

Jud Smith—2006 Etchells World Champion and Rolex Yachtsman of the Year
Interview by Dave Powlison

A long-time fixture on the Etchells circuit, here and abroad, Marblehead sailmaker Jud Smith has won more than his share of titles, but the world championship has always eluded him. He's been close, finishing second four times. But in November, in Perth, Australia, at the 2006 Audi Etchells World Championship, he finally moved into the champion's circle. With crew Dirk Kneulman, a Canadian Etchells builder who won the worlds in 1998, Andrew Wills, a New Zealander who crewed with Smith in the 2003 and 2004 worlds, and New Zealand opti sailor Thomas Saunders, Smith sealed his victory in the final race.

Having finished second four times, with it all coming down to the final race, did you plan to take the offensive, to attack the boat closest to you in the standings?

Other times, like in 2003 when Kenny [Reed] won, I would think, should I tie him up and push him back 60 boats or get him to be over, or push him the wrong way, or should I just make sure I hang on to the second? I wasn't uncomfortable finishing second and third over the years, but I've been there, done that. So my mentality was, I came here to try to win this regatta, and I was going to go out there to win, and if my best effort isn't good enough, so be it.

With three general recalls in that final, eighth race, you must have had more time than usual to think about your best approach to that race.

Before we went out there, we had two strategies. One was to start near the boat that we had to beat, which was the second place boat, and the other strategy was to just get a really good start and then decide where we were after the start. We just decided to go for a good start and worry about the race after we got going. So what was going through our minds was how to execute the best possible start and not be over, be in the right spot. Ultimately, after all these recalls, they ended up punching the middle of the line about a boat length to windward. So you couldn't really start too far from that boat. That was influencing me 10 boat lengths one way or the other. As it turns out, no one was pressing us, and we were able get off clean.

What was going through your mind when you crossed the finish line in first, with the Etchells World Championship now in hand?

It was a relief. We were all pretty tired at that stage, after 8 races in 8 days—really it was 9 because we did the invitational race just before the worlds.

Perth is known for more breeze than most North American venues—usually a strong sea breeze because of the nearby desert. Did you feel you were ready for it?

We really didn't see a sea breeze until the regatta got started, so we hadn't had a chance to practice in the heavy stuff. I knew the Australians would be good in it, because they'd all been tuning for it. I didn't expect to have an edge on them in over 15. When we first went out in some of the heavier air races, it was clear those guys were good. But we were always in the top 10 at the weather mark, except for one race where I screwed up.

What happened?

We didn't have a good enough start to hold a lane and got flushed out to the right side. Then the fleet came into the weather mark from the left. The reality is, you don't lose that much by just staying in the second row and toughing it out, especially when it's a

one-sided course, which is what we had. I should have just sailed low and fast and just boogied off into the left-hand corner, like, with blinders on, and not even looked around. We ended up in the top 20 at the first mark. That's one of the biggest things to realize in big fleets--when to suck it up, to tough it out, at the expense of going the right way. You just have to find a way to be able to do that.

What kind of preparation did you do prior to the event?

We hooked up with a local coach, Ron Jensen, who is acknowledged as the best, local-knowledge coach in western Australia. We spent our first days there with him, as well as Craig Healy as a tuning partner. Ron coached us out on the water. He was photographing us the whole time, and we learned a lot coming in after that session, seeing what was working and what was not. I had brought a brand-new main with me, and I wasn't really satisfied with it because it didn't fit the new mast very well—mostly luff curve—which was what I was suspecting on the boat and was pretty clear in the photographs. At that point, we went back to the other main.

What did you learn about sail shape in those conditions, conditions that you might not have been quite as in tune with before you arrived?

After meeting with Ron, we knew the sail combinations and were pretty confident about that. Because it was so shallow there and so choppy, we quickly found out how twisted the sails needed to be, in other words, how well it worked to be slightly eased. But you just don't ease a bladed out shape because the exit angles won't be right; you ease a fuller shape. You don't want to be so full you're tipping the boat over, so it's finding the right amount camber versus twist in the sails and the sail combination that likes that best. I don't think it [leech twist] really mattered much when we were pointing. In fact, we found that when we eased our sheets, we were just plain fast and higher, which seems counter-intuitive, but we were just loading everything up, we weren't stalling, and we had more flow over the sails and the keel.

