

Augie Diaz, classe 1955, è appena passato al 505, il suo curriculum velico è di tutto rispetto: Rolex yachtman anno 2003, pluriirridato Snipe, numerose campagne per le selezioni olimpiche per Star e FD ecc. Intervista completa fatta da Keith McCabe

Snipe/Star superstar Augie Diaz stepped into the International 505 in February only to walk away with a resounding win in the 29-boat Midwinter Champs. Anarchist KmMcCabe, one of the geniuses behind the excellent High-Performance Dinghy Open as well as an enthusiastic Tempest sailor, caught up with him for a great SA Innerview. Enjoy.

Kmccabe: Thanks for taking the time for this discussion, Augie. I was hoping to have a chat with you about what I think is something pretty unique in 505's, that is, someone essentially stepping into the class and walking away with a major trophy.

Everybody already knows that you're fabulous, you're one of the best in the sport. Quite honestly, I've been following your career ever since I was a kid in high school.

Augie: I don't really agree with that, and as we go through our discussion, I think you'll see why - and by the way I STILL haven't figured out how it really happened that weekend, because basically it was almost like a Perfect Storm that happened. I like to analyse; when I lose I like to know why, but when I win, I really like to understand exactly why as well. So, I've done a lot of thinking about the Midwinters; and the thing that troubles me is that I just can't quite put my finger on it. I've got a lot of tidbits but I can't say really that this is the way things happened and I know what I'm doing. Which is what I like to be able to do after a race.

Kmccabe: OK, well I've got some suspicions as to why you did well. It has to do with the fact that you are a newcomer. I think that a LOT of people in the class get too involved in the gear. I think it's the fact that you come from a different perspective where you can see things fresh and you're not involved in fashion and styles, the latest and greatest piece of gadgetry. There are a lot of frustrated engineers in the 505 class, and consequently, they focus more on the equipment and less on the actual sailing of the boat, moving the boat around the course. It's my opinion that your experience with the other classes has basically allowed you to see what's important and focus.

Ok if you could just tell me a bit about the reasons why you selected the boat you did, why you picked the masts, a lot of the reasons why stuff gets done in the 505 class is the "best guys are using x or y".

Augie: We should start with the story of why I got into the 505's...

Kmccabe: OK

Augie: I had my Star boat next to Carl Buchan all last season - he had his boat down here and he was sailing it with his son Jamie. About halfway through the season, we were talking the usual stuff about sailing. At one point I said, "Carl, I really envy you. You get to sail with your son." My sons are too big for the Snipe and too small for the Star. In typical Buchan brilliance, he mutters under his breath, "you should sail 505's with them" and then walked away. I thought, "I'm not going to get into 505's at this stage - I'm too old and too busy to do that." But that idea started working on me. Then I made the biggest mistake; I sent my sons a clip or two from the website of what it was like to sail a 505 and said "hey would you be interested in sailing with me on this boat? Would you guys sail with me?" They both came back with "Absolutely! Hell, Yes! I would love to sail on a boat like this with you!" So I said, "OK well I guess I got buy-in from them."

So I started looking for a boat. The first call I made was to Ethan Bixby (North Sails former 505 world champion). Ethan hooked me up to sail in the ECC's up in West River and Macy Nelson was super-gracious in getting me Nick's (Macy's son) boat to borrow for the event. It took off from there. Having had experience with the Flying Dutchman, getting back in a boat like the 505 with the new 'chute, it was even better than I recall the Flying Dutchman being. It was an adrenaline rush, and it snowballed from there. Now, one is going away to MBA School and the other just got married. But, I am in the 505 to stay.

So, how to get a 505: At first I wanted to get a good used boat. Then I quickly found out a good used boat is as expensive as a brand new one. Then I said, "Well, let me get a new boat." I asked Ethan, and he told me to get a new Rondar. I started trying to figure out how to get a Rondar and I realized that I wasn't going to get a new Rondar rigged anytime soon, so I did the next best thing. I got a Rondar Hull. Paul Young (owner of Rondar) was very gracious and helped me out got me a new hull right away. When I started thinking about how long it was going to take me to rig that boat I freaked out. I said, "this is something I'll never be able to do". So I got a call from Jesse Falsone, who I met at the West River regatta – Jesse's super helpful. That's one thing about the 505 class and I think its both that the people are great people and it's a self preservation issue. The boat is so overwhelming and difficult that if you don't help people and if you don't have an openness the class would not grow.

I'm used to the Snipe class where the boats are not that difficult but the class is very open. I'm used to people walking up to my boat and taking pictures and measurements. It's a totally open book. So I'm used to that. The Snipe would survive without that quality in people but I don't think the 505 would. So you wouldn't believe how helpful people have been.

