

Sensas Challenge Final

Darren Cox – In Depth

Coxy recently competed in France's Sensas Challenge Final with his Kamasan Starlets squad. Roach were the expected target, so where did all those carp come from?

Wintertime signals my Kamasan Starlets squad's annual adventure on the Sensas Challenge Final in France. Having won the event in 2002 we get an invite back every year, and this time around we had qualifying teams from Daiwa Dorking and Barston for company. It's always an adventure because we are usually travelling to a new venue we know nothing about. This year the final was to be held close to the Swiss border in Belfort, France's equivalent of Sheffield. Belfort has a huge forging industry and steelworks and is a very important city in France – it's also a long haul from the UK!

After picking Jean Desque's brain we discovered that the final was going to be held on two canals; the Canal du Rhône au Rhin and the Canal de Montbéliard. These were two quite different canals, one very similar to our own traditional narrow-boat canals and the other more like the wide and deep Stainforth & Keadby or Gloucester Canal. According to what Jean told us the fishing was likely to be quite good, with plenty of roach and ruffe throughout.

Our team this year had a familiar look to it with Sean Ashby, Kian Wardle and myself, plus Scott Geens stepping in for Mark Downes who was unavailable. It was Scott's first Sensas Final and I know he was looking forward to it, as we all were.

Keith Ward, our trusty bank runner, was also travelling with us. Keith fishes the practices to get the best idea of what's happening and then runs the bank for us on match days. He is a brilliant runner, and it's like having five anglers fishing in a four-man team at times! He also provides us with cups of tea and burgers as he always brings his camping-gas stove – he's angling's version of Ray Mears!

We set off a few days early to try and get some practice in and, after a long drive, we arrived in Belfort to be greeted with torrential, ice-cold rain, which had been hammering down all day. The next morning it was totally different, though – freezing cold with a hard frost. This was going to make it very difficult to try and suss out how to approach a completely

Kian Wardle, Darren's Kamasan Starlet team-mate, is the second angler along at Belfort, France's equivalent to Sheffield!

alien venue in such adverse weather conditions. It was the first frost of the year in the region and, to make matters worse, it was a beautiful clear, sunny day and the canal was carrying extra water, making it a horrible tea colour.

After a good discussion between the five of us we decided that we should try and see whether a UK 'potting-in' style would work against the more traditional Continental balling-in approach. In France, everyone balls it in at the start. Even when they fear that it'll be difficult they will still put in 15 balls in the five-minute prebaiting period, and the fish are actually used to this approach. This is a problem for UK anglers as we are not used to such a bold attack when we expect it to be poor. Whether everyone around you is doing it will often determine if you have to follow suit or not.

Sean was to be our guinea pig, so we sat him in the middle and balled the hell out of it around him. We did, however, change our own approaches and mixes slightly to see which was best. I used a darker mix of Sensas Fine Canal, a bag of Lake and

two bags of damp leam – a lovely fine mix but nice and dark, even though there's a lot of leam in it.

I decided I would put 10 balls in on the 13m line and pot four at six metres. The four balls potted in close would have about 75g of joker in them so they were quite rich, while the 10 balls on the 13m line would be virtually empty. However, I potted in two very rich balls full of joker exactly where I wanted it, too. This gave me a nucleus target to fish to.

The practice went much better than we all expected; I had the most on the end peg with 161 roach for 7lb 4oz but everyone else had between 111 and 121 fish, so we really enjoyed it, catching short and long. Sean's potting-only approach showed no advantage whatsoever as there were so many fish to be had. We still thought that this might play a part, though, as Sean didn't catch any less than most of us, which proved that if we needed to we could purely pot it and still compete with those around us.

In the afternoon we moved onto another length of the canal, which was even more coloured. To cut a long story short it was really difficult; Sean and I were next to each other and had 28 small roach each, while the rest of the lads struggled for a



The venues were very much like those in our native canal network.



Skimmers were a very useful bonus in most sections.

bite! I also had a carp about 3lb, which turned out to be the first of many caught that weekend! Interestingly, Sean used the same mix as I did in the morning (and as I did again) and this mix just seemed right.

The next day we fished the wider canal after teaming up with the lads in the

Fishing heavier for carp would reduce the chances of catching roach.

Barston team – we figured that nine of us in a row would give a better perspective of how the match the next day was likely to be. Again it was hard at the start for all of us, whether we potted it or balled it.

For an hour we caught only tiny ruffe with the odd roach, then Sean started to catch roach off the deck over his long line. I was struggling for bites so decided to try the opposite approach, laying on for a bonus catfish or skimmer. I sat for 45 minutes with tiny ruffe being a real nuisance, but eventually the float went

under and another carp around 3lb was played gingerly to the net on my 0.07mm hooklength and size 22 3530 hook!

