

## 2011 SONAR CLASS EUROPEAN AND WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

RHU, SCOTLAND

By Steve Shepstone

A year and a half ago my wife, Melissa, asked if I wanted to go to the World Championship in Scotland. I said "Sure," and she took it from there. She arranged for us to charter one of the two brand new boats that were available, arranged for housing in a converted stone coach house/stable on the grounds of a large estate on nearby Loch Lomond, bought new sails, pushed me to work out at the gym, organized the crew, scheduled team practices, arranged the travel, and came with us for the first week to make sure we were organized. Originally, she was going to sail, but the waves can be large at that venue if it blows hard from the west. She gets seasick and didn't want to risk us having an incapacitated person on the boat.

It was an interesting choice whether to go or not. We had won the 2003 and 2005 Worlds, but we had almost entirely stopped fleet racing and had been doing team racing for the past few years. We weren't sure that I'd be able to relearn how to leave other boats alone and go fast on longer courses. Scotland's a great place to visit, and Melissa's grandfather was born there, so we decided to go for it.

The European & World Championships were hosted by the Royal Northern and Clyde Yacht Club in Rhu. Rhu is a very small town on the east shore of Loch Gare, about a 25 minute drive northwest of Glasgow. The club is in a beautiful old stone building that had once been a private home. It's on a point of land with great views of the surrounding water and hills.

One of the club members, Ewan Mackay, was very helpful when we were planning our trip, and helped us a lot when we got there. All of the people that we met there were very nice and helpful.

There's a strong connection between the fleet in Rhu and sailors on Long Island Sound. They started their Sonar fleet to compete in team racing with Seawanhaka YC on Long Island. They bought a number of used boats from the U.S. and many of us donated sails to help get them started. While we were there, we were able to spend some time with Gilmour Manual, who had organized the start up of their fleet.

Our friend, Tony Smythe from Texas Corinthian Yacht Club, wanted to sail in the Worlds, but there weren't enough boats available to charter. We expected that we couldn't get our entire Worlds crew to get two weeks off from work, so Tony came over and we co-skipped the European Championship. Our crew members were Ford Hubbard, also from Texas, and Doug Wefer, from Long Island.

The schedule was for three days of racing for the European Championship, a day off, a practice race before the Worlds, then four days of racing for the World Championship.

The first thing that we had to do was get the boat organized. Except for putting the mast up and launching, the boat was ready to sail when we got there. We felt that some of the rigging needed

improvements, so we spent two days upgrading the rigging. Then it was time to launch the boat and try it out.



Launching Nefarious

We had some time to try adjustments to the rigging to try to get the boat up to speed. The practice race before the European Championship gave us a chance to test our speed against the other boats and try to figure out the winds and currents in the racing area. We raced in the Clyde Estuary, an area where the Firth of Clyde (a bay), the River Clyde, and Loch Gare all come together. There are a lot of deep spots and shallow spots in the race area and the tide can be 3m (10'). Between the tides and the river, there's a lot of water moving somewhere all the time. Figuring out the pattern is a major part of success.

The course for both regattas had 5 legs; upwind, downwind, upwind, downwind, up wind. The length of the legs varied depending on the wind strength, but was typically around a mile. We sailed south out of Loch Gare to reach the racing area, while keeping an eye out for submarines coming out of their base farther north in Loch Gare. We heard that the escort boats can be a bit aggressive keeping you away from the nukes.

There was a lot of strong southwest breeze in the European Championship, mostly around 15 knots. The wind was fairly steady, so the effects of the current became evident during the races. In some of the races, a sugar ship that had broken loose in a storm and sunk on its side on a sandbar was in the course area. Most of the ship is visible all the time, and you can see quite a lot of it at low tide. One of the decisions in the race was which side to pass the wreck on. What we learned about the currents during the European Championship came in handy later during the Worlds.

We found that our speed was pretty good in the European Championship. We were always among the fastest boats. Speed is just one part of the game, so that's OK. Doug Wefer was our tactician, and did a good job of keeping us up toward the front of the fleet while he checked out the wind and current shifts. Skip Shumway, from Rochester, New York, and his tactician, Dirk Knuelman, did a great job of picking the side of the course that got them into the right wind and current. They won the European Championship. Simon Barter, from Cowes, England, and his tactician, Brian Hayes from Connecticut, also did very well and came finished second. We sailed well and came in third.

One of the highlights of the European Championship was the performance of Bruce Kirby. Bruce is now 82 years old and won two races in row in windy weather in the European Championship.