I was also sailing with a straighter mast than most people there, in terms of sailing more powered up. For instance, on the first beats, in winds that were typically 11-14, our backstay was set up at about half the maximum tension. We were chocked all the way back—pretty straight--and everything else was pretty standard. We were at 46 1/2" on the headstay the whole week, except 46 3/4" in the light air race. We obviously changed the shroud tension a lot, and we might have moved the mast back a bit in the one light-air race. But we're used to doing that in North America. That's what we have to do after every race—we have to retune. But the single biggest thing we did was carry more twist in the sails than we're used to doing.

Why did you sail with four crew?

We wanted to see how four-up was and if that was an advantage. I clearly could tell halfway through this regatta that the four-up boats had an advantage. I'd compare it to a J-24 sailing upwind with four instead of five. There are more torsos on the rail, the weight is in the right place, and they're not being weighed with their gear. Just from the appearance of it, the boats carrying four were sailing more powered up. They weren't hiking any harder or anything like that, just that they had more effective weight on the rail.

Tell us about your fourth crewmember, Thomas Saunders.

He was part of the New Zealand Opti team. Andrew [Wills] is their national coach, and he picked Thomas to sail with us. He finished fourth in their nationals, and has done well

in some other events. He weighs 105 pounds. He was front of Dirk, who trimmed the main, and behind Willsy, who did the jib. Thomas had his own hiking line, did the topping lift and downhaul, helped look around, moved his weight around, helped the chute in and out of the boat. He kept pretty busy.

Did you set the boat up differently for four?

We used a smaller console, but instead of putting it forward and having the back cut off, we did it the other way. I kept the back in the same position and cut the front off, which allowed more room for tacking. We moved the [skipper control cleat] inserts back four inches as well. We moved the topping lift and downhaul to the cuddy lip, old school, so we didn't have them on the console. But nothing significant.

Any new hardware developments?

We were using the Brogli shroud adjusters, which we thought were pretty nice because you can adjust those by hand without tools. They had ball bearings in them, and we'd oil them up with lanolin, as recommended by the supplier, every day, and they really were amazing. You could adjust them while going to weather in 25 knots from the windward side, by hand. So even tuning up before the start, we could adjust an upper and lower while we were sailing along and see how it did by lining up with something without having to slow down or unload anything, or get tools out. [*Editor's note: Brogli shroud adjusters are manufactured by Malcomb Anderson, an Etchells sailor from Australia. These units retail for around \$290 each. For info, contact Ontario Yachts, 905-639-8382.*]

Also, although this is nothing really new, we were the only boat in this regatta that had a boom that was rigged with no holes through it anywhere in the sides or on the bottom of the boom. Everything was lashed with spectra loops through the webbing section of the boom. We had zero gear failures during the regatta, nothing.

Ten years from now, Thomas Saunders will no doubt list you as one of his major influences. As you look back who has influenced your sailing?

It's not just one person. Obviously, Dave Curtis, who I work with every day . . . and Dennis Connor. I did an *America's Cup* campaign with Dennis, but it was really an Etchells campaign that led into the *America's Cup*. One other person who impacted the way I sail a regatta is Poul Richard Hoj-Jensen, from Denmark. I liked the way he approached a regatta, how he constantly made subtle improvements and adjustments. From the beginning of the regatta to the end of the regatta, he was improving every race. I have definitely been incorporating that into the way I sail.

What's next?

Probably harder than winning the first worlds is repeating that win. That's the biggest goal. So I'm off to Cowes for the Worlds in June 2007, which is not that far away. My boat's being returned from Perth—it went in the container a couple of days ago—and it's on its way to Cowes right now.

This article is reprinted from the March 2007 Sailing World magazine, with permission from the author, who is one of the founding members of Lake Champlain's fleet 25.