As you can imagine, I was called all the names under the sun as I had snared another carp. Nobody had mentioned carp to us before we arrived, so how come I'd caught two? While I was netting my fish Dean Cherrington and Miles Day were each playing a carp, and by the end of the day everyone had caught at least one carp. There was also another team practising about 300 metres to our left and all day we watched them land big fish, which must have also been carp by the way they were being played.

When we got back to the hotel I could hear all the French anglers talking about carp. It transpired that they had stocked thousands of carp in various stretches of the canal – that certainly put the cat among the pigeons as far as tactics were concerned! How would we know where to fish for carp and where to fish for silvers?

In our meeting we kept coming back to the point that the carp just turned up and it was dangerous to specifically target them. Everyone who caught a carp caught it on very light gear and they were easy to get out if you were sensible and patient. We felt there was little point in fishing heavier for them as it would reduce the chances of catching roach. We would have a rig ready just in case we caught one or two but wouldn't spend time fishing for them if there were other fish to be caught.

We decided we would ball it long without much feed in but then pot in two balls with plenty of joker and a few chopped worms so that we would know where the fish would be whether it was good or difficult. The mix was my original blend from the first day. We felt that it was very important to keep potting in neat balls of double leam and joker to keep the roach coming, and this was also the best way to catch a carp.

In the Sensas Final you get five points per fish and one point per gram, so all was not lost if you had no bonus fish as long as you caught plenty of bits. On the other hand, you could still get out of jail with one lump if you were struggling.

On Day One I drew an area we hadn't practised and was told there could be some carp to be caught. I balled in eight balls with very little in them and potted two balls full of joker and a little chopped worm in the five-minute prebait. Then I went in and couldn't buy a bite on either line – I was gobsmacked! To make matters worse the anglers either side of me started catching roach steadily. I went 25 minutes without any bites while the angler from the Sensas team, to my right, had 22 fish.

Then, all of a sudden I started catching a roach every put-in on my 13m swim, and within the hour I had caught them up and was beginning to enjoy myself. Keith was running my section and told me I was doing well and to carry on catching roach. He wandered down the section and by the

time he got back to me I had a carp to go with my 45 roach. I couldn't wait to tell him but he already knew. He doesn't miss a trick!

The guy on the end peg had already caught two carp but I was happy with the way my match was going and was sure that I would get another bonus carp if I was patient. With regular feeding every 15 minutes of one small neat ball via a pot I continued to catch roach steadily. Then, out of the blue, I hooked another carp. I knew that this one would be worth a lot of points so again took my time as I was still on 0.07mm Garbo Line and a size 22 hook.

Day Two would be very hard for most after all the groundbait that had gone in the day before.

I ended the match with 4.4kg and 104 fish for 4,920 points, putting me third in the 16-peg section. I was happy with that and hoped the others had done well too. Scott had a good battle with Gilles Caudin off the next peg and came out a worthy second in the section to him, but Sean and Kian had drawn badly and both ended 11th. That gave us 27 points for 16th overall on Day One. We were still in the running but would struggle to get on the podium, being 17 points behind the leading team and with the top five all having seriously good scores!

We figured that Day Two would be very hard for most after all the groundbait that had gone in the day before so we revised our targets dramatically and adjusted our feeding accordingly. We changed our mix to a lighter, lower-feed-content, leam-based mix containing 50 per cent damp leam and 50 per cent Lake. We also decided to pot it in where it had been difficult on Day One.

I took it very easy as I drew close to where Sean had been the day before and it had been dreadful. I gambled and potted three different lines at 13 metres: two with two balls each, and one with six balls. I also potted two balls at six metres. This 'negative' approach worked as I winkled out 42 fish for 675g and 885 points for another third in section.

Pictures kindly supplied by Christophe Noualhier (Sensas) and Franck Malaga (Team Sensas NIORT).

I could catch one fish on every line if I left them alone for long enough – I may even have caught more had I fed more lines.

The other lads had done really well – Sean was sixth, Kian third and Scott fifth. With 19 points on the day and 46 over the two days it looked like we had done okay and we were delighted when we ended up fifth out of the 64 teams.

It is always difficult beating the French on their home waters. They are so good at catching roach – it's all they ever do, and all they ever want to do! It is also difficult getting your head around a three-hour match instead of our traditional five. It is

so different and requires such precise and swift decision making. Get it wrong and your match is pretty much over, whereas in five hours you often have so much time to try things.

The Sensas Challenge Final is superbly run with great hospitality from the French. This year Sensas put on a great presentation by honouring Will Raison and the England team for winning the World Champs. We have some great friends thanks to this event, and even Kian knows two or three words in French now. Who knows, by the time he is 50 he might even be fluent!



Darren discovered the carp tended to be caught while fishing for small fish rather than targeting them specifically.