



## Augie Diaz – lucky AND good

Carol Cronin sat down with one of the racing world's most popular characters and a sailor who still works tirelessly to support youngsters new to the sport. Oh yes, and a hugely talented Cuban-born Floridian whose trophy cabinet is so big that it is frankly ridiculous...

You can't talk to Augie Diaz for more than about 30 seconds before he mentions how lucky he is. When I pin him down for a chat during a thunderstormy postponement, the day before he and Barbie Brotons win the 2021 Snipe Western Hemisphere & Orient Championship, he makes it sound as if 50 years of impressive results all came down to good fortune. Or his crews. Like all of his competitors, though, I know there's a bit more to it.

### What makes you win?

'I've been very fortunate,' he starts off, as we settle into the cosy armchairs in the Cottage Park Yacht Club foyer to review

his impressive victory list. 'But if you talk about the things that I have controlled I would say: realising at a young age that the guy who sails with me has to be at least as good or better than I am. Most of my sailing career my results have been tied to who I'm sailing with. The better that person is the better I do.'

(For those who've never sailed against Augie, I will add three other key skills: meticulous boat preparation, constant gear shifting and many, many more days on the water than most amateurs will ever manage.)

Augie started sailing at eight, right after his family emigrated from Cuba to Florida. 'The Clearwater Optimist Pram Club had a big warehouse full of 100 boats, and a ladder system; as you got better you got a better boat. I got to be number two, in one year, so I had a state-of-the-art boat. They would pick us up on Friday night, we'd go to a regatta and they would deliver me home on Sunday night – an incredible opportunity.'

Once the Diaz family moved to Miami Augie started sailing at the Coconut Grove Sailing Club. 'They taught me a lot there also. And by then my father had expertly trained my brother to be a great Snipe crew. We would be very competitive

because I understood tactically what I wanted to do, while my brother did everything on the boat.'

Another early teammate was his father, who is known throughout the Snipe universe as 'Old Man' Diaz (it sounds much more respectful in Spanish: 'Viejo'). In 1971 a 17-year-old Augie and his Old Man won a silver medal at the Pan American Games, continuing a family tradition; in 1959 his father and uncle won silver at both the PanAm Games and Snipe Worlds.

In 1972 the pair won the Western Hemisphere & Orient Championship, which is considered by many Snipe sailors to be even more competitive than the Worlds. (The 'Westerns' take place in the 'off' year between Worlds, along with the Europeans.)

### First World Championship

I ask Augie if he's ever sailed singlehanded boats, and that brings us to his next adventure. 'In 1973 I wanted to go to the Youth Nationals in the 470. My father said, "I'm not buying a 470! But I'll buy you an old Laser." So he did, and we fixed it up.'

He calls that youth champs a Who's Who of sailing, ticking off each legendary sailor on a different finger: 'Carl Buchan.



MARCO OGUENDO

**Above:** Augie Diaz and Bruno Prada on their way to winning the 2016 Star World Championship with an astonishing final race that saw them start poorly to round the first downwind mark in 60th place before sailing a breathtaking second upwind in the very shifty conditions to round the next top mark in 7th. The pair then managed to push back current Star World Champion Diego Negri allowing one boat to get between them, giving Diaz his first Star world title by just two points... and Brazilian super-crew Bruno Prada his fourth

Mark Reynolds. Peter Commette.

'At the starts it was like that comic thing – everybody starts, but one's left spinning, like this?' He swirls his hand in the air. 'That was me!' He laughs, and I join in – not because I agree with his self-deprecation but because Augie's laughter is so infectious.

'Invariably I'd get to the weather mark in a good position, and they would crush me downwind. Fortunately, back then you finished upwind. Peter Commette won the event by a mile, so he qualified for the Youth Worlds and I ended up second (Commette went on to win the first ever Laser World Championship in 1974).

'But I'd been borrowing 470s too, and Pete and I were also both qualified for those Worlds. So whichever regatta Peter decided to go to I would go to the other one. He went to the 470 Worlds and got second by a point; to this day he claims he made the wrong decision.'

