

An interview with Travis Wilson

by Andrew Kerr

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Travis Wilson started sailing Santana 20s at Sacramento's Folsom lake as a member of Fleet 12 and since then he has taken his boat – *Head First* – all over the country and he has been a strong supporter of the class.



In 1999 he sailed with class veteran Rick Harris, finishing 3rd at the Nationals on Lake Alcovia (Casper, WY). In 2000 he and his talented team of Willem van Waay (skipper) & Peter van Waay (bow) bested a talented fleet and won the Nationals at Newport Beach, CA. In the 2003 Nationals at Huntington lake they finished 2nd and at the 2004 Nationals in Long Beach they finished 3rd. This team (With Willem skippering) was also part of the Coronado YC team that won the prestigious Lipton Cup.

A long time resident of San Diego, CA and a member of Fleet 7, Travis has since moved to Arizona from which he organizing the 2006 Nationals to be held at Coronado Yacht club – August 7th to the 11th.

The Nationals were previously hosted at Coronado Yacht Club in 1980, 1983 & 1992. This year's event going to be a great regatta for the Class and is a much anticipated event.

Andrew Kerr caught up with Travis to find out about his sailing and the upcoming Nationals at Coronado.

AK: Tell us about your early sailing years and what got you interested in sailing the S20.

TW: As I grew up, sailing was something to do on the weekends. My dad owned a Catalina 22 that we would take out on Folsom Lake. We would go out to watch the Camellia Cup from a viewpoint next to the dam. I remember on one occasion where all the Wavelength 24s (at the time I had no idea what they were) came around the weather mark, all broached and some of the crew fell off the into the water. It was exciting. That is when I decided I wanted to get into sailing more seriously. So my Dad bought me a Coronado 15 that I raced from junior high into my freshman year of high school. During the winter months, I would travel down to Richmond Yacht club to sail Lasers in their Junior program. We also had a Junior program that was headed up by Keith Steele and George Koch at Folsom Lake YC during the Spring and Summer months. That is where

I first had contact with Charles Witcher - would come in to do chalk talks with us.

After three years of sailing the C-15 around Folsom Lake, I became interested in the Santana 20 as all the Hotshots of FLYC were sailing them. So my Dad went out and bought one for us to sail.

AK: Tell us about *Head First*, I seem to remember the boat back at the '96 Nationals in Eugene - where and when did you get the boat?

TW: I thank my dad for that. He found and purchased the boat back in 1990 from a guy who had it in San Jose. The boat was barely used and had a full inventory of Hart Sails that were brand new. Sharon and Charles talked us into going to nationals in 1991 for the experience. It was a bit overwhelming for us. We showed up to the '91 nationals with no clue on what this all meant. I was 16 and we had only had the boat for about a year. We went out on the practice day and pulled our starboard bulkhead and never got to compete in the event. I remember Ron Fish being willing to repair the boat. At the time I had no idea who he was. But we opted to wait and fix it when we got it back home. The experience hooked me. I wanted to go to Nationals whenever I could. So all of you that don't think you're ready for the big event. You are. Look - I did it at 16. It's just about showing up, having a good time and moving up the learning curve faster.

The second Nationals I attended were held in Eugene in 1996. We had a great time. That is where I met many of you for the first time. I sailed with John Poole, a former '20 owner of #457, now owned by the Cardwells (aka Moon). It was nice to compete in my first Nationals with someone that had done it before. And at the Eugene Club you can never have a bad time.

AK: Tell us about your time sailing with Fleet 12 on Folsom Lake - you must have learned a lot being around Charles Witcher, Sharon Hart & Charlie Hess.

TW: Folsom was great. My dad had a slip in the marina so we would keep the '20 in the water during the spring and summer. After school or work I would go up to the lake, either by myself or with some friends, and go sailing. I spent so many hours sailing the boat that I just got a feel for her.

Charles and Sharon were great. I used to go to Sharon's loft anytime that I was close to downtown. Her loft was on the banks of the Sacramento River. Walking into that loft was like going into the FLYC Hall of Fame. There were trophies and pictures of her and Charles all over the place. I remember when I was younger thinking, "How could they win this many trophies?" I considered them to be the best. So whatever they said to do or said to change, I did. To make the boat a little faster they recommended that I fill the gap in between the rudder, the following weekend I was doing it. If they said to fair the keel, I did it. Charles taught me how to tune the '20 from the ground up. To this day I still tune the '20 to some of his numbers. Both Sharon and Charles took the time to get me started and I appreciate it tremendously.

