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A New Generation of Cool

by Betsy Alison



What people think is cool will change over time, but in performance sailing some things have proven to be "perma-cool." For example, the rush of a hair-raising high-speed plane, or the smooth touch of some new hybrid, like carbon-fiber hardware and high-end composite rigging. Cool is winning a race and knowing exactly how you did it. Passing to leeward is always cool. So is a cool boat that you can afford.

According to this year's Boat of the Year judging panel-Betsy Alison, Peter Wormwood and Leif Beiley—there were more cool boats in 1998 than in any other year. There was a 24-footer with hiking racks, a plastic hydrofoil that screamed, and many others with modern technology and design. The judges' overall Performance Boat of the Year, however, introduces more than the latest in high-tech thinking—it introduces thrilling high-speed sailing in an amazingly simple package, a package that sailors at any level will enjoy. As the judges say, this year's Boats of the Year are the coolest of cool.

The 29er

When the 29er races across your home waters for the first time, expect to hear the snap of heads turning. This year's best Performance One-Design and Overall Boat of the Year is no run-of-the-mill doublehanded dinghy.

Canadian builder Byte Boats calls its 29er the "little brother" to the Olympic class 49er, but don't be scared off by its association with the latter's reputation. Those who have always wanted to

experience the high-speed thrill of sailing the 49er, but feared humiliation, will be glad to know that the 29er is far more user-friendly. Whether you're a scrappy junior sailor, an International 14 vet, or a PHRF stalwart, this boat will be a hoot to sail. I promise.

Byte touts its latest addition as "the new, exciting youth boat for the 21st century, but we think they're slightly off base. They suggest an ideal crew weight of 265 to 310 pounds, which we believe opens the door to all sorts of crew combinations, not just kids. There's also a lot of talk about attracting and keeping new sailors, and if the class can quickly establish itself with a global lineup of exciting events, this could be one boat that keeps us coming back for more.

Skiff designs that feature racks or wings are the rage, and skiff-design guru Julian Bethwaite designed a boat that literally invites you to come and take it for a spin. Its systems are the pinnacle of simplicity. A single-line spinnaker launch-and-retrieval system, self-tacking jib, boom-led mainsheet, and a virtually bare cockpit are unheard of in a boat with so much latent speed.

Once in planing mode, the 29er does what skiffs do best. It scampers over wave tops and crunches through short chop. Its acceleration is fluid, and its flared wings, which push the beam to 5'7", provide solid form stability. Its waterline is narrow, which makes it tender in light air and makes weight placement critical to boatspeed. Crews that flow together will win together.

The hull itself is rock solid. The polyester, fiberglass, and foam-core construction is extremely stiff. Two-part aluminum rudders and daggerboards (foam injected) use the same extrusions for the trailing edges with different leading edges—a clever and cost-effective production idea. The triple-section aluminum mast has a carbon tip, which allows you to replace only the broken section if disaster strikes.

Enough about its makeup. It's prom night: what you really need to know is how this baby dances! Both upwind and down, it's lively and quick, which equates to highly responsive sailing. The helm is light and sharp, allowing you to point exactly in the direction that you want to go, and get there fast. We test sailed the boat in about 10 knots, which was enough breeze to have my "grown-up" crew on the wire and me comfortably tucked under the hiking straps, perched outboard on the wing.

Sheeting the powerful main straight off the boom is velvety smooth. Without the typical floor-mounted mainsheet block, you can feel every puff. Boom sheeting also gives the skipper or crew the option to trim. The jib is self-tacking, so it only needs to be fine trimmed. Because of the extremely refined single-line hoist-and-retrieval system, spinnaker handling is child's play. We enjoyed rapid sets and douses with minimal friction.

There's no need to be subtle here. The 29er is radical. "This boat will be to sailing what snowboarding was to skiing" says Byte Boats' Ian Bruce, who with his design erudition estimates that the

29er can sail 1.3 times faster than true wind-speed. The 323-sq.ft. sail plan is generous for a boat of its size and weight, and the 181-sq.ft. asymmetric simply enhances the motor.

Fully rigged and ready to sail, the boat weighs 198 pounds. It's easily cartopped, so just include a dolly for ramp launching and you complete the sail-away package for under \$6,500. Its simple layout makes it quick to set up and helps pull your head out of the boat to concentrate on tactics.

"Almost anyone could jump in this boat, and after a half hour of getting used to it, go racing," said rookie judge Leif Beiley, who sailed 505s before making his livelihood designing keelboats. "I was uncomfortable at first, but got comfortable really quick?"

"Bethwaite struck gold with this one," he continued after we snapped him out of his daydream of owning one. "This boat will get a lot of people excited about sailing again, and keep them out on the water shredding."

International 29er Class Association:
www.29er.org

