

THE DÉFI AZIMUT 48-HOURS – A PROPER CONTEST AND A WORTHY WINNER

You could hardly hope for a more dramatic race packed into less than two days at sea than we saw in the Défi Azimut-Lorient Agglomération 48-Hours classic, a contest that tested crews and produced another stellar performance at the front by Charlie Dalin and Paul Meilhat on APIVIA.

The beauty of the 48-Hours – the centrepiece of another very successful Défi Azimut rendez-vous in Lorient for the IMOCA Class and its suppliers – is that the race directors can place their waypoints perfectly to give a proper all-round test. And so it proved on a 500-mile circuit out into the northern Bay of Biscay.

The 14 double-handed IMOCA 60s went upwind, then downwind VMG and then back on a powerful reach to the finish, set between the Ile de Groix and the mainland coast, on a course that produced a thrilling battle for the minor places on the podium behind the all-conquering yellow and white APIVIA.

Having won the Rolex Fastnet Race in style last month, Dalin and Meilhat continued their dominance of the world's most powerful offshore monohulls in an impressively-optimised boat, deploying a deck-sweeper jib in the light upwind early stages that saw them build a lead of several miles that they never relinquished.

Dalin has spoken about how well his new partnership with Meilhat is working and, on this occasion, they never put a foot wrong in a race when – as they often say in sailing – the rich got richer. Apivia was fast on all points of sail and by the final leg was more than half way home as she flew on her foils, by the time her rivals got to the last mark.

In the end, Dalin and Meilhat won by the considerable margin of two hours after one day and nearly 16 hours at sea, over 11th Hour Racing Alaka'i, sailed by the Swiss-British combination of Justine Mettraux and Simon Fisher. They got in just 17 minutes ahead of Morgan Lagravière and Thomas Ruyant on LinkedOut who, in turn, were just three minutes to the good on Louis Burton and Davy Beudart on Bureau Vallée.

If Dalin and Meilhat caught the eye at the head of affairs, not far behind in terms of quality and competitiveness were Fisher and Mettraux who have now produced two podium finishes in their first two double-handed races on the old HUGO BOSS, having finished third in the Fastnet Race behind Charal and Apivia.

Modest and easy-going, Fisher is a world class sailor and navigator with long experience in fully-crewed racing at the elite level and Mettraux has a reputation as a tenacious soloist and together they are proving a formidable force that will have serious winning chances in November's Transat Jacques Vabre (TJV).

On their heels Ruyant and Lagravière did well to recover from fifth at the final mark to steal the last place on the podium. This came after the LinkedOut pair had sorted a big crisis going downwind when they blew their spinnaker which got wrapped on the foils and on the propeller and, unbeknownst to them, pulled the prop-shaft out of the boat.

They were not the only team to deal with this sort of drama on a short course in which the sailors were pushing hard throughout and on which rest or sleep was a precious commodity for many of them.

On Fortinet-Best Western, Romain Attanasio and Sébastien Marsset also blew their spinnaker and it too ended up caught on the foils of the old Malizia II and had to be cut away. Earlier Attanasio and Marsset, who finished ninth behind Isabelle Joschke and Alain Gautier on MACSF in eighth place, holed their mainsail when the tack fitting for the J1.5 exploded under load in more than 20 knots of breeze.

Two boats were forced to abandon the contest. Manuel Cousin and Alexia Barrier on Groupe SÉTIN-4MyPlanet broke a daggerboard, while the brand new 11th Hour Racing Malama – the first IMOCA to be designed and built with fully-crewed racing in mind – had to leave the racetrack when the tiller connection with the rudder bar broke. This was a disappointment for co-skippers Charlie Enright and Pascal Bidégorry amid high hopes for a boat that was very much the talk of the dockside at La Base marina in Lorient.

The 48-Hours is the last race before the TJV, which starts on November 7 from Le Havre, when the fleet will be joined, among others, by Jérémie Beyou and Christopher Pratt on Charal – the defending Défi Azimut champions from 2020 – who were forced to sit this one out because of damage incurred on the Fastnet Race.

For the first time this 48-Hours classic counted for points in the new IMOCA Globe Series Championship with Dalin and Meilhat now in second place in the ranking behind Fisher and Mettraux. In third place comes Benjamin Dutreux who partnered with Damien Seguin on Groupe Apicil in the 48-Hours, finishing in 10th place, the first of two non-foilers to complete the course.

Ashore during the last week, the place has been buzzing with suppliers, contractors and race organisers – plus new potential partners for the IMOCA Class – getting together to talk about the future for a Class which is enjoying excellent health.

The Défi Azimut, which concludes with the Round the Ile de Groix Race today, is fast becoming not just a unique showcase regatta but a key annual forum for the IMOCA 60 Class as it looks forward not just to the TJV but the Route du Rhum and the Ocean Race next year.

Ed Gorman