

Morocco Optimist Worlds 2026

The New Zealand Morocco World team of Jeffrey Du, Will Handley, Noah Petersen, Tom Hall, and Ally Burfoot, Coach Andre Wills (Willzy), and a mix of supporting parents, set off for Tangier, Morocco, on 10 June. 32 hours later, we arrived at our Tangier Hotel, not without some drama to get our bazookas to the final destination, but we got there in the end. According to Willzy, the Regatta Hotel was far and away the best regatta accommodation he had ever been part of, being a 4-star hotel, just a 15-minute coastal walk to the boat park, so it seems like the kids were spoilt compared to previous editions.

Tangier is a historical town only 20 miles from Spain, which looms large as part of the stunning sailing backdrop, with the mountains of Spain to the north and the white sand beaches of Africa to the south. Tangier is where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Mediterranean, with generally consistent breezes and swells, and a good dose of current.

The venue was well set up considering the entire regatta infrastructure had to be brought in from Europe, including team tents, charter boats, measuring equipment, and coaching RIBs. Our team tent was shared with the one-sailor contingent from Macedonia, and hopefully he had positive things to say about the Opti sailors from New Zealand. We did our best to keep it tidy, but our lot were noisy.

With one day to acclimatize on land, the kids hit the water to practice for 6 days, which included a three-day practice regatta with 110 boats. The weather pre-event was a good mix of sunny, hot conditions, with the kids usually getting to stretch their legs with hiking. The intensity and competitiveness of the training and practice regatta was far above what the kids experience in New Zealand, so the learning curve was steep and exciting for all of them. With conditions generally on the windier side, 15 knots +/- and decent-sized waves, there was a lot to learn/re-learn after predominantly lighter-wind, inner-harbor training conditions back in New Zealand for the previous two months. We broke up the training routine with some camel riding and sitting around the hotel pool.

The opening ceremony was an extravagant affair, albeit long-winded and hot, but it set the scene for an exciting eight days of racing against 280 competitors from 73 countries. The series consisted of three days of qualifying races to determine the Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Emerald fleets for the finals series, two days of team racing, and then three days of finals racing. The sailing for the first three days was in champagne conditions, with 15-18 knots the first two days and 10-13 knots on the 3rd day, always sunny and warm, with Atlantic swells that made the downwinds both exciting and crucial for getting a good result. As expected, a sailor's result was highly dependent on how good their start was, how well they could hold a lane needing to sail high for long periods of time, and then how well they went on the downwind. Once our sailors got free from the pack, in the top ¼ of the fleet, they were very competitive, although we lacked the ability to consistently gain downwind. It was also very obvious how much fitter and stronger the top sailors were, clearly having done more recent training in moderate to strong wind conditions and big waves. By the end of the qualifying round, Will, Jeff, and Noah had sailed solidly to be in silver fleet for the finals with Tom and Ally in Bronze. The whole team was getting a lesson on the importance of starting. Even the top sailors were getting results in the 40s and 50s after a bad start.

Days four and five were set aside for Team Racing. For the first time since we arrived in Tangier, the sky turned overcast, and the winds were light. It would be fair to say our lack of team racing practice was evident as we made an early exit, with the upside being more time to relax and get our energy up for the finals series.

For the finals series, lasting three days, the normal Tangier conditions returned, albeit slightly lighter at 10–15 knots, which caused some snakes and ladders at the top of the leaderboard. As with the qualification series, starting was the all-important factor in whether our kids had good races, and the situation on a worlds start line is hard to replicate or simulate sailing in New Zealand. Something to think about for future campaigns.

The final results for the team were:

- Will (Silver) 91st
- Jeffrey (Silver) 123rd
- Noah (Silver) 133rd
- Tom (Bronze) 189th
- Ally (Bronze) 195th

An interesting fact was that the top three in the Gold fleet finished with an average race place, after their drop, of 6th, 8th, and 9th. respectively. This shows how competitive this event is at the podium end of the fleet, and what a fantastic introduction to high-level international yacht racing it was for our sailors. There is also a clear link between success at the world championships and whether a sailor has done previous world championships. Many of the top 20 sailor were on their 2nd, 3rd, and sometimes 4th world championship.

The prizegiving ceremony was an affair befitting the status of the event, followed by the ritual team gear-swapping market back in the hotel lobby, which was akin to an old-fashioned stock market trading floor, with some items being traded multiple times, and the kiwi gear always in hot demand. A gifted NZ rash top also got us some crucial boatpark favours with officials. I would recommend for future tours that you can't take enough NZ gear to swap or use as a bribe, and any excess Team New Zealand gear is always highly prized.

A special thanks to Willzy, surely the world's calmest and unflappable coach; the NZ Sailing Foundation for their financial support to the team; NZIODA for all the behind-the-scenes and unseen organisation; and the attending parents Philippa, Sam, and Stella. who were always willing to help with whatever jobs were required.

Team Manager – Nik Burfoot