

ICS Oppy Training and where it can lead!

This is a short account of Stephan Groves' journey from first sailing at 8 years old with ICS to yacht skippering in the Caribbean and Mediterranean.

When he started Oppy sailing, Stephan was living in France, inland just south of Paris, and he attended his first ICS (International Competitive Sailing) Optimist training with Bryan Willis in the UK over the Easter holidays. Bryan was an accredited Americas Cup adjudicator and ran the most professional Oppy training in the UK. In a loaned RYA polypropylene training Oppy, over the week Stephan achieved RYA Level 1.



Stephan's first Oppy experiences



He then returned with his own first boat for an Oppy Camp at nearby Wraysbury lake, sadly now closed for sailing, where he achieved Level 2. His first challenge was a fear of capsizing on the first week which he had to overcome at Wraysbury and he soon got to like capsizing. He also had to overcome the frustration in first races at the back of the group and a fear of strong winds. However when he was shown how to deal with winds, he managed to win a trophy!

So the training and experience taught Stephan to overcome various challenges along the way.

Stephan's 3rd Oppy session and 2nd with ICS was a week aged 10 at Hayling Island sailing Club, with tuition and races each day, and daily lunch breaks at various points around and even outside picturesque and quite large Chichester Harbour.



There, despite visiting the UK for only 3 weeks in the Summer and having only 3 weekends for sailing and only if the weather is conducive, compared with others who could sail much more often, he came 2nd for the week in a group of 12 similar aged sailors! The winds reduced towards the end of the week and on the last day he became separated from his group and found himself in the strong tide drifting out of the harbour, until the ICS safety boat noticed and came to tow him in his Oppy back!

ICS Summer Optimist course Hayling Island July 1994

GROUPS 1 & 2 MINI RACE SERIES

SKIPPER	race 1	race 2	race 3	race 4	race 5	race 6
Neil	1	1	1	5	3	8
Stephan	2	2	2	1	6	5
Georgina	2	11	5	3	1	4
Alexander	3	6	3	6	2	2
Liam	3	8	4	4	7	6
William	4	4	8	8	5	3
Oliver	5	9	11	9	10	7
Jeremy	6	3	2	2	average	1
Thomas	7	12	7	7	12	
Sam	8	7	9	13		
Claire	9	13	6	average	4	10
Edward	10	14	-	11	11	6
James	11	10	12	12	9	9
Tori	12	5	10	10	8	11

average means average points (of all races sailed) are awarded for this race



Then after a gap of around 9 years Stephan returned to take part in around 10 annual Cowes Week regattas, trimming, handling pit (i.e. halyards, spinnaker uphaul and downhaul) and doing around the buoys racing navigation & tactics, as part of two successive yacht race teams competing hard and achieving some notable results and good times socializing during après sailing!

The picture on the left, relaxing whilst returning to Cowes harbour after an active day's racing (picture on the right) and the picture below, powering past another leading Sigma 38 class yacht with the Isle of Wight Needles in the background.



Stephan also took groups of typically 8 British, French and German friends on around 5 annual trips on 40 or 44ft Catamarans in Croatia.

Because he enjoyed these annual trips so much, Stephan decided to become more involved with sailing for a while, to take a sabbatical year off work and establish himself as a pro skipper for the year. With that in mind, he had the logged miles experience from the Cowes Week regattas and Croatia holidays, and needed to get the right qualifications. So he spent the best part of his holidays

over 18 months working up the RYA scheme, with training in Gibraltar and the Canaries (because winter weather was better than in The Solent!) from Day Skipper to Yachtmaster Offshore with commercial endorsement. In October 2017 he moved to the Caribbean, based at Guadeloupe, working out of there and also Martinique, The Grenadines and Antigua. Highlights included being assigned as one of 2 skippers to take journalists from The Times, Yachting Monthly etc on a 1 week charter supported by the Antigua Tourist Board.



From June to September he'll be skippering in the Mediterranean, before returning to the real world of work!

This just shows that from little acorns (or Oppies) much more can grow, which we could never have anticipated at the beginning. Oppys have been the start for many well known achievers in sailing, and at the 2016 Olympics at least 85% of the boat skippers were former Optimist sailors, as were of course previously our Olympic gold medal winners Ben Ainslie, Shirley Robertson and others.

In Stephan's case, a big thank-you must go to ICS for their professional training and engendering his enthusiasm for sailing.

Feel free to follow Stephan's sailing on Instagram [#stephtheskipper](#)