's *El Ocaso*. Bernie Evan-Wong's *Mumm 36*, *High Tension*



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▣ Some of the races were decided by three or four seconds. That's good racing ▣

praise for his team: "While I don't pay anyone to sail, they are all good enough to be professional. I've sailed with them for 30 years so there is an instant communication and things just happen."

**Multinational crew**

At the beginning of the year, Bernie Evan-Wong set out with the aim of being on the podium of every Caribbean regatta. An optimistic goal for a Mumm 36 built in 1993 and certainly one that would require a massive logistical undertaking.

Born in Guyana, and of Chinese decent, Bernie was educated in England before moving to Antigua and now considers himself Antiguan. Over the past few years he has raced in the Caribbean with mixed success but says: "I reached a point in my life where I wanted to go for it."

He bought *High Tension* eight years ago and has gradually optimised and changed her, adding a suit of new sails this year. He believes that the key to his success was finding many little things to improve on that gave them the edge, tweaks that saw them holding 7.4 knots upwind and occasionally beating the Melges 32 to the windward mark.

Evan-Wong has a multinational crew, and his main objective is to have fun. "That is why people come back," he says. While he does not pay anyone to race, he covers all costs and converted a Taiwan trading boat this year as a mothership.

Going into the final race Evan-Wong admitted to feeling a little jittery. This was not helped when a shroud fitting broke 40 minutes before the race. After a tense 30-minute repair they had an amazing start. Evan-Wong says: "We had a plan, sailed the plan and made no mistakes, we were really focused."

On winning the final race with the smallest of margins the

achievement started to sink in. He says: "I was so happy I couldn't take it in, I still can't. It's been a lifelong ambition to win here, and we did it by just 15 seconds."

**Decided by a thrilling finish**

Some use Antigua Sailing Week to prove their new boats. Jonty Layfield, 59, an engineer from the UK, admitted to feeling under pressure at the start of the week. He has a new Azuree 46, *Sleeper*, and there were plenty of people watching her performance.

Fresh from 2nd place in the RORC 600, he had a new crew on board for Antigua Sailing Week, as his regular crew of 25 years had used all their time off for the offshore race. There were four crew from Antigua, his wife Vicky, and a long time friend. "There were no egos, they just got on with it, they were superb and the local guys had so much enthusiasm," he says.

From the start they knew they would have a fight on their hands in CSA2, particularly against the Lightwave 48, *Scarlet Oyster*. Only recently launched and with her crew still learning how to make her go fast, *Sleeper* was at the opposite end of the spectrum to her well-travelled and evergreen competitor.

Their class win was decided in a thrilling last race of the series with *Sleeper* holding a one-point lead over *Scarlet Oyster*. Layfield claims there is very little to change, paying particular tribute to the Southern Spar rig that he described as a beauty, and the "wonderful" North 3Di's.

Layfield was enthusiastic about the downwind handling and performance of the Azuree 46, and concludes: "I cannot wait to get her offshore in a big breeze, hopefully in the Rolex Middle Sea Race later this year. We have already had 16 knots out of her and [designer] Rob Humphreys believes we can notch 20."

**A step into the modern world**

Over the past few years, American Rick Weslund's J/120 *El Ocaso* has dominated its class in the Caribbean. Two years ago, as overall winners at Antigua Sailing Week, they won the Lord Nelson Trophy and have twice won overall in the St Maarten Heineken Regatta. This, added to their impressive list of victories at many other regattas, has made the crew a benchmark in the Caribbean.

The crew is made up of good recreational sailors, most of whom started sailing as kids or at college. Weslund, 58, the founder of a healthcare consultancy, puts the success of their campaign down to the commitment of the team over the season. They race with ten people, eight of whom have done every Caribbean regatta this year. This year he felt it was time to take a step forward with the boat and he acquired the former *Lazy Dog*, a successful J/122 from Puerto Rico.

"We decided to step into the modern world with a more contemporary boat. It was a hard decision to make as we had so much success with the J/120. We nicknamed ourselves Team Boring and decided it was time to shake things up."

"It's a new programme for us. We started this season by going to Key West to learn the boat. Without this event we wouldn't have had such a good season."

In Antigua he believes that the long downwind courses were not the most suitable for asymmetrical kites, but defends his decision not to opt for symmetric spinnakers.

Weslund found Antigua Sailing Week the best series of the season and remarks that the competition was intense: "Some of the races were won by three or four seconds. That's good racing. I would love every race to be decided by those margins."

▲ Above: prizegiving on the first race day  
▶ Right: Shaggy provides Tuesday evening's entertainment  
▼ Below: the crew of *High Tension* celebrate



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