As soon as Augie made the IYRU Youth Worlds team Bob Johnstone (the founder of the US Youth Champs) asked if Augie thought he was ready. 'I said, "Yeah, I just beat a pretty good group of sailors." And he said, bluntly, "You're not ready." Typical Bob Johnstone! So he put me in a programme: gaining weight, lifting, coaching. All I did was sail Lasers – really, really key. Before, I was a Snipe sailor trying to sail a Laser. When I got to the Youth Worlds I was a Laser sailor.' He won. 'Since then I've sailed Lasers on and off all my life.'

In 1975 Augie and Old Man steered separate boats at the Snipe Midwinter

Championship. Augie had the better result so by previous agreement, when they teamed up to go to the Snipe Worlds the 21-year-old got to steer. They won the last race to take second overall; to this day that intra-family rivalry is a favourite tale for both men.

### College

Augie studied mechanical engineering at Tulane University, but of course all we talk about is the sailing. 'Again it was mostly about the people. There were several super-good sailors and it was an outright war between us. For me that was fantastic.' In 1973 the team won the overall collegiate trophy. In 1974 Augie was named College Sailor of the Year. College sailing also taught him a valuable life lesson; after shivering through so many Boston regattas he was 'determined to stay in Miami.'

In 1976 Augie and Marshall Duane missed winning the US Trials in the Flying Dutchman by one point. After that disappointment he went back to school – but he was already focused on the next phase: going to work for the family medical supply business, and starting a family of his own.

'I really wasn't thinking about another Olympic effort,' he explains. 'But somehow I had another incredible stroke of luck: I ended up sailing with Mark Reynolds!' Mark had just sold his own Flying Dutchman so he signed on as Augie's crew. 'He put his whole life on hold,' Augie tells me. 'He moved to Miami, lived with my parents. And he built us three boats that were rocket ships.

'I would show up at 6am and we would

go sailing. Imagine, Mark Reynolds on the wire!' He shakes his head. 'He didn't need a driver; I just pointed the boat.'

'When we hit the waves he would press hard with his front toe, and push the bow down a little bit.' They'd sail until 10am, and then 'I'd go to work, and he would take care of everything.' (Mark still remembers babysitting Augie's kids.) 'The boats were perfect, and fast. We had an incredible three years, and we did super well.'

The pair dominated the 1979 European season. Augie gets a faraway look in his eyes, remembering the final race that won them Kiel Week: 'We had to get second and the French guy had to be deep. 120 boats. And he was deep.'

But by the final lap 'first place was gone. In second place, right ahead of us, is Rodney Pattison – double gold medallist and three-time world champion. I said, "Mark, we made a great effort. But I don't think we can get past Rodney." And he's on the wire, we're planing along... and he looks down at me like this –' Augie sits up tall and glowers across at me, and I imagine the intimidation of Mark's great height and incredible focus amplified by an FD trapeze wire. 'He goes, "We're gonna get him. Or I'm gonna kick your butt!" Another throaty and infectious chuckle.'

By early 1980, though, it was clear the US would boycott the 1980 Games. The pair didn't even bother to show up for the Trials; instead, they both went back to work. 'One of the things I learned from Mark is never get too high and never get too low. He has a temperament that is so steady...'



Like Torben Grael, Santi Lange and many other great one-design sailors, Augie Diaz first found his competitive feet Snipe racing, in the hot beds first of Cuba then South America and the Southern States of the USA. As well as the two world titles Diaz won in 2003 and 2005, he holds three Western Hemisphere & Orient titles (the first in 1972 and the latest this year) and six North American titles. He has also been US National Champion no fewer than 10 times, spanning 50-odd years from his first in 1974 and most recent in 2018

### Star beginnings

In the early 1980s Augie followed Mark into the Star class. 'I did a really smart thing: I bought a brand new boat from Andrew Menkart. It was perfectly tuned, and everything was marked. I go out for the first race and put everything on the marks, and I have instant success. So the next one, I say, "Oh, I know what I'm doing; I can start playing around with the settings here." What happens? A complete failure!'

Of course with Augie that can be loosely translated as: 'I didn't win.'

He didn't travel for Star sailing in those days: 'In the winter the best sailors in the world come to Miami; and I would only go to the Worlds when they were here in the United States.' In fact, it would take a few decades – and the added incentive of Star Sailors League points – for Augie to show up at most of the major class events elsewhere in the world.

