

A crowded mark rounding pales in comparison to the problems facing the Laser class



Laser Fracas

After 40 years of sailing in 200,000 boats, you'd think the venerable Laser class would be fairly immune to controversy—but you'd be wrong. In recent months, the class has confronted a crisis that some fear could tear it apart, or at the very least jeopardize its status as one of the boats sailed in the Olympics.

At the heart of the matter is a dispute between a company called Global Sailing, which bought the rights to the boat from designer Bruce Kirby a couple of years ago, and Laser Performance Europe (LPE). Apparently all was fine until LPE stopped paying royalties to New Zealand-based Global Sailing, saying the agreement between Kirby and Global Sailing is not valid.

Unfortunately for the International Laser Class Association (ILCA), what would normally be a purely commercial dispute has become a practical one as well, due to a rule requiring a formal "building agreement" between Bruce Kirby or his representatives and any prospective builder if a boat is to be class legal. As a result, the ILCA is worried there won't be enough race-ready boats to go around until Global Sailing and LPE settle their differences.

To resolve the problem, the class is asking members to vote online as to whether they think the "Kirby" provision should be removed to ensure a steady supply of boats in the coming months. This referendum has, in turn, generated yet more controversy.

"Each of the parties to the conflict has threatened ILCA in various ways," a preamble to the proposed rule change states. "Global Sailing has said it may form a new class association for a 'Kirby Sailboat.' LPE informed the ILCA that it intends to form its own 'Laser' class. We therefore end up with three different classes and may lose the Olympic status...the (proposed) rule changes were deemed the only possible solution in order to promote the uninterrupted supply of class-legal Lasers."

ILCA officials declined to comment on record, saying the text on the class web site explains its position in full. The general consensus, though, seems to be that everyone would like nothing better than to end the controversy so they can concentrate on the sailing. The deadline for voting is September 23. —AC