

17th Water Ski Racing World Championships

Erin Saunders, who won two of the four races, earned the silver medal in Women's Open.

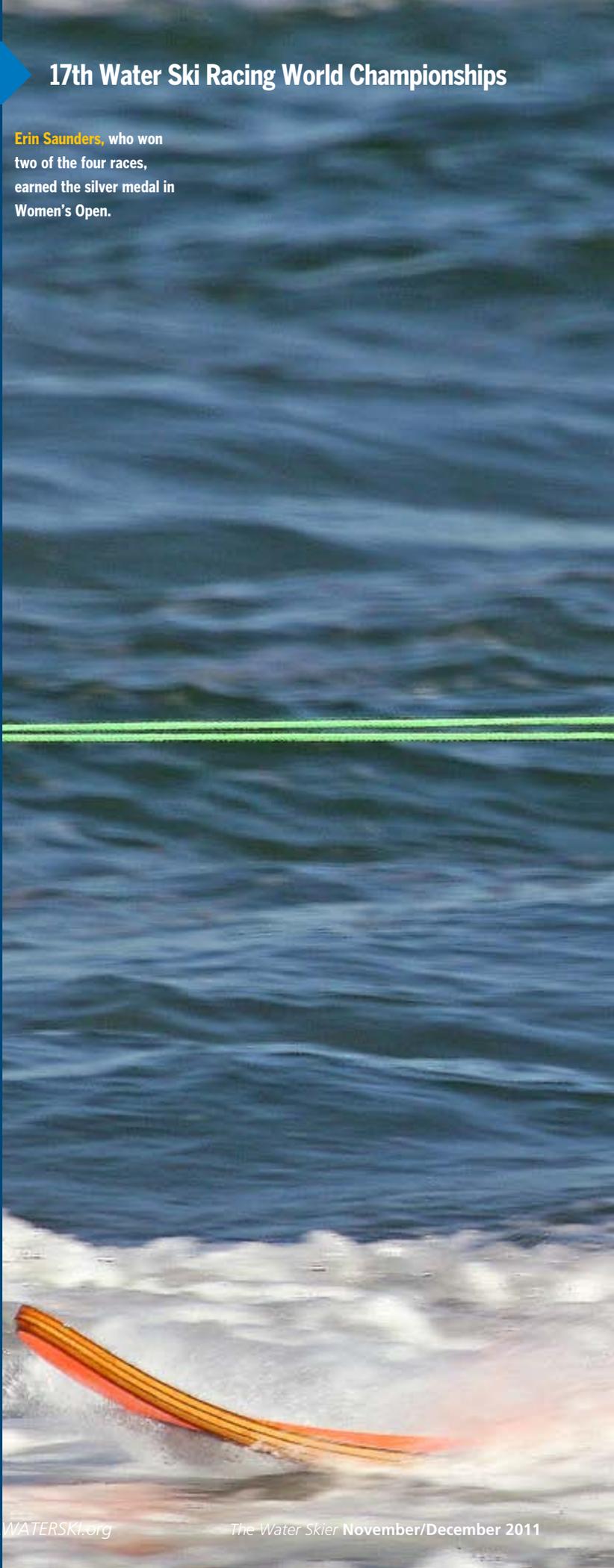


Down to the Wire

U.S. elite water ski racing athlete Katelin Wendt narrowly edged teammate Erin Saunders for the Women's Open world water ski racing gold medal at the 17th Water Ski Racing World Championships, Sept. 6-18, in Queensland, Australia

Written by **Scott N. Atkinson** • Photography by **Vanessa Eyles**

For U.S. Elite Water Ski Team members Katelin Wendt and Erin Saunders, it was only a matter of time. Roughly 23 seconds to be exact. After completing three of the four races at the 17th Water Ski Racing World Championships, Sept. 6-18, in Queensland, Australia, both athletes knew exactly how they needed to finish in the championships' finale to win the sport's ultimate title - World Champion.





Andy Anderson earned the bronze medal in Formula 2 Men.

17th Water Ski Racing World Championships

Wendt, 25, who won the Junior Women's world title in 2003 in Long Beach, Calif., won rounds one and three, and placed second in round two. Entering round four, she had a slight lead on Saunders, who placed second in round one and first in round two, but suffered a DNF from boat problems in round three. For Saunders to win the world title, she would need to not only beat Wendt in round four, but her margin of victory would need to be greater than 23 seconds. She did the former with no problem, beating Wendt in the fourth and deciding race. But she couldn't pull off the latter, as Wendt and her team – led by her driver/father, Scott Wendt, and observer, Jared Cooper – stalked Saunders from start to finish, finishing within 9 seconds of Saunders and clinching the Women's Open world title by a mere 14 seconds. "I used everything I had to keep going and stay close to Erin," says Wendt, who earned the silver medal in Women's Open at the 2009 world championships in Belgium and became the first U.S. woman to win the world title since Debbie Nordblad in 1991. "I was exhausted mentally and physically from the whole week of racing, but I just kept telling myself that Erin was going through the same thing I was. I just kept giving myself pep talks to get through that final race. It's awesome knowing all of the hard work I put in paid off and I came away the world champion."