In 1984 Augie sailed the US Star Olympic Trials with Marshall Duane. 'Mark was third, we were fourth, Bill Buchan won and Cayard was second,' he rattles off, as if it had happened last week. 'And then we went to the 1985 Star Worlds in Nassau, and we got fourth.'

### Unlucky thirteen

By the late 1980s Augie was also competing in J/24s. 'There was a circuit; literally all the boats went all over Florida. We would drive after work on a Friday night

with the four of us, rig the mast at midnight. Tune the boat up, come back the next morning and launch, sail for the afternoon, take the mast down, and drive home.' As he remembers it, winning would usually come down to the last race – and his best competition was John Jennings.

Then, suddenly, 'John just sold his boat and disappeared.' Several months later Augie ran into him and asked why he'd stopped sailing. 'And he said, "How old are your kids?" I said, "Six, four and two." And he said, "Well then, you're getting ready to disappear too!" Sure enough, family and business demands forced Augie to stop sailing in 1986, 'like clockwork. I didn't sail for 13 years.'

He didn't plan to take that much time away from sailing, he says now: 'I just got super-involved in Little League, coaching and stuff. And also the company was exploding on us, mostly due to my brother's efforts. It was a really tough time; I refer to that part of my life as slavery. But it created a bond between me and my boys; we're like brothers. Which is very, very similar to what I have with my father.'

### Second wind

In 1999, when Augie was finally able to start sailing again, 'I hit it pretty hard.' In addition to Stars and Snipes, 'I started sailing the Laser a lot against the Olympic guys. And every once in a while I would be lucky enough to be around them and they

would coach me. I'd get to a weather mark in front of [Mark] Mendelblatt, and we would go downwind... He'd say, "Ease your vang! Come on, follow me." And I would have dinner with guys like that; what an education.'

Augie's goal was still winning, but his perspective had completely changed. 'I was sailing for fun, while leading up to 1980 I was sailing so hard to try to go to the Olympics.' Also, thanks to the advent of laptops, now he could work from anywhere – a habit he continues to this day. 'My brother had a joke that he wanted me to go to regattas, because he thought I got more work done!'

Augie also sailed Snipes with each of his sons, until they announced (in their own unique ways) that they preferred younger teammates. 'My son Lucas says, "Hey, Pop, I want to sail with my friends." I said, "Are you firing me?" He said, "No Pop, please, I'm not firing you. I just want to sail with my friends!" I said, "OK, go sail with your friends. I'm gonna sail with Adrian.'

'And after a year Adrian goes, "I want to sail with my friends." I said, "You're firing me." He just says, "Yes!"' Again that contagious laughter bubbles up, and he has to pause to wipe his eyes. 'The best sailing bar none I've ever done is crewing for my sons in the Snipe,' he says, 'closely followed by my father crewing for me.'

In 2002, 30 years after he'd first won it with his father, Augie and Jon Rogers won



**Left to right:** a lifelong Snipe racer who is still winning – the 2021 Western Hemispheres being Augie Diaz’s latest championship win. In 2020 Diaz was inducted into the Snipe Hall of Fame alongside other one-design racing icons Torben Grael and Santiago Lange; given that Diaz had been winning big championships in the class since 1972, HOF induction is clearly no cake-walk. Ironically it was only the year before in 2019 that Gonzalo Diaz – the Old Man as he is fondly referred to – finally also made it into the hallowed halls. **Below:** Gonzalo Diaz passes his son the helm in 1969... two years later the pair won silver together at the 1971 Pan American Games

the Snipe Westerns. The following year, 30 years after that 1973 Youth Worlds victory, Augie and Jon won the Worlds in Sweden.

‘We were really, really fortunate,’ Augie says again. ‘In the first race the leaders sailed right by the finish – there was a sea of boats with flags.’ After a heated team discussion Augie waited as long as he could to alter course for the correct finish line – and won the race. ‘That was four points,’ he points out. (They won by four points.)

‘Johnny is an incredible sailor. He has so much experience crewing with so many good people that he instantly figures out what you need as a skipper. He’s focusing on your weaknesses, and trying to make up for them. It’s magical.’