Bruce Kirby, Michael Loeb, Brit Hall, and Curt Altmann leaving the marina

After the last day of racing in the European Championship, there was a reception and awards were presented at the club. Bruce Kirby had the only other team from Connecticut there, so we invited them over to the place where we were staying to have dinner. After a great dinner with venison and lots of wine, Bruce headed back to Rhu and we went to bed. The next day I went to the airport to drop people off and pick people up. When we got back to Rhu, we found Bruce with a cast on his arm and learned that he had fallen down a flight of stairs. My first thought was that he had too much wine at our dinner party and that we had done him in. He assured us that it was just steep slippery stairs and a 3:00 AM trip to the bathroom that caused the fall. One of the first things that Bruce did that morning was call a friend of his, Scott McLeod, an American working in London and a very good sailor, and convinced him to skipper his boat in the World Championship.

Melissa had us organized, so she headed home and back to work. By now, my Worlds crew was all there. I'm in the back of the boat and steer and trim the mainsail. Doug Wefer is in front of me and is the tactician. Michael Loeb, from Branford, CT, is in the next spot forward and he trims the spinnaker and looks at our sail shapes. Tom Kinney (a.k.a. TK), from Westport, CT, is in front, and he trims the jib, handles the spinnaker pole, and works on the tactics with Doug. TK and Michael are good at tuning the rigging to get the sail shapes right. We had it pretty close with our set up for the European Championship, but we made adjustments that made us a little faster. We also put on our new sails for the Worlds.

We noticed during the Europeans that the two boats that finished in front of us sailed more risky courses. They set themselves up to gain big if they were right about the wind and current, but also set themselves up to lose big if they were wrong. Our goal for the Worlds was to continue to sail conservatively and keep all of our finishes in the top 3.

We had taken the boat out of the water to clean the bottom after the European Championship. We had to get the boats back in the water early before the Worlds practice race, before the tide dropped too far. After getting back from the airport, we found that Ewan had already put the boat in for us, which we appreciated very much.

I didn't have a good start in the first race of the Worlds, but we made a comeback and finished third. Skip Shumway won the race, so it looked like he was continuing his winning ways. I also hacked up the start in the second race, but we worked our way back to second place. Simon Barter won the 2nd race, so it looked like the usual suspects for the top places. There were 9 races scheduled, and we get to drop our worst score if at least 6 are completed. Skip finished 7<sup>th</sup> in the 2<sup>nd</sup> race which put pressure on him to avoid getting another big number. At the end of the two races that first day, we were tied for the lead with Simon with 5 points. Scott McLeod was just behind us with 6 points.

Simon's and Scott's teams picked the wind and current patterns better than we did in the first two races of the second day. Simon had a 2-3 and Scott had a 1-1, while we had a 3-6. Ouch! It didn't help that we underestimated the current at the first windward mark in the second race, hit it, and had to take a

penalty circle. In the third race; we, John Robertson and Scott McLeod had very good starts at the left end of the starting line. We sailed away from most of the boats, but John and Scott were a little faster and eventually got in front of us. We were convinced that left was the way to go for better current, so we decided to follow them, even though they were slowing us down. John was going really well and started to get ahead of Scott, who tacked to the right to get clear air. At that point, we expected that John would win the race and we would be second, and that's exactly what happened. Scott finished 8<sup>th</sup> and Simon finished 10<sup>th</sup>, which was good news for us. John had a very good day, with 5-2-1 scores. At the end of the second day, we were tied with Scott and John with 16 points. Simon finished with 20 points. Skip Shumway had dropped back with scores of 4-11-4. The previous World Champion, Dave Franzel, from Boston, was having a tough series with his best race being a 7. With the series just over half way completed, we were in a 3 way tie, so the pressure was on.

The previous day, we had winds generally from the south. On day three, we ended up having winds from just about every direction. This was where it really helped to have other people in the boat keeping track of wind shifts, the current, and the competition. All I had to worry about was getting a good start and going fast.

In the first race, we were in second place going up the first leg in shifty breeze coming off the shore from Helensburgh (pronounced Helensborough), the small city just southeast of Rhu. Scott McLeod was leading and we were in second. Just before the first mark, we got to the left of Scott, got a puff of wind, and passed him just before the mark. We stayed ahead of Scott for the rest of the race, and were well ahead of our other close competitors. That is, until halfway through the last leg of the race. The better wind had been on the left side of the course, so we were favoring that side, playing the shifts, and staying between Scott and the finish line. Suddenly, a new wind came from the south (right side of the course). The boats that were far behind us had nothing to lose by rolling the dice and going hard right after the previous mark. We saw it coming and started working our way right. Boats farther to the right were reaching with their spinnakers up, and going a lot faster than us. It looked pretty bad for a while, but the packs from the left and right ended up arriving at the finish line at the same time. Dave Franzel crossed the finish line just ahead of us, we finished second, Simon Barter came in 3<sup>rd</sup> from the right side, and Scott McLeod came in fourth from the left side. We didn't mind having Dave beat us, since he wasn't in contention to win, but it was a disappointment that we didn't gain more points on Simon.