AK: In 2000, you, Willem, and Peter put on a very impressive performance at the Nationals – what are the elements that make this team successful? Tell us a little about Willem & Peter:

TW: I met them at the Coronado YC Fall Regatta in '96. When I moved down to San Diego in '97, I ran into them again at the Nationals held at Mission Bay YC. The following summer I was at the first "X" games held in Mission Beach when I ran into Peter working at the games. We started hanging out and became friends. As I became friends with Pete, Willem became a friend as well. We didn't do any sailing together for about a year. Then Pete and I started sailing the '20 together for the year and went on to sail our first nationals together with Rick Harris in '99 up in Wyoming. That year Willem was going to sail on Team Disaster Area and decided to drive out with Pete and me to Wyoming. We had a great time on that road trip and became better friends.

I remember being at a local bar that fall called Pacific Beach Bar and Grill and the idea was formed. I can remember after a few beers Willem, Peter, and I started talking about sailing *Head First* together. And from then on the team was set.

Since that year Willem and I have sailed together on numerous campaigns with one another and have won regattas in the Farr40, 1D-35, Schock 35, J-105, and numerous other small boat regattas. So we learned from one another on how to win and what it took to win.

Another key to our success came in 2000. We were using North Sails and Chris Winnard had just become a North representative. So with the our two boats having the exact same sails we spent two to three days sailing against one another, tuning up and getting ready for the event. I can't tell you how important it is to tune with someone fast.

AK: One thing I can appreciate as a coach is how hard you guy's sail and practice. I remember seeing your team at the 2004 Nationals in Long Beach, CA and how much sailing you were doing before and between races. Tell us about your approach to events:

TW: Our approach is simple. Have the best boat handling in the fleet and do whatever it takes to win the start and not to break down. Before the event we always go through the boat and replace anything that looks like it might fail. We clean and wax the boat and then it's time to work on our skills in the water. Before every major event we spend at least one full day of boat handling. Peter and Willem both worked at J World with Andrew prior to us meeting. Willem is also the Coronado High School sailing coach and is a graduate of the famed St. Mary's sailing team. From his experience in coaching and being coached, he takes us through some intense drills all the time. He always tries to catch Pete and I off guard or just relaxing and will say, "jibe and turn the boat". Because we all know at the top and bottom marks you need to make split second decisions and turn the boat without waiting for the crew to get ready. So our goal was that he could turn the boat whenever he wanted and we would be able to do our jobs and complete the jibe or tack. Being comfortable with all your maneuvers in the conditions you are going

to be racing in makes you and your team confident.



Long Beach was a bit more work for us. We had a new mast and a new set of sails from Elliott-Pattison. So we spent about a day trying to figure out what the best setup was for our boat and his sails. Harry Pattison came down the day before the event to go out with us and show us what he thought a good setup would be. So that helped and it gave us a good starting point and from there we could tweak it. In Long beach, we set up for heavy air and had sails built for a heavier air venue. As the heavy air didn't show up, we needed to do

more sailing before, between, and after races to find something that worked. But all the time and hard work paid off as we found a way to get the sails to the shape we wanted. And the sails and practice put us in a position to win the regatta as going into the last race - we were winning the event. We didn't end up winning but we came close. So practice pays off always in the end.

Again, it is important to tune with someone or teams you know are fast. No one was out prior to the event to tune with that had EP sails. We tuned with *Altitude Sickness*, *Aggressive Tendencies*, *Mini Me*, and *Disaster Area* - as we knew any one of these boats could win the regatta. This gave us a good idea of what we needed to work on to be fast.

AK: The Class is excited for the upcoming Nationals at Coronado. Tell us about the event, and how things are coming along.

TW: Things are going great. The yacht club, race management team, sailing area, and dining arrangements have been made and confirmed. We are working on gear, a live band, and local shop and restaurant sponsorships. I have many ideas for trophies and I am trying to get awards for others accomplishments besides 1-10th place. I'm using ideas from past Nationals and adding things new to make the event memorable.

The yacht club is excited to host the event and is doing whatever I ask of them to make this the best event held at CYC since the 2002 Lipton Cup. I guarantee that everyone that comes will leave with great memories.

AK: What can a first time visiting team to Coronado expect?

TW: A laid back town with a club that is full of great members. The CYC reminds me of Eugene YC. Not a big ego type of place. Everyone is friendly and willing to help visiting boats. The town itself is going to blow people away. The main street with all the restaurants and shops, including the Hotel Del, is just across the street from the club.