Augie also learned a lesson at that regatta about the rewards of giving back to his competitors. After a bad experience at a previous Snipe Worlds he’d hired a Swedish coach. But ‘when I got there, I felt super-selfish. So I said to the guy, “Hey, do you mind coaching the whole US team?” And it’s a typical situation where you give, and then you get so much more in return.’

His fellow Americans shared all their detailed research about the Oresund’s funky currents, and Augie and Jon counted only one finish worse than seventh.

Two years later Augie defended his title at the 2005 Worlds with Pam Kelly, in Japan. He calls that regatta ‘a war of attrition. It was a really short series, and I think our best race was a fourth. We had to count a 19th.’ And again he compliments his crew; ‘You look at Pam on shore, this short little blonde girl... but when we get on the water she flips a switch. Wow!’

His two subsequent PanAm Games medals don’t even come up, perhaps because they’re not gold: another silver in 2011, and bronze in 2015, both with Kathleen Tocke.

When I ask Augie for his favourite regatta he calls out his 2003 Snipe Worlds victory as ‘a very exciting thing for me.’

‘That Youth Worlds... I was too young to understand. But at 49 years old I could appreciate it. And also, we had just invaded Iraq. Americans were very unpopular, especially in Sweden.’

‘It was a proud moment for me when



they raised our flag at the prizegiving.’

When I ask which one-design worlds would be the hardest to win, of course he has a strong opinion: first would be the Laser, and second the Finn. ‘Then the Snipe, closely followed by the Star.’

I push back on whether the Star should be third, but he shakes his head. ‘2019: I was one point from winning the Star Worlds. Three months later I was 31st at the Snipe Worlds. And everybody goes, “What happened to you?” Nothing happened; there were just 30 people there that were better than I was!’

### **I never thought I could win a Star Worlds**

After the Diaz family sold their medical supply business Augie started Diaz Marine and became the MJM Yachts dealer for Florida – bringing him back into Bob Johnstone’s orbit once again. He also stepped up his sailing, logging an incredible (and uncounted) number of regattas each year in both Star and Snipe, wherever in the world they occurred.

In 2006 he teamed up with Bruno Prada. Of course he attributes that solely to luck – and the Star class weight limit. Augie weighs the same as Robert Scheidt – far less than most Star skippers. So when Robert wasn’t available Bruno could sail with Augie without going on a crash diet.

‘And for Bruno it was safe,’ Augie likes to add. ‘If we did well it was because of him. If we did badly it was because of me!’

The two became close friends and in 2016 they won the Star Worlds together – making the 61-year-old Augie the oldest-ever gold Star winner. ‘Bruno puts it best,’ Augie says. ‘We had a week where everything that we needed to happen happened. It was so special.’ They only won one race, but they tossed a fifth to win by two points.

‘I’m not talented enough to win things by a lot; I’m always just able to win by a little. Mostly due to that guy. I never thought I could win a Star Worlds...’

### **Having way too much fun**

The AP is about to come down so I fit in a final question. After this regatta (which he’s currently leading), what’s next on his list?

‘I’m not going to change much,’ he admits. ‘I’m just having way too much fun sailing Snipes, and Stars. And becoming a father again...’ His grandson is living with him, a responsibility that brings on a hefty sigh. ‘If I knew then what I know now – what I would have been able to do for my kids! But when you’re young you’re just going by the seat of your pants. And you do the best you can.’

‘Life is backwards,’ he continues. ‘Now I understand what works, what doesn’t work. And I understand that I’m not smart enough to do it all by myself.’ He could be talking about sailboat racing.

The next day Augie and Barbie win the 2021 Western Hemisphere & Orient Championship by seven points – more than ‘a little bit’, and two points more than he and his father won by in 1972. As we pack up our boats side by side and I listen in on the various phone congratulations he answers in a mix of Spanish and English, his words from the day before come back to me.

‘I ask my grandson: who’s in charge of your happiness? It’s not me; it’s you. Look for ways within the parameters that you have control of, to make yourself happy. And you will be very happy.’

Of course, it also helps to be very, very good at that thing that makes you most happy – because it’s a combination that might just bring you a lifetime of luck. □