

Olympic Games - Finn class day one

Heading: Typical Qingdao day for Finns

The waiting is over. The racing has begun. The first starting signal for the 2008 Olympic Sailing Competition was for the Finn class.

During the next nine days, 26 Finn sailors will be competing for three elusive medals and a chance to stand on an Olympic podium. Over the past few weeks the weather has been anything but stable. With everything from 25 knot winds to drifting around in the fog, to sweltering under an intense blue sky and the cancelled practice race on Thursday, today's optimistic forecast didn't quite materialise. However two races were sailed in what could best be described as trying conditions.

Despite the forecasts of 8-10 knots of wind today, it was business as usual with 3-5 knots of patchy breeze, a strong current stretching out the downwind legs and high temperatures and humidity. It was also a day of mixed fortunes for some in a day characterised by massive position changes. Technically Ben Ainslie (GBR) had the best of the day, but the wind lived up to expectations in the first race, dumping him out of the lead.

After a 20 minute delay for the wind to settle, the first race of the 2008 Olympic Games got underway in what turned out to be the best breeze of the day. Those who favoured the right found more pressure and first round the top mark was Jonas Høgh-Christensen (DEN) followed by Giorgio Poggi (ITA) and Rafal Szukiel (POL).

Ainslie rounded in fifth and had the best of the downwind to lead round the left hand gate with Ivan Kljakovic Gaspic (CRO) just behind him round the right hand gate, after rounding the top mark in 13th. Høgh-Christensen, the world number one, lost 17 places on the downwind to round in 18th.

Ainslie favoured the middle right on the second upwind to build a useful

lead while Kljakovic Gaspic dropped to fourth. Michael Maier (CZE), the oldest Finn sailor in the Games at 44, moved from eighth at the gate to second at the final windward mark while Guillaume Florent (FRA) maintained his third place.

On the final leg Ainslie had a good 100 metre gap on the fleet when everything started to go wrong for him. Half way down the leg with the tide increasing all the time, the wind went very light and then came in from the left slightly stronger. Ainslie immediately started losing places.

Emilios Papathanasiou (GRE) went furthest to the left and gradually moved ahead. From 25th at the first top mark to sixth at the first gate to eighth at the second windward mark, he found the best pressure on the final downwind to steel the opening race. Also making large gains down the final leg was Zach Railey (USA) who moving from 15th to 2nd at the finish. Szukiel, who had dropped to 14th at the top mark also recovered well to finish third, while Ainslie's lead evaporated in the slow motion finish to end up 10th. The change in wind also favoured Nachhatar Johal (IND), who had rounded the final mark in 25th, and ended up in fourth place by the finish.

The second race started in more or less the same wind with the right side clearly favoured again. Poggi again sailed a blistering first upwind leg to round the top mark just ahead of Szukiel and Tapio Nirkko (FIN).

Ainslie rounded in a comfortable seventh place and again demolished everyone downwind to lead round the bottom gate ahead of Florent and Nirkko. On the second upwind, Railey sailed well to move up to second with Nirkko remaining in third. The largest gain went to the 2004 Silver medalist Rafael Trujillo (ESP). After a disappointing 12th in the first race, he moved from 15th at the first top mark to fourth by the second.

This time Ainslie managed to maintain his lead on the final downwind to win race two by just 12 second. Szukiel, who again had an appalling second upwind leg to drop to 13th scratched his way back to second by the finish to head the leader board overnight. Another big mover was Chris Cook (CAN) who went from 14th at the final upwind mark to third at the finish, while Trujillo held onto his fourth place. Railey had an unfortunate leg to drop

to fifth place and lies in second place overnight while Ainslie's win leaves him in third place.

The opening day proved as tricky as everyone had predicted with virtually all of the medal favourites picking up at least one high score, some of them two. While he can't have been particularly impressed with his performance on the water today, world number one Høgh-Christensen was impressed with the regatta centre. "It is very impressive. Unlike anything else. We know that the sailing conditions to say the least will be very challenging, so it is going to be as hard on the organisation as it is on the sailors, but I am sure they will manage. The Olympics always brings out the best on shore and hopefully, the best on the water too."

After a third and a fifth today, Railey commented on the racing after coming ashore, "It was difficult sailing today as the wind was very puffy and there was a lot of current. Downwind was where the gains and losses were made."

When asked about his recovery from 15th to 2nd in the first race, he said, "To be honest I took a bit of a risk as I went to the other side of the fleet. I got a little more pressure and made big gains. We have to find the pressure but the wind is hard to read when it is that light. It is more a matter of getting in the puffs and taking calculated risks than just speed. Then in the second race I went to the right hand side (looking down) with the rest of the fleet, but some went to the other side and passed me."

He continued, "These are the conditions we were expecting in Qingdao - it was typical Qingdao sailing. The fleet is very tight and it is very close racing," which perhaps explains there were such big changes in positions from one leg to another.

When asked about Szukiel - the overnight leader - he said, "I am not surprised to see him do well. He is very fast and has trained a lot with us in Qingdao. He knows the place and the conditions. Now I am going to have some dinner and will then join the team to go to the opening ceremony and really enjoy being in the Olympics."

Tomasz Chamera is the Director of racing of the Polish Yachting Association and in Qingdao he is Sailing Team leader and also deputy Chef de Mission of the Polish Olympic team. He said on Szukiel's performance today, "It is amazing to see Rafal in the lead of an Olympic event. But it is not a huge

surprise. Rafal has worked very hard here in Qingdao over the past weeks and was one of the best during the Finn training sessions. However, it is just the beginning with eight races to go, but the truth is that even if you can't win a regatta on a first day even with great results, you can lose it on the first day with bad results. So, so far so good. Today, Rafal was consistent and made good tactics. He has applied all we have worked on recently and it is proving successful."

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Class website: www.finnclass.org

Full results at www.sailing.org/olympics

The Finn Class 2008 Olympic Competition Micropanel is available on the homepage of www.finnclass.org and will be continuously updated with news, photos and reports in the run-up to and during the Olympic Games.



