



Get racing!

In the next installment of our series for those new to sailing, **Rupert Holmes** looks at how to choose a boat for getting started on the race track.

Ask a dozen different people what racing means to them, and you'll probably get a dozen different answers. A common thread, however, would be that it's a chance to escape from the stresses and worries of day-to-day life. Even in a race lasting less than one hour, the concentration level can be such that you're completely unaware of the rate at which time is passing – or of anything outside the race. For others it's also a chance to be in the open air and reconnect with the natural elements. For some it's a chance to grab some time alone; for others it's more about teamwork and being sociable.

At the same time, there are so many different elements of the sport: many dinghy racers, for instance, have no urge to race offshore, while equally, some of the most successful ocean racers have never set foot in a dinghy. Yet others happily swap between totally disparate boats at a whim –

witness Volvo Ocean Race skipper Sebastian Josse sailing a foiling Moth at the Melbourne race stopover, or America's Cup navigator Ian Moore racing his radio-controlled Laser. Other top sailors also choose to go cruising on non-performance boats. Y&Y writer Mark Rushall, is one of many well-known racers with a cruising boat – in his case a 28ft wooden classic from the 1960s.

Even at some of the most prestigious events there's a huge range of old and new classes. For instance, the second-largest class at Skandia Cowes Week is the X-One Design, which will celebrate its centenary in just three year's time, while the largest is the SB3, less than a decade old. So, how do you choose?

Choices, choices

The first decision is what basic type of boat you'd like to start sailing – an easy singlehanded or two-man dinghy, maybe a catamaran, or perhaps you fancy a small keelboat? There's a bewildering choice of individual models – the latest version of Y&Y's *Racing Classes Review* lists 138 different designs. For many people, the boats sailed at the club they choose to join will reduce the options to a manageable short list. Another defining factor is your own height and weight – some boats are relatively tolerant of a variety of crew sizes, but



PHOTO TURTLE

Left and far left Would you rather sail a boat of your choice in a mixed fleet, with the winner decided by a handicap rating, or sail a one-design class where first past the post wins?

others are very much geared around a relatively specific size band.

Most clubs also offer handicap racing, normally using the RYA's Portsmouth Yardstick Scheme, (www.rya.org.uk/KnowledgeBase/technical/pys.htm) in which boats of different designs are assigned a 'yardstick' or handicap number that enables a 'corrected time' for each race to be calculated. Many clubs have both fast and slow handicap fleets, so that the boats in any individual race are not too disparate in terms of speed. Most races for sea-going yachts are handicapped using the somewhat more complex IRC rating rule (www.rorcrating.com).

The main advantage of sailing in a handicap fleet is that you have more freedom to choose the design of boat you want to sail. Against this, however, is the disadvantage that you won't know your actual position in the race until after you've come ashore and the race officer has calculated the overall results. With class racing, however, you're racing identical boats so you know your position all the time, and because everyone's going a similar speed you have the added challenge of more boat-on-boat jostling for position, which adds to the excitement and creates a greater tactical challenge.

Singlehanded dinghies

It's no accident that the world's most popular boats are singlehanded dinghies. They tend to offer fast and exciting sailing in an affordable and often very easily maintained package, and you'll never have problems recruiting – or retaining – crew to sail with you. To the outsider, it may appear that sailing on your own is antisocial, but in fact singlehanded classes tend to be some of the most friendly classes, with plenty of pre- and post-race camaraderie and helpful advice to improve your skills. Here are a few examples, with designs spanning the past 50 years. Prices range from as little as £500 for an old, but functional, Laser or Solo, through to £4,500 for a new Laser with all the trimmings, and up to around £8,000 for a new singlehanded skiff.

■ The **Laser** is hugely popular and sailed at almost every club in the country. Originally dating from the early 1970s, it's a very versatile boat, used for everything from training beginners to the highest-levels of racing – it's an Olympic class. On the downside, it's a little powerful for many people – to be properly competitive you need to be about 6ft tall. However, smaller Radial and 4.7 rigs help smaller people and for the past six years attendance at the Radial national championships has exceeded

that of the regular Laser by a wide margin.

■ The **Solo** is a classic one-design, singlehanded dinghy designed by Jack Holt in 1956. It's a popular choice at many clubs and has seen a resurgence in popularity recently. Last year's national championships attracted 90 entries, making it the UK's seventh-largest championship.

■ By contrast, the **RS Vario** is a modern downwind speed machine with an asymmetric spinnaker to maximise the fun factor when sailing downwind. A high stability hull shape reduces the time you'll spend swimming, and with 47 entries at the 2007 nationals the racing is certainly competitive.

■ At the top end of the scale, singlehanded skiffs offer the ultimate in thrills for singlehanded sailors. They're certainly not for raw beginners, but why not set a goal of getting to grips with one after regularly sailing a more manageable boat for a couple of seasons? Examples include the **RS700** and **Musto Skiff**, both of which have spinnaker, trapeze and wings.

