



BSPORT ISAF Women's Match Racing World Championships

# Allez les bleus

**When reigning world champion Claire Leroy of France opened her title defence on Auckland's Waitemata Harbour in early April, she declined to identify any particular threat in the 14-team line-up.**

"They all have their different characteristics," she said. "Some are strong in the heavy wind and others are good in the light wind. Every one of them

must be treated with respect." As it turned out, the regatta provided the full spectrum of those conditions, starting at the heavy end, with winds over 20 knots, and steadily reducing until the final day, sadly, left the yachts drifting, propelled more by tide than by wind.

Story & pictures by Ivor Wilkins

The windless conditions of the last day meant the sailing schedule could not be completed and the final placings were calculated from the semi-final standings. Leroy had done enough to secure her second consecutive world title.

That outcome did not look like a foregone conclusion after the first day of racing, when Leroy did not have it all her own way and the leaderboard was topped by the





*Back to back world titles for the French team skippered by World #1, Claire Leroy.*

Finnish team skippered by Silja Lehtinen. But, then at the same stage in the regatta it would have been a brave person who bet on American Liz Baylis to take out the silver medal slot. Yet, when the wind went light, the Americans proved to be extremely fast, roll-tacking with precision and setting their boat up nice and easy compared with some of the European crews who seemed to favour very tight sheeting and

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Claire Leroy, at 28 years of age and representing Sport Nautique de Saint Quay Portrieux, is current Rolex World Yachtswoman of the Year. She has been virtually untouchable in her recent match racing career, hanging on tight to the Number One spot in the Women's ISAF World Match Race Rankings since May 2005.

"We are feeling very good, very emotional," she said. "It's a great moment. We had a cry."

Of Leroy's crew of Marie Riou, Elodie Bertrand and Claire Pruvot, both Riou and Pruvot are newcomers to the team this year, and in true Leroy style they have pulled together to achieve a distinctive edge in boatspeed that enables them to win time and time again.

While Leroy was disappointed not to meet up with Baylis in the finals, she was glad to have the confidence of knowing she had great Round Robin results to fall back

on if needed. "We are very happy with all of the results. It's nice to come back with a trophy."

Leroy advanced to the finals after three straight wins over the British crew led by Josie Gibson. The French team were then reduced to spectators, waiting for the second semi-final to yield their opponents – but the lengthy delays waiting for wind meant the final could not be sailed and the top order was decided on countback.

Lehtinen, who led convincingly in the early stages of the regatta, appeared to continue her winning momentum when she took the semi-final score to 2-1 against Baylis. But, in the faintest of breezes, Baylis coaxed pace from her yacht and took the next two matches convincingly.

Baylis commented: "We had really good boat speed and used that boatspeed to our advantage in the final two races."

She said her crew of Suzy Leech, Lee Lcyda and Karina Shelton made some great tactical calls. "Suzy and Lee knew where they wanted us to go, and we made



*Photos: top left – The Finnish team skippered by Silja Lehtinen dominated the early rounds and finished 3rd. Above – Veteran match racer Liz Baylis and her American crew came through to take the silver medal.*

*Opposite Page: Top: Unbridled joy from the German team led by Silke Hahlbrock as they score an upset win over the French world number 1 team. Bottom: The British team led by Josie Gibson made the semi-final four.*









World #2 Lotte Meldgaard Pedersen and her Danish team slipped down the leaderboard

sure we sailed there as fast as we could."

She also admitted to a psychological edge. "We felt like there was nowhere to go but up, and that gives you an edge. You just want to keep racing, and maybe take a little more risk."

Baylis is one of the sport's most enduring patrons. A former Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year, and 2002 world champion, she has been instrumental in seeing women's match racing become an Olympic sport. Now her attention is turned to the remainder of her 2008 campaign, and plans to be at the 2012 Olympics.

Bronze medallist Lehtinen, aged 22, was the youngest competitor in the fleet, a former world champion skiff sailor, and a second year student at medical school. She entered the regatta ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the world and with a team that includes her stepmother Vivi Fleming-Lehtinen, Maria Klemetz and Livia Varesmaa,

she is not only a skilled match racer: she will also represent Finland in the Yngling class at the Beijing Olympics later this year.

Fourth placegetter Josie Gibson, a former 470 sailor, represents Island Sailing Club and also won through to the semi-finals in the 2007 edition of the ISAF Women's World Match Racing Championships.

New Zealand's hopes rode on Squadron Youth Programme graduate Jess Smyth, and Yachting New Zealand president Jan Dawson, but the internationals proved

too polished and the New Zealand crews finished 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> respectively.

Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron Commodore John Crawford is hearty in both his congratulations of the winners, and his gratitude to the team who organised the event.

"In particular I would like to congratulate this week's podium finishers. The spirit of competition from all concerned has been very rewarding to see," he said.

"We were disappointed with the conditions on the final day of racing, but the first four days of racing provided excellent sailing."

The BSport ISAF Women's Match Racing World Championships were hosted by the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron and sponsored by BSport, Giltrap City Toyota and Auckland City Council.

The 2009 event will take place in Lysekil, Sweden.

### Overall standings

- |                          |                                |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 – Claire Leroy (FRA)   | 8 – Jess Smyth (NZL)           |
| 2 – Liz Baylis (USA)     | 9 – Christelle Philippe (FRA)  |
| 3 – Silja Lehtinen (FIN) | 10 – Lotte Medldgaard (DEN)    |
| 4 – Josie Gibson (GBR)   | 11 – Camilla Ulrikkeholm (DEN) |
| 5 – Katie Spithill (AUS) | 12 – Sabrina Gurioli (ITA)     |
| 6 – Silke Hahlbrok (GER) | 13 – Jan Dawson (NZL)          |
| 7 – Nicky Souter (AUS)   | 14 – Gemma Farrell (GBR)       |