

SAILING

Optimist proves perfect starting point

DAVID BRANIGAN

THE COMBINED classes gathered at Qingdao for the Olympic regatta are selected for their representative profile of the wider and more diverse world of sailing. True, ocean racing and some of the more exotic extremes of the sport aren't included, but the essence of the sport is on show.

So too is the cream of world talent that finds its way into most corners of the sport outside the Olympic cycle. But when it comes to linking all the seams together, one of the recurring threads to the world's best is how they started competitive racing.

Inevitably, the same word keeps popping up, and the Optimist dinghy has become the de facto starter boat for children as young as six until their teenage years.

A quick look at the top-ranked sailors in Beijing reveals many of the medal hopefuls as graduates of the box-shaped dinghy. At least 63 per cent of the Olympic competitors sailed Optimists when they were younger, and over 70 per cent of these had already represented their countries at under-16 level.

At the Athens Olympics in 2004, almost 75 per cent of the skipper medallists were ex-Optimists, including champions Brazil's Robert Scheidt, Britain's Ben Ainslie, Norway's Siren Sundby, Greece's Sofia Bekatorou and Spain's Iker Martinez.

The future is looking healthy as well, and this week, as past class graduates take on the fickle conditions at Qingdao, no fewer than 300 Optimist sailors from around the world are competing at the Volvo Musto British championships at Pwllheli, Wales.

Ireland's Seafra Guilfoyle of the Royal Cork YC, in a solid fifth overall, was best of the 20-strong Irish contingent in the Junior division (8-to-12-year-olds) in which 144 boats have entered.

Colm O'Regan from Kinsale is best of the Irish senior fleet in 12th place out of 146 boats.

The final races are this afternoon.

Meanwhile, a slightly older single-handed sailor has just completed an offshore race with a runner-up place. Dublin-based Barry Hurley (31) was competing in a modified, 35-foot racing boat.

The bluQube Solo 1,000 involved three legs, from Falmouth, England, to Kinsale (185 miles); Kinsale to Santander, Spain (525 miles); and Santander to Camaret, France (290 miles), covering, obviously, 1,000 miles. Twenty boats competed in the race that set off on June 29th, but fewer than half completed the course after gales battered the fleet.

"During the trip I had many highs and lows," Hurley said. "The lowest point was when I had to drop all the sails during a massive storm in the Bay of Biscay and lost my autopilot remote control over the side of the boat."

But the decisive point came in the final leg when he led the bigger and more powerful boats.

"Completing the bluQube Solo 1,000 means that I have gained automatic entry into next year's Ostar (single-handed transatlantic race)," he said. "At 3,000 miles, it is one of the most testing single-handed transatlantic races. I am really looking forward to this new challenge."

Finally, nearly 60 boats have entered the Flying Fifteen European Championships that will be held in Kinsale next week, with entries received mainly from Britain, France, Spain and Ireland. Those tipped to do well are new British national champions Greg Welles with Mark Darling from Hayling Island, and new Irish champions Dave Gorman with Chris Doorly from the National Yacht Club.

Current world champion Mike Hart, with Richard Riggs crewing, is also entered. Other Irish boats hoping to do well are Darren Martin with Simon Murray, and John Lavery with David O'Brien.

branigan@indigo.ie