

Salcombe Gin Merlin Rocket Salcombe Yacht Club Week^{the} Runners and Riders

by Alex Jackson

Salcombe Ria remains a leveller within the class due to the unique characteristics and tidal effects, local knowledge plays its role more than perhaps any other class event, thus allowing every dog to have their day, on a good day that is.

Hence the runners and riders for event winner spans the top ten not just the top three or four that you'd expect at a Championship. As for race winners well there are twenty plus boats in with a chance.

However, there remain teams with greater chances than others and turning to last years' top eight seems the logical starting place to assess competitor's chances this year.

Tom Gillard and Rachael Gray – Winder 3759, Selden rig and North Sails. Last year this duo won pretty much every event they entered. As two-time Salcombe winner and with super-crew Rachel Gray in the front, these two have phenomenal boat speed, consistent determination and are considered to be event favourites. But will fluky conditions show a relative lack of Salcombe experience?

Mike and Jane Calvert – Winder 3691, heavily modified Chipstow rig and Spoons sails. Perpetual 'also rans', it's hard to believe this pairing haven't dominated the event for the past two decades as perhaps they deserve. Showing devastating downwind boat speed when running against the tide, or transitioning their way through the bag, their light weight setup is used to maximum effect.

Andy Davis and Ollie Meadowcroft – 37, full Ceilidh rig and HD sails. Having won the event in previous years, Taxi has shown his uncanny ability to dig himself out of a poor start and chip away back through the fleet to the front. A vital skill requirement at any venue but particularly Salcombe where a cool head pays dividends.

Simon Potts and Holly McArthur – 3802, Paragon and North sails. Simon burst on the Salcombe scene almost winning the event with wife Ally. Since then he has managed to remain below the radar, never being a firm favourite but always being in the hunt at the sharp end. A boat that carries little pressure and lots of brain power, they'd be a mighty popular duo to win the event for their first time.

Ian Dobson and Ally Potts – 3751, Selden rig and HD sails. Dobbo packs a mighty punch at pretty much every event he attends. This year with Ally in the front her reputation as a competitive crew is formidable. Determination and focus will be second to none and as per hubby Simon, the lack of 'event favourite' status could play in to their hands.

Tim Fells and Fran Gifford – 3764, Selden and P&B. Although it may seem an age since they won their solo victory, both now retired they have been seen sailing every weekend on the estuary.

Having recently returned from the Lark nationals where they recorded a very credible fifth overall you get the feeling this duo are finding their form once more.

Roger and Jane Gilbert – 3722, Selden and P&B. Being completely off the radar and now retaining their Merlin purely for Salcombe week, they are never to be discounted. Roger triggered a transformation in the fleet when he and James first turned their hands to the class. Nick Craig and Ben McGrane shortly followed and to say they have pulled up the standard as we've followed on their coat tails is an understatement.

Richard Whitworth and Jemima Scroggie – 3703, Selden rig and North sails. Last but certainly not least, Richard is a past master and multiple event winner. When this duo first won they gave a master class in how to start, not always risking the most favourite end but always getting off in clear air and at full speed. Lack of practice and a slightly aging craft may be their only weakness.

New teams and race winners

Caroline Croft and Pete Gray – 3820, SuperSpar and North sails. Undoubtedly in the top tier Caroline and Faye were a serious challenge to the crown last year. For 2023 she is sporting a shiny new boat and new crew. Caroline should not be underestimated and her focus to be admired. We can only hope that she gets distracted at the bar and distracted by other half Chris Gould on the water.

Chris Gould and Sophie Mackley – 3803, Superspars and North sails. Chris has been a multiple race winner before his wife stole his boat last season, having reclaimed it he has landed N12 Champs winning crew and Salcombe local who happens to be a dab hand on the stick. Boat prep will be meticulous, fitness and confidence in where to point their boat will be great strengths. Partying partners with varying levels of snoring will be their weaknesses.

Simon Blake and daughter Molly (10) – 3738, Chipstow and HD. Three time event winner Si is now living in Melbourne with his family. If Molly is half as determined as her mother then these two could be scary fast when it goes light. How will the boat survive the tantrums and how will Penny cope with their youngest with no help from Si?

Dave Winder and Anna Blake – 3735 (his old boat), Ceilidh rig and HD sails. Dave dominated Salcombe in the post Phil King era. Having closely followed Phil and Kev around the estuary who knew exactly where to place the boat to benefit from back eddies, wind bends, a helpful tow from a dolphin. Having paired with Anna, the River Championships winner, and borrowing his old boat back for the week will we see some of the old magic?

Missing in action

Sadly, this year, partly due to the events incredible popularity and partly the influx of children, some notable faces are not in attendance. Christian Birrell and Sam Breary have withdrawn from the event, Stu Bithell is sadly busy with other commitments, George and Sophie Yeoman are presumably busy changing nappies and Tim Saxton is also a no show. We hope they'll all be back next year to add depth back to the front of the fleet.

Thank you to the event sponsors Salcombe Gin and Craftinsure. Racing is from Sunday 9th July to Friday 14th July, with racing at 10:30 and 14:30. The MROA is aiming to be live on Facebook for the racing and all the action will be on their social media channels -

<https://www.facebook.com/merlinrocket>