

WATER SPORTS



RIDING THE WAVE: South Africans hold more Hobie world championship titles than any other nation

FOR SAIL

Thirty years after South Africa hosted its first Hobie World Championships, the sport is still thriving in the country, writes Miles Masterson

THE fifth Hobie 14 World Championships were held in Plettenberg Bay in 1979. Although an American, Phil Berman, won the racing that year, the event was the first of its kind on our shores and contributed in no small measure to South Africa's dominance of the sport from then on.

Indeed, it's a little-known sporting fact that, with two dozen golds, South Africans

hold more Hobie world championship titles than any other nation. Among these are Mick Whitehead and his son Colin, who already claimed South Africa's first Hobie title in South Padre Island, Texas, during the second Hobie 16 Worlds in 1978.

The length of the race is not always specific. "It works out to about 16km," says Colin, "the distance varies on how hard the wind is blowing... if the wind is light, the

course is longer."

Understandably, Mick still rates that seminal win as one of his favourite achievements, but is quick to add their victory wasn't easy. "The wind was so strong... they nearly cancelled it," he says. "In the final race we had to beat this Yank by three to four places. The wind was screaming."

Hailing from Cape Town and naturally used to the good old, pumping south-easter, the Whiteheads did what was necessary to beat the American and take the event. "He was from Florida; a soft, light-wind sailor, so we nailed him," laughs Mick, 69. "That was fantastic."

"We were actually the first South Africans to win any yachting world title," adds Colin, 44. "That was my first major regatta (and is) still the highlight for me, too."

The Whiteheads wouldn't look out of place in a rugby front row and have an enthusiastic passion for Hobie sailing writ deep in their DNA. They are visibly proud of their dynasty's achievements, as Colin's sister Robbyn won the 1983 Hobie 18 Worlds with an Australian skipper, and son Matthew (just awarded the accolade of South African Junior Yachtsman of the Year) won the dragon class at the Tiger and Dragoon Hobie Worlds, held in Langebaan in 2008, with crew mate Megan du Plessis.

Colin's daughter Kelli also finished second at a recent Hobie 16 national event in Durban. "It's a great family sport," smiles Colin, who is the outgoing president of a world body, Hobie Cat International; his wife, Tracy, runs Hobie Cat's youth programme. "I'm very lucky my kids are interested in sailing."

Mick began sailing Hobie Cats shortly after South African surfing pioneer John "Oom" Whitmore imported the first boat from Australia in 1971. A long-time builder and sailor of twin hulls, Whitmore had discovered the sport in Sydney in 1970. Once he had secured the Africa licence from US Hobie Cat inventor Hobie Alter, Whitmore soon converted his City Bowl surfboard factory into a Hobie hub. Eventually, at the sport's peak in the mid- to late '80s, Whitmore almost couldn't keep up with demand.

"The number of catamarans sold per potential buyer," reveals Alter, "was much higher in South Africa than the rest of the world."

Alter, who has nothing but praise for South African Hobie sailors, first visited the country at the time and, as he jokes, was blown away to find Hobie Beach in Port Elizabeth named after him — or at least his catamaran. "I thought that was pretty neat," he laughs.

It is largely thanks to Whitmore's

meticulous manufacturing standards that Hobies flourished. Despite initial scepticism in the yachting fraternity (which lingers to this day, say the Whiteheads), South Africa produced, under the "Oom's" stewardship, sailors of the calibre of four-times world champion Shaun Ferry, among others.

"John set the ground rules for what Hobie is about," says Colin.

"I think he was doing 700 boats a year in the '80s," adds Mick who, along with Whitmore, Colin and scores of others, would spend every weekend at the then Western Cape centre of Hobie Catting, Fish Hoek.

However, when Whitmore retired and passed on the Hobie franchise, sales dropped drastically.

By the mid-'90s, the boats were being imported under licence from France, as they still are today, adding to the cost.

The Whiteheads concede that, at the current price of R120 000 for a Hobie 16 and more than R200 000 for an 18-foot Tiger, the sport can be prohibitively expensive.

The passing of the family torch, or at least the lack of it, has also affected its growth. "The Hobie style of racing is very family-orientated," explains Colin. "You might have five or six families in an area organising regattas, but as soon as that crowd gets older or the kids aren't interested, it goes away."

Even Europe, where Colin says Hobie Cat racing is the strongest in the world and races attract around 300 entrants, there has recently been a decline, partly thanks to the global recession, which meant that sponsors pulled out of events.

Yet, says Colin, there are 300 to 400 sailors still racing in South Africa, and thousands of recreational Hobie Cat users, and boat sales are on the increase.

"Durban had died a death," he cites as an example, "but we had 54 at the nationals there in Easter." Colin can't help expounding the social and blood-pumping merits of his beloved sport.

"The Hobie is an easy boat to sail, it's not tippy like a yacht, so it is a stable platform. You can get three to four people on a 16 and it is fast and exhilarating... the race starts really get your adrenaline going."

The Whiteheads and many others in the local scene are continually involved in encouraging racing to recreational Hobie users and in organising regattas all over the country, as well as youth programmes on the Vaal River in Gauteng — where Hobie Catting has had a foothold since Whitmore's time — and the sport's de facto national capital, Langebaan.

"We should get about 120 boats," says Colin, referring to the upcoming Hobie Tiger and Dragoon National Championships, being held on the famous West Coast lagoon this weekend. "We try our best to keep it going because it is such a good lifestyle."

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