So Jesse calls me up and says, "look Augie, I know you've got a new Rondar coming but you'll probably never get that thing rigged in time." I said "you know what, I already realized that." Jesse told me he wanted to sell his boat, but really wanted to sell it to someone who he knew was going to sail it. So, I called Ethan Bixby. By the way, Ethan Bixby represents about 90% of my program. Literally, everything I do, that guy has so much patience, I almost feel bad calling him. I try to keep it all short. Ethan said "buy the boat" so I did. Probably the best decision I have made so far.

The boat came with two masts. A Proctor Cumulus section and a Superspar M2. When I first rigged the boat up to go sailing down here (Miami) I rigged the Cumulus because the main mast for the boat was the Superspar M2. I put up the Cumulus because I knew I was going to be crashing and burning and I didn't want to risk the Superspar.

We practiced over the Christmas holiday and then the first first two weekends in January we did sessions Ethan, Eric, Drew Buttner, John Lowe and Craig and some of the guys in Saint Petersburg. For this practice series I rigged the M2 by Superspar. Regarding masts I think the guy who put it best is Peter Alarie who said "Look, the M2 is probably a great mast between 8-18 knots, above and below that you're probably better off with an Alto or some similar section to that." Guess what? In the Midwinters we probably sailed in that eight to ten knot breeze the whole time. I noticed that when we were both in the boat we struggled a little but as soon as my crew Tommy got on the wire, we picked up a little bit and the mast seemed to power up. I did something between Friday and Saturday that I don't know was smart. I lengthened my spreaders a little bit. That mast does have the spreader bracket at the lower position at 10 feet. Most of the other masts have the spreader bracket at 10' 4". So when you're looking at spreader length on all the masts you really have to keep in mind where the spreader bracket really is in relation to the others. That four inches makes a big difference. I was trying to copy Ethan as much as possible, so that when he starts speaking about rigs I know exactly what he's talking about. We meld. Its important when you're trying to learn a new class. So between Friday and Saturday, I lengthened my spreaders a little because I wasn't sure my mast was as straight sideways as I would like it to be. BUT I'm not really sure that was faster. I'll have to do a little work on that.

Kmccabe: How long did you lengthen your spreaders? Where did they come from and where did they go to?

Augie: They went from 16.5 to 16.75". Remember I'm at 10' - if you had a spreader bracket that was at 10'4" I would shorten the spreaders a little bit about a quarter of an inch.

Kmccabe: Just so that we're clear, that's ten feet from where?

Augie: That's ten feet from the deck band (not the gooseneck). That's the most common measure that I hear guy's talking about. Guys like Jesse, Macy and Drew share everything.

Kmccabe: Drew is awesome.

Augie: He's super-knowledgable. Peter Alarie and Tyler talk about stuff a lot too, so there's a great sharing from all the top sailors. They give out great information. My sense is that if you are going to talk about spreader bracket you have to have those measurements. These boats are complicated enough.

Kmccabe: yes the class is great at setting standards...

Augie: That's very important, I need to simplify things.

Kmccabe: OK what about blades?

Augie: For the blades I've got Waterrats, That's another person who's great. Larry Tuttle. Because I'm good friends with Ethan, I have really good access to Larry mostly over email and we've spent a lot of time speaking about things. So I have a 445 that was designed by Larry/Jesse and built by Larry. That's what the boat came with. I'm used to heavy boats and particularly at starts and when turning the boat I felt like I was going sideways a lot, so under Ethan's advice I got a 480 for the Midwinters. That's what I used. Of course it didn't blow. What I really needed to do was figure out how to make it work in a blow. I didn't get to do that. You'll get a kick out of this: Tommy, my crew, was a little disappointed because the only time it blew fifteen knots was in the first race, and Tyler and Jeff Nelson sailed away from us. Tommy was upset, so after the race I said "Tommy come with me; let's go for a walk." We walked over to Tyler and Jeff and said hello. I then looked at Tommy and he looked at Jeff and said "Tommy, do you understand now?" Tommy said, "yeah I understand." Tommy's 6'4" and 175 he's like a rail and then he stands next to Jeff Nelson and he looks like a linebacker. He understood.

Kmccabe: Jeff's a big boy..

Augie: Oh yea. But I really needed to have the wind blow all weekend to figure that out.

Kmccabe: For heavy air where do you think you need your board to be? In terms of area?

