

New Zealand wins Blind Match Racing

New Zealand sailor Paulien Eitjes has won back to back titles in the Homerus International Blind Match Racing Championship, this year sailed at Sulzano on Lake Iseo, Italy.

Racing commenced on Thursday, October 2 with three teams entering from Italy, two from Spain and one each from Australia, New Zealand, Israel and the USA.

Sailors competing in this event must be IBSA classified B1 or B2 – legally blind. The championships are sailed in two identical Nitek keelboats by a two person crew with a sighted observer on board. Three "beeping buoys", each with a unique signal, set out the course and each boat has its own sound signal that changes when on port or starboard tack.

Eitjes (NZL), sailing with experienced Italian crew Alberto Prudenzano was favourite for the event, having claimed a startling victory on debut at last years championship in Palermo. Luigi Bartanza & Elisabetta Bardella (ITA2) were the most experienced Italian combination, both having been in the medals during previous events. The Australian pairing of Kylie Forth and Ryan Honschooten, both from Perth in Western Australia, had lost all their races in last years event but had trained hard during the year with the aim of improving their place on the leader board.

The weather on day one was difficult - cold and misty with a light 2-4 knot breeze. Eitjes/Prudenzano (NZL) had a convincing first race win over Israeli/Rosenzveig (ISR) to stamp their authority on the event. They backed it up with another win later in the day but Bertanza/Bardella (ITA2) also took two wins. There were cheers all round when Forth/Honschooten (AUS) defeated Pesaresi/Malerba (ITA3) in race 3 to record their first win in international competition. Later in the day, after freezing in the transfer boat waiting for the breeze to steady, the Australians were beaten by Parente/Malipiero (ITA1) but went on to defeat Israeli/Rosenzveig (ISR) with the boat speed to overcome a port/starboard penalty incurred at the start.

Day two was cut short by the arrival of a 25 knot squall, sending everyone scurrying for shore, but Eitjes/Prudenzano (NZL), Israeli/Rosenzveig (ISR), Bertanza/Bardella (ITA2) & Bersani/Bisio (USA) all recorded wins. Halfway through the event, Eitjes/Prudenzano (NZL) and Bertanza/Bardella (ITA2) shared the lead with 3 points and Forth/Honschooten (AUS) were 1 point adrift.

Clear sunny skies and steady breezes enabled organisers to complete 10 races on day three. The leading New Zealand and Italian teams both won their encounters with the Australians, who then lost their heat against Gimeno/Giner (ESP2). Despite this setback, the Aussies sailed two of their best races of the series against quality competition.

On the final day, the light breeze slowly built to 10-15 knots, providing excellent racing conditions. Forth/Honschooten (AUS) won both of their encounters and finished their regatta in dramatic style by having Bersani/Bisio (USA) black flagged before the start. But it was not enough and Gimeno/Giner (ESP2) had sailed more consistently to take third overall.

The final series was sailed between Bertanza/Bardella (ITA2) & Eitjes/Prudenzano (NZL). Heat one was a convincing win to Eitjes, but the Italians came back to win the second. In the last race it was an easy victory for Paulien Eitjes & Alberto Prudenzano to take out the Championship.

After racing, the cheers from the assembled crowd were almost as loud for the Australians as they were for the winners. The 23 year old Kylie Forth, who lost her eyes aged three and who is also an above-knee amputee, is very popular amongst the Homerus competitors and officials.

Now having won two Championships in a row sailing with Italian crews, Paulien Eitjes has proven a determined and skilled sailor who really enjoys the tactical challenges of the match racing discipline. It was a well earned win.

Even while celebrating her win in Sulzano, Eitjes already had her next objective in mind. She is also aiming to record sequential wins in the IFDS Blind Sailing World Championships B2 Division, with the next Worlds being held on Lake Rotorua, New Zealand, in March 2009. Eitjes coach, Gary Smith, will join her crew as tactician for this event as he did for the 2006 Worlds in Rhode Island, USA.