

Dorney

Varese proved a good hunting ground for the GB Rowing Team Para Squad whose medals signified a promising start to their season. **Caroline Roberts** reports

here we come!

PHOTOS: PETER SPURRIER

“I’m really looking forward to going back to Dorney for another chance to compete on the 2012 course”





Tom Aggar pictured opposite – and above, with GB Rowing Team Para Lead Coach Tom Dyson

The GB Rowing Team Para Squad look to be set fair for this month's World Rowing Cup after their season got off to an excellent start at the Gavirate International Adaptive

Regatta at Lake Varese in Italy on 17-19 May. The squad fielded two crew combinations in the legs, trunk and arms mixed coxed four, both of whom dominated the opposition, winning by clear water on both days. Arms and shoulders single sculler, Andy Houghton, came through to win in a nail-biting final on the Saturday, and Tom Aggar scored an emphatic victory in the same event the next day.

"The racing produced some great performances in each event, except the LTA2x which was not well attended," said Para Lead Coach Tom Dyson.

The Gavirate event is, in effect, two regattas in one with finals on each day, offering a perfect warm-up for the year's bigger competitions.

"It was a great opportunity to trial two different combinations of the mixed para coxed four, something we don't normally get the chance to do at a regatta. With four races in two days, it also offers the opportunity to try some different racing tactics and gives the rowers greater confidence in their racing ability and the training they have put in so far this season."

The Saturday mixed para coxed four comprised Pam Relph and Naomi Riches, both from the London 2012 gold medal-winning crew, along with newcomers James Fox, Sam Murray and cox Oliver James.

On the Sunday, Murray was replaced by Oliver Hester. "I was nervous about returning to racing with a new crew," said Relph, "but a win on both days shows we have some real strength in depth and can look forward to the rest of the season."

Fox added: "A win here on both days has given an insight into what we can expect at Eton Dorney and Chungju [in South Korea, the 2013 World Rowing Championships venue]. I'm really looking forward to seeing what other crews are still to come into the event and facing the challenges they'll pose."

In Saturday's men's arms and shoulders single sculls, Andy Houghton scored his first international victory, taking a notable scalp in the process when

he moved through Aleksey Chuvashov, the Russian 2012 Paralympic bronze medallist, in the final 50m. In the event's Sunday final, Tom Aggar, who did not race on the Saturday, put clear water between himself and Chuvashov in an impressive win, with Houghton in third place.

This signalled a resurgence for Aggar, the 2008 Paralympic gold medallist and four-times world champion who suffered the huge disappointment of finishing outside the medals in London last year. "I was disappointed to not be in a position to race on Saturday," he said. "However the racing on Sunday was a great return to form, putting in a strong performance over the London bronze medallist. I'm really looking forward to going back to Dorney for another chance to compete on the 2012 course."

Saturday's men's trunk and arms single scull GB newcomer Laurence Whiteley drew praise from his coach when he took bronze in a race dominated by Ukraine's Iaroslav Koida. "From my perspective, Laurence produced an excellent scull to medal on the first day, given the level of competition which included some very experienced scullers from top doubles over the past few years," said Dyson.

"This was my first international against a strong field, so I was really pleased to come away with a medal," said Whiteley, who switched to rowing from disability swimming in 2011. Unfortunately, the event does not feature at World Cup or World Championship level so the hunt is on for a female sculling partner to team up with him at major competitions. "I'm really looking forward to the day when I can line up on the trunk and arms double start line," he added.

Despite the presence in Varese of some Paralympic medallists, Dyson believes there is still a lot more to come from the opposition at both the World Rowing Cup and World Championships.

"Many crews looked in early-season form and will no doubt move on significantly in the next couple of months. The most notable absentees were Germany in the mixed para fours and China and Australia in the men's arms and shoulders single sculls – we will be expecting a jump in standard when these crews are present."

At the Eton Dorney World Rowing Cup, which takes place from 21-23 June, GB will have entrants in the mixed para coxed four and the men's arms and shoulders single sculls, but no representatives in other para classes.

"We are working hard to put a full team on the line in 2014," said Dyson, "but there are still places to be filled and new rowers of the right standard to be found. So anyone interested in being assessed or finding out more about para-rowing should get in touch."

The GB Rowing Team Para Squad is looking for female rowers. If you think this could be you then why not get in touch with Helen Blamey, GB Rowing Team Para Talent Coach via helen.blamey@gbrowingteam.org.uk

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