Augie: That's absolutely a tough question - it's a moving target and a subject of discussion with Larry. I'm undecided. I'm leaning towards staying with a 480 'cause that's what Ethan's using. So if I'm going to be using Ethan's sails I may as well stay with the 480 for consistency. There's a lot to be said for going to a place like San Francisco with a smaller blade. But I don't know that I'm going to have time to figure all that out. What I have to do is get good at using the equipment that I have. I need to understand why I'm going fast or slow.

Kmccabe: I can say unequivocally that you moved around the course faster than anybody else. Which brings me to the next question about your sails. I know that you've got the relationship going with Ethan - I know that because Ethan is the number one person for 505 sails from North in the United States, you went with North Sails. How do you like the sails?

Augie: Well, I like the sails a LOT, its all I really know. I haven't used the Glasers yet. The Glasers, well because I'm light, the Glasers look to be more the sails for a heavier crew.

Kmccabe: Do you have a set?

Augie: No, not yet. I probably should do that, but you know what? I probably won't because I have to keep things as simple as possible. Ethan wants me to put a lifting pin in my boat. I am trying to figure out a way to sail in a breeze without the lifting pin.

Kmccabe: I am SURE you will find a way to do that.

Augie: That's kind of like a need thing. I like the sails a lot. I went with the standard sails. I went with Dacron to begin with and will go to the other sails, probably the 3DL's and take my time with that. With all the other things I've got to figure out I will probably just go with whatever sails Ethan uses at the World's.

Kmccabe: You definitely intend to go to the World's with Tommy?

Augie: Tommy has promised that he'll get up to 190 pounds, you should see him eat, he eats a lot, but he doesn't gain weight.

Kmccabe: Oh to have those problems!

Augie: Basically, I'm going to give him some time to gain weight because I like sailing with Tommy and he is very good. You can make up for a lack of weight with proper boat handling but not on those long courses and not against the big boys.

Kmccabe: You know San Francisco has a reputation as a heavy air venue. So with the luck of recent World Championships its probably NOT going to blow.

Augie: Well I will tell you, its going to blow some. I've sailed in San Francisco enough to know it's going to blow. But I do agree with you particularly on those two race days the morning race could be light.

Part 2 of KmMccabe's comprehensive Innerview with Snipe/Star superstar Augie Diaz. Enjoy.

KM: How do you plan your start, taking into account course side bias, number of competitors and wind strength?

AD: I think this is pretty standard for all of us. In terms of the Midwinters, there was quite a bit of current so we took that into account also in our planning. Once I have the feeling that we had pretty good speed particularly in the light stuff. Into that I built in that it was advantage to start early. Even though the rabbit's a fast guy, I definitely want to start early if I'm faster. I don't put too much emphasis on this, 'cause usually the rabbit's a pretty fast guy and I don't let this override the decision to go right if I really believe the right's got better wind, current etc. The other thing I do is what I call "Poll the Players". I have my crew keep track of our major competition and we note where they are going, particularly if I have to beat them. For instance if all the major players start early and I want to go right, then I start analyzing why. If I have an opportunity to get closer to them, I take it with the thought that their analysis may have better data and I beat it down to that area. It doesn't make a difference whether it's a regular start or a rabbit start.

KM: It also shouldn't matter what kind of boat you're in right?

AD: Exactly. That's how I do the start. In the case of the midwinters I felt that starting early was overall favored. Lo and behold the one start that we screwed up happened when we weren't paying attention. I think what happened was there was a little shift to the left and suddenly the rabbit appeared. We were too far away from the line. So we started late. Most of the guys around us realized what was happening and started on time. Everybody else had started and we had to take a lot of transoms. In that one race, the wind went right. So we went all the way right with this girl, I think she's English.

KM: She's German, her name is Katrin.

AD: Well fortunately she was fast. REALLY fast, it was light enough so that she was really fast. So we went all the right and when we tacked we were basically across the fleet. Which was pure luck.

KM: Its not pure luck, Augie. You're good, and you realized the opportunity.

AD: Well in that respect it was pure luck. My gameplan had been to start early and protect left. I should have been coming out of the left also.

KM: How do you plan the windward leg? Does the strength of the wind make any difference?

AD: Yes it does. Particularly in the 505, even more so than the Star or Snipe I think pressure goes a long ways because it gives you angle (it helps too by the way in Snipes and Stars). But in the 505, particularly in that breeze when you're going from on the tanks to trapping, pressure is king. I think that's what was going on at the Midwinters there was more pressure at times on the left. I think

that's what helped us decide which side we were going to be looking at for going upwind. I had very good interchange with Tommy Fink, my crew. The guy is a great sailor in his own right and we had great discussion and a lot of agreement on the boat as to which way to go. We try to analyze what's happening not just with angle but with pressure and favor that side. With rabbit starts of course if you want to go left you want to start early and if you want to go right you want to start later.