Water ski racing athletes from eight countries competed in six divisions – Men's Open, Women's Open, Junior Boys, Junior Girls, Men's Formula 2 and Women's Formula 2 – for world titles at the biennial event. Men's Open and Men's Formula 2 competitors raced for 1 hour, plus 1 lap; Women's Open and Women's Formula 2 competitors raced for 45 minutes, plus 1 lap; and Junior Boys' and Junior Girls' competitors raced for 30 minutes, plus 1 lap. Final overall placements were determined from the athletes' three best race placements.

In addition to Wendt and Saunders, the U.S. Elite Water Ski Racing Team consisted of Troy Hooker of Torrance, Calif. The U.S. Formula 2 Water Ski Racing Team consisted of Andy Anderson of Corona, Calif., Lori Dunsmore of Boulder City, Nev., Cameron King of Manhattan Beach, Calif., Jordan King of Manhattan Beach, Calif., Cheryl Ruston of La Palma, Calif., and Dawn Wallace of Belvedere Tiburon, Calif. The U.S. Junior Water Ski Racing Team consisted of Deke Douty of Huntington Beach, Calif., and Trevor Wendt of Huntington Beach, Calif. Shelby Guardalabene of Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., was the U.S. teams' captain, Mike King of Claremont, Calif., was the assistant team captain, and Dave Yedor of Placentia, Calif., was the team manager. "What I will remember most about these championships is the manner in which this team

represented themselves and the United States," Guardalabene says. "This team went through a lot of hurdles to even get to the Worlds and it never quit. I'm extremely proud of each member for their cohesiveness, their sportsmanship, and their performance."

One of the challenges all of the participants had to deal with was the postponement of round one due to weather, which meant rounds one and two would eventually be held on back-to-back days. In round three, the women raced for 15 minutes before the race was halted due to dolphins in the course. The race was eventually restarted from the beginning after a considerable delay. "The schedule changes were frustrating," Wendt says. "You get up in the morning and go through your routine, eat and stay hydrated. It wasn't the easiest thing to deal with, plus the wind changes and the tide changes. You have to deal with a lot. Racing back-to-back days wasn't a problem because we do that in the States."

Wendt says her plan for round four was to get off to a fast start and control the race, but Saunders had a different idea. "I like to get ahead and stay there," Wendt says. "So, I would have liked nothing better than to get out to the lead and win the race, but Erin came out so hard and strong it didn't work out that way for me. We knew we needed to finish within 23 seconds of her, so about halfway through we just decided to get behind her, play it safe and think long term. It was an amazing feeling when we crossed the finish line."

Says Saunders: "In round four and all the other races I raced as hard as I could. Every race and every second counts at the world championships. I never wanted to leave it up to round four, but it was beyond my control. I knew we were winning the race, but it was so hard to tell by how much. Katelin's team knew exactly where to finish behind me to ensure she won the gold and they did just that."

Luck also plays a huge part in water ski racing, and Saunders and her team – driver Wayne Murray and observer Mike King – were plagued with the bad kind before leaving California, and then in rounds one and three when the racing began. Saunders' boat broke two days before it was to go into the container to be shipped to Australia. Scott Wendt, Katelin's father, demonstrated sportsmanship and team spirit by allowing Saunders' team to pull her behind his spare boat. "I went into this Worlds ready to win, I never wanted it so bad," Saunders says. "I had worked so hard and I was so excited to get on



Katelin Wendt (left) won her first career Women's Open world title with her dad, **Scott Wendt**, driving and **Jared Cooper** (right) observing.

the water and make it happen. However, this year luck was not working in my favor. We had a lot of challenges."

In the first lap of round one, Saunders was forced to let go of the handles, which set her back about 2 minutes, but she battled back and finished in second place, about 35 seconds behind Wendt. "I was hoping that was it, that round one would be my race to drop," Saunders says. But after winning round two over Wendt by about 35 seconds, mechanical problems with Saunders' original boat forced her to a backup boat and new driver for rounds three and four. In round three, the backup boat broke about 12 minutes into the race causing her to DNF. "It was all left up to the fourth race," she says. "I knew I had to win and by exactly how much, but unfortunately it did not work out. Katelin and her team were not giving it up easily. We won that race, but not by a large enough margin to capture the gold. It was disappointing to not win overall, but I was pleased with my performance."

"Looking back at these Worlds the first I think about is all of people that supported me. In January 2011 I decided to go to Worlds and it took a lot to get there. My family and boyfriend were always there to support me day in and day out. Wayne Murray, who I've skied behind for more than 10 years, spent a lot of time and money to take me training every week to prepare and has played a huge part in my ski racing success. Mike King, who came in last minute for me, was awesome in the boat and I could not have done it without him. I also thank Scott Wendt for allowing my team to use his boat (Nordic Racing) in races one and two. I also must thank Daniel McMahon of Australia for providing his boat (Psycho Clowns) and driving for me in races three and four. He is a great driver and person."

