

Spellbinding SSL Gold Cup Grand Final in Gran Canaria

Sunday 3 December, 2023

After 23 days and 64 races in Gran Canaria at the SSL Gold Cup it all came to the final four, and the Grand Final. The inaugural football world cup in sailing's thrilling conclusion.

It all started with 56 nations, qualifying at Lake Neuchâtel to make the final 40 at the Gran Canaria Final Series with five rounds of competition to reach this stage. The wind may have been light, but as the five minute countdown to race began, the tension was the equivalent of a hurricane.

In sailing, the race starts well before the starting gun as the teams jostle for position, aiming to start in the perfect place at top speed. In this one-race shoot-out for the title of World Champion of Sailing Nations, there are no second chances. It's all or nothing.

The winners of the start were Spain and The Netherlands, crossing the line at speed with clear air, while Hungary were shut out at the committee boat end by The Netherlands, and Italy, who approached the line too low, having to squeeze up around the pin end, pushing them into the disturbed air of the Spanish yacht.

Recovering from their poor start, the Hungarian 'Shamans' team chose a perfect track on the first upwind leg and, in a move a chess grandmaster would be proud of, outmanoeuvred the Spanish 'La Armada' on the final approach to the windward mark, switching a 10 second deficit into a 20 second lead, leaving 'La Armada' open to attack by the Italian 'Gladiators'. This was tactical sailing at its very finest.

Downwind the 'Shamans' risked it all by going left while the rest of the fleet went right - a brave move by the charismatic Hungarian Captain and Tactician Zsombor Berecz. The 'Gladiators' also put 'La Armada' to the sword, as the Spanish were still suffering after their windward mark mauling, while the 'Dutch Lions', who have remarkable speed with the spinnaker up, roared back into contention.

The 'Shamans' conjured a stunning spinnaker drop, while the 'Dutch Lions' rounded just 25 seconds behind having bitten 30 seconds off their windward mark deficit, overtaking the 'Gladiators' and 'La Armada' in the process.

The Netherlands team were on the charge, but Hungarian helm Robert Bakoczy was in the zone, while his tactician Zsombor was making all the right calls. With uncanny foresight, the team who started racing in Gran Canaria in the 1/16 Finals were reading the local winds and waves to perfection.

Behind the 'Shamans' the other three were engaging in a tight battle. The 'Gladiators' tacked on the 'Dutch Lions', who in turn held 'La Armada' out on the left. These exchanges were all playing into the Hungarians hands, who rounded the windward mark with a 46 second lead, as just 14 seconds separated Italy, The Netherlands and Spain.

As the wind continued to drop, the 'Gladiators' charged, but the 'Shamans' wove their magic to fend off their opponents. The Hungarian heroes had won the SSL Gold Cup. Zsombor Berecz, Robert Bakoczy, Marcell Goszleth, Csaba Adorjan, Kos Lillik, Levente Takacsy, Balazs Tomai, Zsombor Gyapjas and Aron Nemeth have written their names in the history books as the inaugural World Champions of Sailing Nations.

Behind them the Italian 'Gladiators' sealed silver, while The Netherlands' 'Dutch Gladiators' took bronze. Agony for the home team, the Spanish 'La Armada' who finished fourth.

They've been here since 16th November, raced through four rounds, facing off against 13 other teams on the water, and over the past 17 days the 'Shamans' have put us all under their spell as they sailed to victory in this inaugural SSL Gold Cup. Back home in Hungary, they'll surely inspire a whole new wave of sailors to take to the water.

On the winning manoeuvre at the first windward mark, Hungary's Captain and Tactician said:

"That was a great move, yes. The boat was going super nicely and I was confident with our team that nobody can drive the boat faster than we are, so from that moment on a fast boat it's a pleasure to be a tactician."

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Hungary's helm Robert Bakoczy added:

"I think all of us still can't believe it. It's amazing and crazy. After our start we just tried to get back the speed as soon as possible. We were expecting a right shift and it came, so we were back in the game a minute after the start. It was hard, but we could solve it."

The SSL Gold Cup prize giving was heralded by a drum parade from the moored SSL 47 yachts, along the pontoon and into the event village, with the four teams greeted by rapturous applause and kids asking for their SSL jerseys to be signed by their new sailing heroes.

World Sailing Vice President Yann Rocherieux spoke of the importance of the SSL Gold Cup, especially how it promotes sailing participation globally, with its Special Event status meaning that its place in the calendar is secured alongside other prestigious international events such as the America's Cup and SailGP.

Each team was presented on stage, with the top three national teams awarded medals by Gran Canarian dignitaries. Finally it was time for Hungary to lift the SSL Gold Cup and be crowned the first ever World Champion of Sailing Nations.

Regatta Director Paul Hutton-Ashkenny closed the event by summarising the staggering scale and reach of the event, which has attracted live coverage on TV networks around the globe.

The SSL Gold Cup, billed as the football world cup in sailing, had exceptionally high expectations. To have delivered on its promise in the inaugural edition is a remarkable achievement, but this is just the beginning of something truly special.

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