

## Small Fleet, Big Talent: Cascais delivers as Xcellent wins with local crew

*Team Xcellent led by John Pollard demonstrated their class by winning the SB20 Open Portuguese Nationals in Cascais earlier this month. Though the fleet was smaller than some of the previous years, the competition was anything but easy, with shifty winds and tricky current in the bay demanding full concentration.*

Held over three days at Clube Naval de Cascais the event delivered a classic mix of light westerlies and stronger winds, shifty northerlies inside the bay - tricky and demanding conditions that made consistency key. Led by British helm John Pollard, Team Xcellent sailed with Portuguese tactician Jorge Lima and his already regular Portuguese crew Santiago Sampaio finishing first overall, ahead of HelloNext and Bravo.



“It was a tough regatta, probably one of the toughest recently,” - said Pollard. “We were a bit too light on weight in stronger winds, but we had to deal with it. Cascais is still a quality place for racing and the depth of sailors here is amazing. The Club does an outstanding job on and off the water. With the new PRO [Miguel Amaral] we started every race on a P flag and it was smooth. We could focus on speed and team work.”

Friday’s racing opened with 6-8 knots of Westerly breeze, favouring those with better skills in the lighter conditions. Xcellent started strong with 1-2-3 finishes.

“The level was high and the racing was tight throughout,” said tactician Jorge Lima. “It wasn’t just the usual strong north wind - we started with a light westerly, which made for some very sensitive sailing and we felt good straight away. It was our first

time sailing together, but John is a world-class sailor - very methodical and well-organised. He was open to my tactical calls and really supportive.”



With John’s recent win in Singapore, which is known for light winds, he’s had his skills sharpened for those conditions. “Still, Cascais light wind and Singapore light wind are probably different conditions”, - reflects Jorge Lima. “I’ve never sailed there myself, but from what I’ve heard, it’s a really tricky venue. After Singapore John has handled it very well here in Cascais.”

On Saturday, the breeze built up to 14-17 knots from the North with gusts hitting 20 in Race 6. “We raced inside the bay and it was shifty, as usual,” - said Gonalo Lopes, bowman aboard HelloNext. - “John was more consistent that day - two bullets and a fifth. We got a bullet too, but we had been early on the line twice and forced to re-start. Of course, John’s years of experience in the SB20 gave him a natural advantage over newer helms like ours, but in terms of tactics and speed, it was a very tight battle among the top three boats.”

By the end of the second day, the battle at the top had clearly taken shape. Pollard was leading, discarding a fifth-place finish, with teams HelloNext and Bravo close behind. Despite a smaller fleet this time, racing among the front-runners was intense. Pollard’s consistency began to show, particularly on Day 2 when he secured some advantage heading into the final day.



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On Sunday the battle was on and the opening race proved decisive. Team Xcellent went into it with a three- and five-point lead over HelloNext and Bravo respectively, and extended that cushion despite slipping to fourth after getting caught in a lull while leading. By the time the final race arrived, the championship was effectively secured - even if Bravo had won and Xcellent finished outside the top five, the tie-break would go to John's team thanks to more race wins.

Still, they didn't take anything for granted and sailed the last race with a controlled, measured approach. HelloNext focused on covering Bravo as they battled for second, while Xcellent sailed their own race, confident but composed. In the end, HelloNext and Bravo finished tied on points, with HelloNext claiming second on countback, and a clear gap back to fourth.

"It was super competitive, especially between the top three boats," - said Lopes. "It's a shame we only had 11 entries, but the level was really high." Despite a smaller fleet, the enthusiasm in Cascais remains high. "This place is a breeding ground for sailing talent," - says John Pollard. Jorge Lima adds: "We're always being pushed - by each other and by international teams. That's how the standard stays so high."





Fleet captain André Gray echoed the sentiment: “John Pollard has come a long way and has a super track record, namely in Cascais, and really all over. When he first showed up in Cascais we knew immediately that he was a top sailor and noticed he had really good crewmembers. Whenever I manage to sail alongside John, I tell my guys we are doing well. It’s great to have the talent of this calibre here in Cascais!”

With less than two months left to the 2025 SB20 Europeans, Pollard now turns his focus to racing in the UK at the [SB20 Nationals in Weymouth](#) and the [Half Ton Classics Cup](#) in his native Torquay. After years in the SB20 fleet and a clear commitment to refining his own performance, both physically and tactically, Pollard has shaped himself into a consistently dangerous presence on the racecourse. There is no doubt that whoever joins him onboard next will be stepping into a campaign tuned for big-stage success.