Led by Wendt and Saunders, who both reside in Huntington Beach, Calif., the U.S. Elite Water Ski Racing Team earned the silver medal, tallying 9,758.96 points. Australia won the gold medal with 14,997.51 points and Great Britain earned the

bronze medal with 4,428.08 points. Australia's Chris Stout won the Men's Open gold medal, becoming the first water ski racing athlete to ever win world titles in Junior Boys, Formula 2 Men and Men's Open. Australia's Peter Procter earned the silver medal. Austria's Kathrin Ortlieb earned the bronze medal in Women's Open. Hooker earned the Men's Open bronze medal. "At the drop of the flag on the first day the racing got intense," Guardalabene says. "The U.S. women quickly showed they were the ones to beat. Erin suffered some more mechanical difficulties, but she never quit, and Katelin never folded. In my opinion, Erin and Katelin put on the show of the Worlds. Troy really stepped up in the face of very stiff competition and had to overcome some mechanical difficulties himself. I'm not sure what he would say, but in my opinion he had never performed better."

Hooker, competing as a first-time Elite Team member, placed third in rounds one, three and four, and recorded a DNF due to boat problems in round two. "I trained really hard and I knew we would have a really good chance at getting a medal if not win," Hooker says. "I knew the Australians would be very strong as well as the Belgium skiers. My team and I were ready, however the Aussies did surprise us with how hard they were running. I knew it would be

tough to beat them, but I didn't know it would be that tough. I trained in Long Beach Harbor quite a bit. The conditions were similar, but the

chop in Australia was different. It seemed to be sharper, which made you catch more air over the bumps. My team and I seemed to adapt pretty well and overcome what the ocean threw at us over in Australia. The last two races were very smooth, but boat wakes chopped up the course pretty good. We still adapted and were able to come in third in three races. We were very happy with what we did and how we came in."

The U.S. Formula 2 Water Ski Racing Team earned the silver medal, tallying 14,704.18 points. Australia won the gold medal with 15,869.94 points and Great Britain earned the bronze medal with 10,502.91 points. Australia's Grant Turner won the gold medal in Formula 2 Men. Australia's Mark Weaver earned the silver medal. Australia's Leanne Campbell won the gold medal in Formula 2 Women. Australia's Trudi Stout earned the silver medal and Austria's Katharina Hebenstreit earned the bronze medal. Anderson earned the Formula 2 Men's bronze medal. Cameron King and Jordan King placed seventh and 13th, respectively. Wallace, Dunsmore and Ruston placed sixth, seventh and ninth, respectively, in Formula 2 Women. "Andy Anderson, with his team of Steve Davis (driver) and Justin Frank (observer), raced a fantastic championship," Guardalabene says. "They performed just about flawlessly during the four-race series against some first-class competition. Outside of Andy Anderson, our F2 Team is the group my heart breaks for. The F2 class is so very competitive and although they may not be recognized as the 'Elite' team, there is nothing second-class about them. All of our athletes trained endlessly, but

due to some tough breaks and some equipment deficiencies we had some members not realize the rewards they should have earned. Unfortunately, that is just part of racing at times."

The U.S. Junior Water Ski Racing Team placed fourth, tallying 6,177.17 points. Australia won the gold medal with 15,784.89 points, New Zealand earned the silver medal with 7,034.77 points and Great Britain earned the bronze medal with 6,266.02 points. Australia's Jack Houston won the Junior Boys' gold medal for the second consecutive time, becoming the first water ski racing athlete to accomplish that feat. Australia's Lloyd Woolman earned the silver medal. Australia's Kelsey Feros won the gold medal in Junior Girls. Belgium's Yolien Bormans, the 2009 gold medalist, earned the silver medal. Australia's Tayla Wright earned the bronze medal. Wendt earned the bronze medal in Junior Boys for the second consecutive time and Douty, the youngest competitor at this year's Worlds at age 13, placed seventh in Junior Boys in his first Worlds' appearance. "Trevor raced very hard for his bronze medal," Guardalabene says. "I'm not sure what his long-range plans are in ski racing, but if he stays with it I'm sure you will be writing about his accomplishments as a member of the Elite Team in the not-to-distant future. He truly left it all on the race course each day. Deke is definitely one of my favorite stories of the Worlds. Having never been to a world championships before and being the youngest competitor of the event, he was stellar. He took a giant step in his ski racing career in Australia and made fans out of every competitor at the championships."

For complete results, visit skiracingworlds.com.au.

BELOW: Members of the U.S. contingent pose for a photo in Australia.

BELOW RIGHT: Troy Hooker earned the bronze medal in Men's Open.



Photo: Nikki Yedor