That sailing venue itself is possibly the best for boats our size and for all levels of competitors. As the weather mark is just a few hundred yards off the beach, it creates flat-water conditions with consistent and steady breezes. The leeward mark and start and finish lines are close to the Navy piers where you can see up close the newest ships. Near the leeward marks, you can get some wind chop but the teams that are used to sailing in lakes will feel right at home. There is no kelp except an occasional piece that has been dragged in from the ocean. Also expect some current near the leeward mark.

AK: You recently sailed at the Arizona YC Birthday Regatta – tell us about the event and the S20 fleet in Arizona:

TW: The AZ fleet is full of great people. AZ is very different than most places as their sailing seasons are opposite. I sailed in the Arizona Yacht Club's major event early in January with a team new to the '20 - Dennis and Tim McMillen (S20 #903 "*Rambunctious*"). Dennis and I had been "talking shop" for months. We finally got that chance to sail together in January. The weekend before the regatta, we met at the lake and went through the boat and re-rigging some of the controls. We took time to get used to one another and didn't push it too hard. While we were practicing Dennis, told me his goal was not to finish last. I was thinking that is a good goal being his first regatta driving a '20.

When the regatta weekend arrived, Dennis had bigger ambitions and wanted to be the first place Arizona boat. There were four boats from Arizona and the road warriors Britt Williams (S20 #920 "*Feyest*") and IV McNamara (S20 #925 "*Cocaine and Hookers*") who traveled all the way from Okalahoma. It was a small turnout of six boats but it was close racing. I didn't know what to expect but I figured with a small fleet I just needed to keep us out of trouble and sail smart. My goal was to win the starts and sail towards the best pressure. Something I learned at Folsom Lake.

Saturday was the light air day and boats would go from first to fourth and fourth to first. We finished two race and at the end of the day Britt was leading with two second places while we were tied with the local rock star, Martin Lorch, with both of us having a 1st and 4th.

Sunday the wind came out of nowhere. A cold front moved in and we saw winds all day from 10 to close to 20 knots. I was glad, and so was everyone else - there was not going to be a drifter that day. The races on Sunday were tight and everyone was obviously sailing fast; staying upright was key. Other boats similar to ours decided to de power and run downwind with the genoa while other boats sailed with the jib.

In the first race both Britt and our team (Dennis, Tim, and me) were sailing within a couple of boats lengths of each other. Britt passed us about 20 yards from the finish line while we were sailing through a fleet of Buccaneers. Our team won the next race, Britt finished third. IV McNamara won the third race. This gave our team, *Rambunctious*, a one-point lead going into the last race.

The last race of the day was real puffy and Britt sailed with a jib. The course was a one-lap sausage. Britt rounded the weather mark with the jib one boat length in front of us and then set the kite. We were hesitant but knew that if we didn't do the same, the race was over. So up she went. We sailed under control by over sheeting in the puffs and were able to pass Britt before the bottom mark. But that is where I made the big mistake of falling off the boat and watching Britt t come right at me at full speed. Luckily I was able to get back on fast and we were able to stay in the race right behind Britt t and team. We were not able to catch Britt t but no other boats managed to pass us during my man overboard episode. Back at the docks we had no idea who had won. When our victory was announced, Dennis and his son Tim were ecstatic. Their first regatta as driver and crew on a '20 was more than they had hoped for.

It was great to see everyone again and I hope to see all of these teams in Coronado and at other regattas throughout the year leading up to Nationals in August.

AK: What are your sailing plans for the year?

TW: Well Andrew, this year will be different. I am getting married this coming September, in Maui, to my long time girlfriend Holly that some of you have met. So far I have sailing invitations for the Farr 40 East Coast and Great Lake circuit, the World Championships in Rhode Island, the J105 North Americans in Marina Del Rey, and a handful of Melges 24 regattas. Then in San Diego I have the Etchells weekends, along with defending the PC nationals that Chris Nesbitt (also a Santana 20 racer) and I won last summer with Bennett Greenwald's *Minx*.

For the '20s I am going to take a step back from ownership this year and maybe next. I still want to be a big part of the class and will remain a member and contributor as much as possible. This year I am going to try to help as many teams as I can by sailing with teams that need crew or help in getting up to speed prior to the Nationals. I enjoy helping out. I look forward to sailing in regattas all over the West coast and meeting those who I have not met before and visiting those that I have already met. I would love to go to Oregon - I have not been to Eugene in a while.

AK: Thank you Travis, we appreciate all the hard work that you are doing for the Santana 20 Class.

This and other Andrew Kerr interviews are available on www.s20.org.