KM: How do you plan to round the weather mark? Do varying wind strengths or the size of the fleet make any difference? Does your position in the fleet make any difference?

AD: I'm still getting a feel for that in the 505. Generally, I like to avoid what I like to call the "wall". Its more pronounced on the starboard laylines, but I like tacking short of that on both sides. Very critical at the Midwinters to tack short at the starboard tack layline because the current was blowing you so quickly to the bridge. If you tacked over or near the laylines at the Midwinters you were usually overstood. We realized that early in the regatta and Tommy had that in his thoughts and was pretty quick to say "we're getting close" or "we're running out of runway" because once we tacked on starboard we were almost always overstood...

So I DO have an approach and its usually stay away from the "wall". The size of the fleet DEFINITELY makes a difference, its more critical in the bigger fleets and less critical in the smaller fleets.

KM: After you've rounded, assuming it's a simple windward/leeward, how do you plan the downwind leg?

AD: Generally I like to set because I don't really like going into what I call the cone of silence.

KM: the Center?

AD: That's usually defined as between the gybing lines. Its really critical at the weather mark to avoid this. So I generally like to set and go. I have to have a VERY compelling reason to gybe set. I think that's standard in most of our gameplans and in everyone's gameplan. Actually I'm still feeling my way through that on the 505. I'm getting through this by copying. I look for guys who I believe know what their doing. I find them and I try to copy their angle going downwind. I know in one race we had a pretty good lead, we tried to trap reach to each side and we ended going back and forth perpendicular to the rhumb line. Guys came around the weather mark and we were reaching back and forth, the current was against us and they were right on top of us going dead downwind. We lost a lot. Fortunately we had enough of a cushion so we didn't lose. Its that kind of thing that I'm getting used to and learning.

KM: What's your guide on gybing? There's typically a judgement call.

AD: We're going along on starboard because I don't like to gybe set. If there are guys that are brave enough to gybe set, I try to gauge how well they're doing.

KM: Some boats back in the day, Solings, Stars and FD's used to have tacking and gybing lines written on the hull...

AD: It changes so much with pressure, especially in the 505. You really couldn't use them. So then I just start analyzing. I let Tommy give me information. I'm terrible at going low enough, but not going too low is super critical. That issue of going low enough but not too low is super critical. You watch the good guys, like Tyler, Ethan and Lin they're so much better. Anyways that issue I still have to get my arms around. You can't go too low or you fall off the edge. So what I do is go off on starboard and I have Tommy watching the angle, the guys around me and the guys who split with us. I don't like to go back into the "Cone of Silence" too early, so I'll never gybe unless I'm really compelled to by pressure or angle. I'll kind of hold. If I have to I'll go to the layline. There are tactical reasons why I'd go early as well. Its kind of complex.

KM: What about planing conditions?

AD: That I'm still learning a lot. We really only had that at the first race at the Midwinters. We had the luxury because of our light weight to go lower than most people. My idea is to keep going as low as you can without losing the "lane" so to speak. When I'm planing I want to go low and look for lanes going across.

KM: By lanes you mean clear air?

AD: Exactly.

KM: So ok, we're at the end of the downwind leg and you're approaching the mark - how do you do it?

AD: I think there are differences, depending on whether or not you have a gate downwind. We didn't at the Midwinters so you want to come in from the left. Its not a huge priority except that you just need to get around the mark clean and fast.

KM: What if you're behind and if there's a clump of boats around the mark? What do you give up to get around them?

AD: It's hard to comment on it because it's so dependant on the tactical situation. Generally if it's a left handed course, I going to go right behind them and tack first. Depending on the amount of boats if it's a right handed course I might just go bow down and try to get around them. Again, it depends on the tactical situation. My biggest concern is getting the kite down early enough so that I do have the option of tacking away or bow down. The good guys like Ethan/Eric and Tyler/Jeff genuinely do a good job, Drew/Chris also, do a very nice job of striking the balance of early dousing and boathandling to get you around the mark clean. It's a function of having the kite up as long as possible to give you as much speed as possible to manouver.

KM: How about some offense - assuming you have started down the line on starboard and there's suddenly a 10 degree header. You're close to the gate mark. How do you get clear to port?

AD: I wait a little bit and see if the guys react. If the guy's not reacting its usually because they want to go left. So if I'm pinned and I can't cross, I wait just briefly and I'm not really good at it yet but tacking and ducking in those situations is critical to do early. You've got a small window to get it right. Dipping and going behind them is desirable. Generally speaking, if it's a 10 degree header, they're going to tack anyway.

