

Pulling power

Few sports can match the high-octane thrills of powerboat racing, with this year's XCAT World Series set to reach a thrilling conclusion in the United Arab Emirates, as **Isaac Davis** discovers

The 2016 season is drawing to a close for one of the world's most exciting sports – but there's still plenty of racing to enjoy, and a title yet to be decided. The 2016 UIM XCAT World Series will soon be reaching its thrilling climax with two races in the UAE, and local fans will be hoping that their home favourites, powerboating legends in the making, to add yet another title to their stellar resumé.

XCAT is short for 'Extreme Catamaran', but these vessels have little in common with the Nacra 17 catamarans you might have seen recently in the Olympic sailing competition. XCATs are powerboats, with the emphasis on 'power' – these high-tech, twin-engined, carbon-hulled vessels can reach speeds in

excess of 200kmh (125mph) as they blaze across the water. With sea, wind and weather conditions offering a trio of variables, the XCAT World Series offers exhilarating racing at every turn.

This year's championship takes in six meets spread across an eight-month period, with each Grand Prix prefaced the previous day by the drag race-style thrills and spills of the Speed Cat Run. After getting under way in April with two races in the UAE, the series moved to Lake Lugano in southern Switzerland two months later. Following round four, staged on the Han River in the Korean city of Seoul, the championship returns to the UAE for two final races in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Big crowds



are assured in both locations, where powerboat racing continues to soar in popularity.

The Abu Dhabi Grand Prix will take place at the Abu Dhabi International Marine Sports Club, while the Dubai race takes the Dubai International Marine Club as its base. In both locations, spectators can watch the action out on the water or on a big screen. Lasting around 45 minutes, each race will be held over multiple laps of looped courses that each measure around 3.2-3.5 nautical miles: 14 laps in Abu Dhabi, 16 laps in Dubai. The Dubai course, in particular, boasts

a spectacular backdrop, with the course circling one of the two famous Logo Islands, which sit at the base of the stunning Palm Jumeirah artificial archipelago.

With two rounds of the championship to go, one pair of racers are odds-on favourites to finish atop the standings. The Emirati duo of Arif Al Zaffain and Nadir Bin Hendi are already powerboating legends, and are as dominant now as they've ever been. Since 2012, the duo have won every edition of the XCAT World Series, compiling a spectacular winning streak that's left their competitors literally trailing in their wake.

Over the past few years, the pair have been practically unbeatable. In 2014, they won the first four races of the ▶



Left: Fans are set to turn out in their droves to watch the high-speed racing by boats such as the UAE's Victory Team (above)

Portfolio

XCAT WORLD SERIES

five-race series to wrap up the title with ease. Last year, Al Zaffain and Bin Hendi failed to finish in two races – but they won the other four, leaving them 14 points ahead of fellow Emirati racers Rashed Suhail Al Tayer and Faleh Khalfan Al Mansoori in the end-of-series standings. This year, they've carried on in the same vein, winning the first three races of the XCAT calendar in Fujairah, Dubai and Lugano to open up a healthy lead at the top of the standings. Calling their 2016 boat 'Victory Team' looks less like hubris and more like a simple statement of fact.

For all the pair's dominance, though, their rivals are working hard to try and break their vice-like grip on the title. This year, their leading challengers are proving to be Tom Barry-Cotter and Ross Willaton, a pair of young Australians who've been making plenty of waves in the powerboating world. With two

second-place finishes in the first three races of the series, Barry-Cotter and Willaton will be pushing Al Zaffain and Bin Hendi to the limits in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

The other main contenders include the Abu Dhabi Team pairing of Rashed Suhail Al Tayer and Faleh Khalfan Al Mansoori, who took second place behind Al Zaffain and Bin Hendi in last year's World Series. The duo got their 2016 series off to the worst possible start when they failed to complete the Fujairah Grand Prix, but a second-place finish in the year's first Dubai Grand Prix was followed by third in Lugano, putting their season firmly back on track.

But in Abu Dhabi in the middle of November, and again in Dubai two weeks later, all eyes will be on Arif Al Zaffain and Nadir Bin Hendi, as the Emirati racers try to continue building one of the most dominant portfolios in world sport. ■

The final two races in the 2016 UIM XCAT World Series take place on 17-18 November in Abu Dhabi and 2-3 December in Dubai. A full practice, qualifying, speed run and race schedule will be posted at www.xcatracing.com, where you can also watch the racing live.



Right (top to bottom): Arif Al Zaffain and Nadir Bin Hendi celebrate winning last year's Abu Dhabi GP; Dubai's coastline provides a dramatic setting; Abu Dhabi 5 challenges Victory Team in April's Dubai GP