The wind died after the finish of that race and then a moderate breeze filled in from the northwest. We were leading up the first leg and were somewhat left of center on the course. A very strong breeze filled from the north funneling right down Loch Gare. Once again, we had boats coming out of the right corner with spinnakers up and Simon Barter was leading that pack. This looked really bad. Then we noticed that we were in some really strong current that was hauling us quickly toward the mark and working against the boats coming from the right. Although they were flying through the water, their progress over the bottom wasn't as good. We tacked twice near the mark and rounded just ahead of Simon. We lead for the rest of the race, with Simon finishing second and Scott McLeod third.

Doug Wefer hadn't been sailing a lot for the last several years. He had spent a lot of time watching and coaching his kids, who are very good sailors. Doug did a great job staying calm and getting us through some rapidly changing conditions in the first two races of the day. It was good to learn that he still had the mojo for the shifty conditions.



Boats approaching the leeward gate on day 2

We had kept track of the finishes of the other boats after the first two races. John Robertson had 9-7, so he was pretty much out of contention. That left Simon Barter and Scott McLeod as the two boats to beat. The strong breeze stayed steady from the north. Big breeze is our best condition, so we were pretty confident about doing well in the third race. Dave Franzel is very fast in strong winds, too, and we were about even with him going up the first leg. We took a few extra tacks to block Simon, and Dave took the lead. Dave lead the rest of the way, we finished second, and Scott finished 10<sup>th</sup>. A number of boats were over the starting line early and had to go back and restart. We assumed that Scott was one of them. Dave finished the day with 1-4-1, which is more in line with what we would expect from him.

That night it was time to crunch the numbers. We were solidly in the lead, but Simon Barter could beat us if he won the final race and we came in worse than fourth. His tactician, Brian Hayes, has been a friend for decades, so we knew that he would tell Simon what to expect, i.e. that we would be on Simon like glue at the start and make sure that he never got a chance to get into the lead. Scott McLeod could move into second place overall if Simon had a bad race, so Simon wasn't expecting to have an easy race.

The final course was set for a light northwest wind and a light current from the north-northwest. One of the match racing techniques is to get behind the other boat and drive them away from the starting line. We got behind Simon and drove him out past the right end of the starting line. We didn't care where we finished, as long as Simon didn't win. Eventually, we were in a position where we were both going to definitely be late for the start. We worked into a position where we had him blocked from tacking, but

he could gybe. As he turned to gybe, we tacked and lead him back to the line. The boats that had started on time hadn't gone very far at all and the current made them drift to the left of the race committee boat at the right end of the line. We got a puff of wind from the right, sailed around the stern of the committee boat, and turned onto a course right for the mark. We immediately passed the boats that started on time with Simon well behind us. We actually would have preferred to have been well behind the fleet with Simon behind us, but the situation was definitely OK.

Big wind shifts early on the first leg of the course make for a lousy race and so the race committee abandoned the race. We were a little disappointed, but it was the right thing for them to do. As it turned out the wind was too shifty to set up a race course and the fizzled completely, so we never got to sail the 9<sup>th</sup> race.



The RC tries to get the final race in with Helensburgh in the background

My first feeling after knowing that we had won was relief. I had a great boat and sails, the best crew, and everything set up by Melissa to make our life there easy. All I had to do was not screw it up too badly, so I felt a lot of pressure. The pressure slowly faded, and it started to be fun. Of course, a couple of pints of Belhaven's Best ale at the yacht club's bar helped.

I had met and become friends with all of the guys I sailed with in Scotland by racing against them over the years. One of the fun things about sailing the Sonar is getting to sail with people that you've known for a long time.

Getting home was the next challenge. We were scheduled to fly out on the next day, Sunday, but hurricane Irene had other plans for us. There wouldn't be any flights available from Glasgow or London for 4 or 5 days. We were able to get reservations on flights from Birmingham, England to Newark on Monday, so we spent Sunday driving to Birmingham, which gave us chance to see more of the countryside. When we got home, we found that our homes were intact, but Michael's car had been parked in a low area and was totaled. That was the only downside of an otherwise great adventure.



Doug Wefer, Steve Shepstone, TK, Michael Loeb

The final results for the top 6 boats were:

Position	Skipper	Boat Name	Race Scores	Total Points
1	Steve Shepstone	Nefarious	3-2-3-(6)-2-2-1-2	15
2	Simon Barter	Bertie	4-1-2-3-(10)-3-2-4	19
3	Scott McLeod	Jack	2-4-1-1-8-4-3-(10)	23
4	John Robertson	Chimera	5-3-5-2-1-(9)-7-8	31
5	Dave Franzel	Spring	7-(15)-7-7-11-1-4-1	38
6	Skip Shumway	For Sale	1-7-4-(11)-4-10-9-3	38

Dave won the tie breaker for 5<sup>th</sup> place, because he won two races while Skip won one race.

We're looking forward to seeing the RNCYC sailors in the U.S. when they come here to sail. We're definitely going to have to help them to make up for all they did for us.