



World No. 1 talks about sailing, training and his fascination with the OK Dinghy

Bo Petersen interview

THERE ARE SEVERAL TRULY TALENTED and dedicated sailors within the OK Dinghy class and one of them is definitely Bo Petersen from Denmark. After only a few years in the class he has already won several titles, including the European Championship in 2013, and has quickly risen to become one of the stars of the class.

Jonas Börjesson spoke to the then current World No. 2 (now World No 1), as he was curious to learn more about his background and what motivated him to start sailing the OK Dinghy at the age 49 and his rapid rise to the top.

The first time Jonas ever met Bo Petersen was at a one-day event on a lake south-west of Helsingør in April in 2014. In a light to medium wind and in a quite competitive fleet he won all four races in big style and he remembers being very impressed. Jonas never talked to him then but perceived him as being a bit loud. Since then, he has had the opportunity to meet him several times and his first impression has definitely changed.

Early days

How did Petersen get into sailing? *"I got my first Optimist dinghy on my 10th birthday. It was a beautiful mahogany Optimist. Ever since I was six years old I had longed for one but my mother did not have much money (Bo's father died when he was two years old) so it took her some time to save up the money."* When Bo was 14, he bought his first Europe dinghy. Later on, Henning Wind (the founder of Winner

dinghies) moved to Bo's hometown and began building Winner Europe dinghies. *"He thought I had talent and we began developing the Winner Europe dinghy to what it actually still is today. In 1981, I won the National Championship and should also have won the World Championships but finished just outside the podium."* From the autumn of 1981 Bo was on the Danish Olympic team in the 470. In 1984 Bo went back to the Europe and won the silver medal at the World Championships in Kiel.



Then followed some years of 505 racing with great success including winning the Nationals and the Nordics and runner-up at the European Championships. *"In 1990 we sold the 505 and from then on and it was mainly family for the next 20 years."*

He realised that he had talent for sailing quite early. *"More importantly I have always had a very strong desire to sail and practice to become better. As they say, talent is 10 per cent and the rest is just hard work and I have always been willing to put in the hard work to reach the top."*

Petersen says one of his best sailing moments was winning his first championship at the age of 18. But there have been many highs and lows in his sailing career?

"Winning the Europe dinghy Nationals in 1981 is of course one of my best sailing memories. Especially since it was in a fleet of almost 100 dinghies with plenty of talented sailors. In modern times, I felt very proud when I won the Europeans in the OK Dinghy in Carnac in 2013. It was a fantastic reward after a great many hours of training invested in the OK Dinghy."

Petersen stayed together with Stefan Myralf and his wife and daughter during the Carnac championship. On the evening before the last day of racing, when Bo was in the lead with

Stefan in second, they sat down together and over a bottle of wine they agreed upon how they should handle this situation on the course the next day. *"The last thing we both wanted was to jeopardize the friendship we had built up between us over the last 18 months which had been strengthened during the week in Carnac. There was no racing during the final day (due to no wind) so the testing of our friendship did not happen."*

The 1981 Europe World Championships in Hoorn is Bo's worst sailing memory. Before the final day he led the championships. On the morning of the final day there was no wind and the sea was flat calm. The fleet was dragged out and kept waiting in their dinghies all day in the hot sun. *"Then, late in the afternoon, after many of my competitors had started to congratulate me on the title, the race committee decided to send the fleet away in a sporadic 1-2 m/s breeze. After the first beat, there was a 90 degrees wind shift and they decided to shorten the race resulting in a downwind finish. I got a 38 and I had lost the gold. I cried like a little beaten up kid when they towed us in."*

There were several protests against the final race but they were all overruled and Bo finished fourth. *"I remember staring at the gold, silver and bronze on the podium and wishing never again to feel so humiliated by our lord. It took me many years to forgive him."*

Getting into the OK Dinghy

Bo Petersen started sailing the OK Dinghy when he was 49 years old, in 2012. By 2013 he had won the Europeans in France and in 2015 he won the Nordics and the bronze medal at the World Championships, in Puck, Poland. Why did he start sailing the OK Dinghy?

"I had not sailed very much over a 20-year period when on a walk in Hellerup harbour in 2009 I came upon a Contender." Bo thought it would be an interesting experience to learn how to sail the technically difficult Contender and once his Lisbeth had given him permission he found himself sailing a dinghy again. *"When I started up, there were many talented Contender sailors in Hellerup but quite soon they dropped out one after one and I found myself sailing alone most of the time. I had also noticed that there were 3-8 OK Dinghies on the water every other day but I had no desire to switch from trapeze to hiking straps."*

One day in March 2012 Stefan Myralf approached Bo and asked him if he would like to come out and test the OK Dinghy. Stefan had two OK Dinghies and was happy to lend



one of them to Bo. *"I thought I might give it a test but thinking back I remember I first of all saw it as an opportunity to meet Paul Elvstrøm, my hero of all heroes."* Paul happens to be Stefan's father in law and lives in the same house as Stefan where he also keeps his OK Dinghies.