KM: I've seen that. There was one race at the Midwinters where you had to take a lot of transoms and you were able to do that and still win. OK - so you're new to the 505, how much of a shift is necessary for you to tack on? Do you tack on 5 degrees 10 degrees ?

AD: It depends on the windstrength and the planing conditions, and I don't have a feel for it yet. But when you're sitting in the boat, its just like a Snipe, so when you get a 5 degree shift you go for it. Its going to be harder for me in upwind planing conditions which happens quite early in the 505.

KM: Have you done that yet?

AD: In the first race and of course in practice sure. It's beautiful. When that happened, I widened the needed tacking angles to be conservative. Its not that big a penalty in planing conditions to overstand because you can put your bow down and really take off. Its not like you're going to die because you've overstood. In a Star or a Snipe, in those conditions, overstanding is death.

KM: Lets say you're going upwind and covered hard by someone - I mean you're getting snuffed. How do you break free? You know that you're faster. What do you do?

AD: If it's a match race situation, you've got to hope you can tack better. If the guys' good and he's just match racing you, there's very little you can do. If it's not a match race, which in a fleet race it rarely is, except if its down to you and him in the last race, then I initiate a tacking duel. In two or three tacks you should be clear. If you can't tack better then I just sag down a little on the favored tack and try to go faster. I'll pick the favored side of the course or the favored tack, put the bow

down and get free.

KM: So now the you're on the favored port tack with a row of boats coming across on starboard. You just cannot cross the leader. How many boats would you dip the stern of or would you tack to get a lee bow position on the leader?

AD: It depends on the room you have. If you are very close to the port tack layline I'm going to favor dipping. I have a few rules about weather mark roundings. Number one - I don't want to foul. Number two - I don't want to put pressure on myself to foul in that situation. Nine out of ten times it's a bad ending to that story. So I like to get around that weather mark clean. There's so little premium in getting around the weather mark ahead. What happens in a clump of boats that rounds the mark is that the leader has to head up a little to keep clear air and so on, so that when you do get around - guess what? You're right with them and overlapped.. . People put way too much pressure on themselves and the payoff is so low that its not worth it. The thing that happens to us most times is that people get caught up too much and that's not good. It works pretty much the same on all the boats I sail.

KM: Let's say you're at the mark on a lift on port and you see a whole lot of boats coming in on starboard, what do you do?

AD: My criteria is how close I am to the layline, how many boats I have to duck and what really am I going to gain from it. It really rarely comes up. If you have three or four boats lined up on starboard tack and they are headed, most times they're going to tack. Again if you're on port and he's on starboard - a lot of times if someone's really good and knows what they're doing, they won't make you tack. I don't 'cause its not worth the trouble.. If I'm coming across on starboard and I see a competitor, even if I'm really close to him in competition and I'm in phase, I just let him go. So the lee-bow rarely happens in competition.

KM: if its at the end of a championship, you'd consider it right?

AD: Of course, if its down to somebody beating me or not. At the regatta at the end of the midwinters it happened to us. Tommy took a little insult when people were tacking on top of us and covering us. I said, no Tommy, it's totally called for, it's all part of the game, just fleet tactics. You gotta do that. Let's talk about just what happened at the MidWinters, lets say you've got a little bit of an edge in speed, people would come across us on a header and tack on us to force us to tack away. Tommy would say, why the hell did that happen? I would say it was totally appropriate. We were in the lead and going faster. People were covering us heavily to force us to make mistakes and finish lower in the standings. Oddly enough, the guys who did that, without exception, were all the good sailors who know how to play the game. Good tight fleet tactics.

KM: Downwind, what do you consider the correct way to pass a boat?

AD: It's a chess game, which is the beauty of it all. People who don't sail like we do have no idea what they're missing. Going downwind and controlling the guy ahead of you and trying to gybe on his air to pass, the cat and mouse game is the best. It's so situational that, for me, it's hard to tell you more. What I will say; it's all about gaining control of the guy ahead of us. If I'm coming from behind, I want to be to leeward and I want to get to that point where I can control him. Its easier on starboard but harder when on port because you have to get so close to control the other boat. Controlling the boat in front of you is something I love to think about. When I was a kid I used to feel ashamed about daydreaming and wasting time thinking about this. I then read a book about mental visualization and it changed me. I contemplate this stuff all the time. In the clinics and debriefs and just talk it all through. The learning opportunities are endless. Going over these situations off the water and then applying the rules really help to improve everyone's game. So we've been able to develop rules and boiling things down to controlling the boat in front and controlling the boats behind. Don't let other boats control what you do.

KM: Thanks so much for taking the time to chat with us, Augie.

AD: Thanks to you for asking!