■ For kids, smaller singlehanders include the **Optimist**. One of the world's most enduring small boat designs, this diminutive craft dates from 1947 and yet is still the ultimate training boat for under-16s. Nearly 400 Optimists competed at the 2007 national championship, and many top-level professional sailors, including Olympic gold medal winners, cut their competitive teeth in this class.

■ The **Topper** is undoubtedly the most popular of the smaller singlehanders. It's an almost indestructible polypropylene design that's now over 30 years old, but continues to draw a big following, with 289 boats at its most recent championship and a packed calendar of events through the year. Toppers can be raced competitively by anyone from a little less than 50kgs upwards, and the class proudly boasts of its attraction to sailors of all ages, with championships regularly attended by those ranging from nine years old to those in their 70s.

Crewed dinghies

These make up the majority of dinghy classes and offer something to suit all tastes, from relatively sedate 1930s wooden dayboats to the latest hi-tech carbon fibre creations. Racing crewed dinghies may call for a wider range of skills than for singlehanders: effectively dividing the roles between the crew is much more important than frequently realised!

■ More than 50 years after it was first launched, the **Enterprise** still has a strong following and is sailed at hundreds of clubs around the world. It

Right You can choose a boat that's sailed at your local club, or one with an international circuit – here the youth RS Feva class enjoy some Italian sunshine on Lake Garda.

PHOTO PAUL WYETH



remains a relatively simple boat, with neither spinnaker nor trapeze, so it's easy for newcomers to sail. Yet, at the front end of the fleet the racing is incredibly close and winning an Enterprise championship is rightly regarded as an outstanding achievement, even among the very best dinghy sailors.

■ The **Lark** is another enduring design, somewhat later than the Enterprise and with the addition of a spinnaker. There are relatively fewer boats, but a huge number of people have raced Larks, thanks to their popularity among University sailing clubs, especially for team racing.

■ The **Cadet** is another design from 1947 that offers close racing for those under 18 in a compact two-person dinghy with a spinnaker, but no trapeze.

■ **Fireballs** are fast two-man dinghy with spinnaker and trapeze, with fleets throughout the UK.

■ The **RS200** is a much newer design with an asymmetric spinnaker, but no trapeze, and dates from 1995. The increased form stability of the hull compared to older designs means the boat has a comparatively larger rig. With 126 boats, the RS200 national championships had the largest fleet of non-junior dinghies in 2007. Heavier crews may find the slightly larger RS400 is more suitable.

■ As with their singlehanded counterparts, two-person skiffs such as the **International 14** and **49er** are boats to aspire to sail – few people go from beginner to racing one in a single season.

Multihulls

These form a relatively small percentage of the dinghy sector, but multihull sailors tend to be enthusiasts who are very committed to their part of the sport. It's not hard to see why – these boats are faster than any others, making for exciting adrenaline-fuelled sailing. Their ability to gobble up large mileages has resulted in a whole host of long-distance races, such as the Archipelago Raid and the Loch Ness Monster, which adds further variety to the calendar.

Keelboats and Sportsboats

Falling between dinghies and yachts, keelboats offer the opportunity to race generally without risk of capsize, although if sailing at sea in strong winds it can still be a very wet experience!

Keelboats are generally sailed by a crew of two or three, although there are a couple of classes for singlehanders such as the Illusions and 2.4mRs. Class racing forms the backbone of most keelboat racing and they can be found all round the coasts, as well as on larger lakes and reservoirs throughout the UK.

Sportsboats are a more recent development. As with keelboats, they have a weighted keel to provide stability, but the boats are lighter, more powerful and faster, with full-on planing performance downwind and can achieve speeds of over 20 knots.

Big boat racing

Yachts are a further step up from keelboats, with a larger crew, each of which is likely to have a relatively specialised role. The exception to this is with the increasingly popular two-handed sailing events, when both crew members need to be able to take on (almost) every role onboard, including navigation.

The majority of events involve inshore 'round the cans' races, although there's also a full programme of offshore races, in the English Channel, North Sea and Irish Sea, as well as longer-distance events. Compared to the number of dinghies that are raced in the UK, there are relatively few yachts that are actively raced, so activity tends to be concentrated into fewer locations. However, with even fairly modest yachts racing with seven or eight crew, it's an activity that involves a very large number of people and there are plenty of opportunities to crew.

Where to sail

Don't be fooled into thinking that a big body of water is essential for good racing. Granted, if you want to sail multihulls, then only the largest reservoirs and lakes will have space for them. But dinghy racing on a narrow stretch of river, or a small lake, can see the action (which mostly happens at mark roundings) concentrated into a small area, which maximises the fun and accelerates the rate at which you hone your new-found skills.

Once you start doing well in club racing, you may want to travel to a few open meetings, where a larger number of boats in one class compete at other clubs. ■