"We started to sail and I was immediately fascinated by the OK Dinghy since it reminded me of the old days when I successfully competed in the Europe. My physique was not the best though, which was a bit of a problem. I could not imagine how I would be able to get the OK Dinghy going in a breeze. After a while, I realised that the World Championship was to be held later that year in Vallensbæk in Denmark. I made a rental deal with Stefan on the boat and got started in the class."

Best in the world

What was his goal with OK Dinghy sailing when he started? Was it just for fun or was he aiming for the top from start? *"After the first few months of sailing the OK Dinghy I decided to see if I could reach the top. I knew the conditions for such a challenge were great in Hellerup where you get to sail with Jørgen Lindhardt, Stefan Myralf and Jørgen Svendsen. These sailors are among the best in the world and I have great respect for all of them. Also, there were several other OK Dinghy sailors who were pretty good as well making it a quite a competitive fleet to practice with."*

Bo explains that he always strives to get in a mode where he sails without reflecting on the different sailing techniques. *"Your body and the dinghy should work together as one integrated part, and you should not need to think about your boat handling. Then, your mind can totally focus on the tactical and strategic aspects of the race. I think one of my strengths might be that I am aware of this and constantly work to reach this mode."* For many OK Dinghy sailors this mode is seemingly unattainable since it requires so much time on the water, time which most do not have.

Bo also talks about the importance of being in good shape. For obvious reasons you need to be in good shape sailing in strong winds. *"To be able to hike effectively during the whole race saves you hundreds of meters."* But Bo also emphasizes the importance of fitness for your ability to maintain your concentration. *"If you are in bad shape, then it is easy to lose your concentration and that will affect your sailing immediately. Thus, good fitness is important not only when it*



master a good steering technique upwind." Bo says that he is very aware of this and by sailing a lot in windy conditions his steering comes naturally without thinking about it, which means he can fully concentrate on tactics and strategy. "Downwind I just concentrate on catching as many waves as possible so that I can spend most of the time surfing."

How often/much does he sail? "One of the main reasons I started dinghy sailing again in 2009 was actually because I had a bad conscience for not really doing any physical training. Sailing was a fun way to get in better shape and thus feel a little better with myself." In the same way the exerciser goes for a run every second day, Bo went sailing. After a while he realised that the sailing also had an effect on a mental level. "When I was out on the water, there was no phone and I was free of all obligations. It was like an indispensable space of leisure that every grown up deserves. Today, I can not do

without this space and during this autumn and winter when I have had no dinghy I can see that it is not so much the racing I miss, but more the daily meditation that the sailing on the sound outside Hellerup gives me."

Boats have personalities and souls

It is obvious that Bo has a bit of a philosophic view on sailing and his boat. Just as people are all different, the same goes for OK Dinghies and Bo says that he perceives that his boat, mast and sail have all got personalities and souls. "Assuming that your boat is basically well set up, which is true for most OK Dinghies today, I would actually say what is most important for speed is boat-handling, physical fitness and the ability to concentrate."

"The souls of the boat, mast and sail must all play in tune with each other. They should also be tuned to your specific sailing style, whether it is aggressive or more calm. I like to think of myself as a musician and the boat and rig as my instrument and I always strive to be in harmony with my instrument. Once the weather changes or you switch sail you must tune your instrument. It could be a 2 mm change of your mast position or just sheeting a little different that puts you back in tune again."



is very windy but also in light wind conditions since it enables you to stay focused longer than your competitors."

He still considers his determination to practice as his main strength. "Dinghy-sailing consists of so many different areas that need to be mastered if you want to become a successful competitor. I have always been aware of that and kept practicing the areas I feel I need to improve. Thus, I always plan what to practice so that my two hours on the water become as effective as possible. Perhaps, the planning of my training and following a game plan is one of my strengths." When coming to fitness and training running, cycling and going to the gym is good substitute but Bo's best advice is to practice in strong winds. "The best training for your thighs is lots of sailing in windy conditions. In addition, when practicing in +10 m/s your learning-curve regarding boat-handling is much steeper."

And on weaknesses. "I have been a dinghy sailor for so many years and one thing I really have learned is that there is a very strong correlation between your physical form and boat speed when there is some wind. But, as I have got older I have found it more and more difficult to motivate myself to do all the physical training that I know is needed."

Motivation to get into better shape

Bo says he had a lot of pain he had in his thighs after the first day of the World Championships in Puck last summer. It was quite windy on the first day and he won both races. "Day 2 and 3 were extremely painful and I had problems with lactic acid in my thighs and I was not able to perform at my best. I then promised myself that I would never experience that again. That, plus the fact that I am only 80 kg and 177 cm is my greatest motivation for getting in better shape for the coming season."

