

Is it time to challenge the Status Quo?

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By Hans Fogh

It was with a lot of enthusiasm and excitement that I recently took part in the Soling North Americans at Etobicoke Yacht Club in Toronto. We had a great used Abbott boat which I purchased with my crew Roger Cheer and, together with my old friend John Kerr, we finished second to Bill and Joanne Abbott and Brad Boston. It was wonderful to see so many old friends, Stu Walker, Peter Hall and Phil Kerrigan, Charlie Camps, Matt Abbott and Bruce Clifford to name a few.

I want to add too, that this regatta was well run, both on the water and shore activities were very well done and organized and the banquet was frankly one of the best ones we have ever experienced.

After sailing in the Etchells 22 for several years it was great to be back in the Soling. Being a bit smaller than the Etchells, the Soling feels like a dingy and when Roger and John would move around I could feel it. The Soling turns faster, the sails are smaller and the self tacker makes it easier and, honestly, you don't need a big crew. The Etchells is a Soling with training wheels; its size and under the waterline profile with its skeg makes it tough to maneuver and get up to speed. And getting ready to rig you need all sorts of help to get the mast through the deck and set up, and your crew, well they better be north for 285 Kg to be competitive. And while I appear to be biased here, the Etchells does allow an opportunity to race with many people simply because the hiking is easier to do than the Soling.

The reality is that you can pick up a crew easier than the Soling because they don't have to drop hike and because they can sit on the deck, lean out and, honestly for the most part, be in the race all the time. In the Soling, as many experienced crew will tell you, they have to recalibrate where the boat is every time they hike. It's simply a very hard and demanding task to have crew hanging over the side, keep them in the race and take the body abuse the Soling can dish out. In the Soling, the crew must be agile, in shape and be able to move easily from side to side and if we want to grow our class again we need to face this fact.

The Etchells and Dragon classes are more popular, 85 plus boats is more the rule than exception at major events and why, because the class has a crew friendly tradition and one that not only makes it easier to sail but one that also recognizes the crews as equals.

What many do not know is that the Soling was originally conceived without the concept of drop hiking. It was Paul Elvstrom that started the trend dropping his crew over the side in the 1971 World Championships. And while my thoughts will challenge the many who love the traditions of the class and the athletic prowess of their crews, the experience we all have sailing one of the best three man keel boats in the world will only be better if we allow ourselves to look at those classes that continually gain in fleet size worldwide.

I would really like the class to look from within and look at challenging the status quo and consider going back to hiking on the deck with the consideration of a cockpit hiking strap in the middle for support. Maybe I am getting old but experience has been a great teacher for me and to me, if we want to grow this great class again the message is clear.