Even though he is not that heavy and he is still considered as one of the best in windy conditions. "I guess I am a quite strong hiker and I am always aware of the boat speed and try to steer as effective as possible in waves. During a beat you may sail your boat through 250 waves and every time you fail to pass the wave effectively you may lose two or three meters. Thus, there is a lot of distance to win if you are able to

Equipment choice

Bo has chosen to sail with the combination of SOTA hull, C-Tech mast and Green sails. "I am very pleased with this combination. Boatbuilder Jesper Strandberg and I have a good relationship and he builds boats with great souls. The SOTA is a 'little' OK Dinghy which suits my weight perfectly." Bo has always raced with Green sails and got to know Jørgen Holm Nielsen back in the 1970s. "Jørgen is probably one of the sailmakers who has made most sails for unstayed masts in the world and I have great trust in his knowledge. I sail with the 4 CC model that is quite flat and open in the top, which gives me great speed in most conditions."

Green also produces another model, 8 CC, which is fuller and suits the heavy sailors. "Since my sail is quite flat, my steering must be precise otherwise the boat will tend to stall. I work a lot with the outhaul to get the right depth according to wind and waves. The inhaul is used to set the angle of entry of the wind and is also used a lot. The Cunningham can be stretched rather late due to the fact that the sail is designed quite open in the top from start."

Like most other OK Dinghy sailors, Bo uses the C-Tech mast. C-Tech has developed a mast principle where the mast is very soft at the bottom up to the gooseneck and rather stiff between the bands. This means that the sail shape is almost the same in windy conditions since not so much happens to the mast curve between the bands when you sheet in. "The traditional masts tend to flatten out the sail when you sheet in resulting in lost height and difficulty holding your course. The C-Tech has been a success but now it seems that Ceilidh is catching up and is ready to take up the fight. It will be interesting to follow their new masts in the upcoming season."

World Championship every week

When asked to describe a typical training session in Hellerup, Bo laughs and explains that the fleet in Hellerup is actually not that good to set up and perform proper training sessions. "It always turns into a World Championship. Normally, there are 4-12 OK Dinghies and we do five or six up and downwind races with rabbit starts. We all use our best gear and full power setup since no one wants to lose." After sailing, there are always discussions about who was the fastest and sometimes these are quite loud, according to Bo. He thinks the best training session is when this concept is dropped and you do either speed training through line-ups or just practice boat handling through specific exercises. "I have had many great training sessions with Stefan Myrälff and Jørgen Lindhardtson. They have sailed so many line-ups and they know both how to do it properly to get the maximum out of it. The three of us just fit really well together, and it is great to test masts, sails and their settings together with them."

For a mid-fleet racer that wants to get closer to the top, Bo recommends time on the water. "For all sailors that want to improve I can only say find the desire to train hard and sail often. Whenever you have questions or technical issues you do not grasp, ask for advice. I would say that every good sailor



in the OK Dinghy class is more than willing to help out. If you have the possibility, try hiring a good OK Dinghy sailor for a training camp. But otherwise I would just say, get out on the water and sail as much as possible. Sail a lot in windy conditions since that will give you three times as much training. Sail the boat to its limits and if you capsize, it is just good fun. I always tend to capsize when I train in windy conditions. If I did not, I would not consider it as proper training since I have not pushed for the extreme limit."

The future

He has firm views on the future for the OK Dinghy class. "A couple of years ago, Jørgen Svendsen said to me: 'Don't you think the class will die with us? And I remember answering him that I thought he was right. Since then, I have revised my thoughts on the OK Dinghy class. Today, there are so many new boats being built, and they are built with great quality and cool designs. These new fancy boats match the Finns and Europes in style and I believe there will be Finn sailors who will find the slightly less physically demanding OK Dinghy very attractive. The same goes with Europe and Laser sailors that have become too heavy. Suddenly, there is a cool alternative in contrast to how it used to be with the old and battered wooden OK Dinghies. No, Mr Svendsen, I no longer believe the OK Dinghy will die with us. I actually think the OK Dinghy class can continue to grow and become really big and keep attracting many good sailors into the class in the future."

What are his future goals in the OK Dinghy? "I just had a half year break from OK Dinghy sailing but once I get my new boat from Strandberg Marine in February I will start to sail again and my goal is to be 100 percent prepared for the upcoming World Championship in France. After the 2016 season I will once again take a little break to recharge my batteries and build up mental power before the preparations for the Worlds in Barbados, in 2017, starts up. After Barbados, I really do not know. Perhaps I get into another class, for instance the Star. Let us see what life will offer."