

Many Hands Make Fleet Work



Sea Spray July 2000

The 10 identical Greg Elliott designed yachts were launched in February this year, just in time to feature as the star performers in the annual Coca-Cola Cup. General consensus from the three-man crews who blooded the boats is they're ultra responsive, easy to handle, and very fast. Thoroughbreds that do the prestigious event proud.

But the six-metre E6s (as they've been christened) have been primarily designed for the Squadron's youth training programme, and in that respect, says training manager John Weston, they're even better. "They're yachts in which sailors will learn to race - rather than learn to deal with boat idiosyncrasies."

The E6s were a long-overdue replacement for the Squadron's fleet of Elliott 5.9s. After 13 years of robust handling by hundreds of budding sailors, the boats deserved a rest. They were also outdated. Thirteen years of advances in sailing technology are very evident in the new fleet, despite the boats having been conceived in the same design stable.

As fibreglass boats, says Weston, the construction is still relatively low-tech. "They're not much lighter than the 5.9s, but the hull shape is significantly different, and in terms of performance, the E6s are light years ahead. They plane very, very quickly."

From a tutoring perspective, he adds, they're also much more user-friendly than the 5.9s, which had a 'canyon' down the centre of boat and a traveller where it shouldn't be. By contrast, the E6 has a large, open cockpit and a simple, uncluttered deck layout. Crew members can trim the yacht without needing to be expert limbo dancers.

Elliott designed the boat around a brief developed by the Squadron's racing manager, Harold Bennett. He wanted to minimise the number of moving parts (to reduce maintenance) and employ a large, modern-style cockpit the crew could hike from comfortably.

There are many other differences between the old and new fleet, but the most striking one is the E6s fixed, vertical high aspect ratio fin and bulb (1.6m draught) and fixed, high aspect ratio foil rudder (transom-mounted on gudgeons). The Elliott 5.9 had a drop keel and drop rudder.

The E6 hull has the trademark 'Elliott' straight stem, with flared sections amidships. "The boat's narrow on the waterline," says Weston, "but with the flared sections, the crew can hike out easily and add to the yacht's stability."

A single-spreader, fractional rig is stiffened by an internal sleeve to a point just 1.5m beneath the spreaders to minimise the chances of breaking.

Performance

Weston's initial impression of the E6 was that she was too easy to sail and too fast (it wouldn't 'test' sailing skills adequately), but on reflection says the performance and stability simply bear testament to the hours of thought and years of experience in the design.

All boats have a single set of Dacron sails (main, jib and spinnaker) - a logical choice given that the boats are sailed virtually every weekend.

While the fleet's major role is training, the boats are also used by the Squadron's new Women's match racing coaching programme (held over winter) The programme is aimed at ensuring a New Zealand medal prospect at the 2004 Olympics. If this year's trial is successful it will be extended next year.

The boats were used at the Women's National Match Racing Championships hosted by the Squadron in April, and winning RNZYS skipper Amy Waring says they're great to

drive. "I was surprised how easily we got used to them. They're not as over-powered as the old 5.9s, but they're still racy and are a better handling boat."

Construction

Perhaps the most remarkable dimension to the fleet is the way it became a reality. In essence, it was a project that resonated with goodwill, with people and companies contributing their expertise, time and equipment free - or at dramatically reduced rates.

"The only way we could even contemplate replacing our entire fleet depended on Greg's involvement," says Weston. Elliott tackled the design at minimal charge - and was happy to do so because he believes the training programme has to be supported.

"It's probably one of the world's best facilities and has been the breeding ground for some of New Zealand's most talented sailors," says Elliott. "Many have gone on to sail in the America's Cup, the Whitbread and the Kenwood Cup. I think we have a duty to support it."

Elliott also arranged for the boats to be built at Unitec's Marine Technology department - a move that not only cut construction costs considerably but also addressed the frustrated memories of his own boat-building apprenticeship many years ago.

"It's important for student boatbuilders to receive as much practical experience as possible. When I did my apprenticeship, we could only build models. Unitec has a great boat-building facility and attracts more than 100 students a year. The fleet of 10 yachts provided an excellent project - and they did a brilliant job on the plug and mold."

Additional aid for the construction of the fleet came from Pleximate (who provided the resin at a substantial discount) and Fosters Shipchangers, who likewise supplied the fleet's Harken deck fittings and the spars at a much-reduced cost.

The training programme is self-funding, and all 10 boats are sponsored. For their contribution, the sponsors' logos and signage are boldly displayed hulls and sails.

All in all, the new fleet has provided a much-needed boost to the Squadron's (and New Zealand's) training programme, and no doubt will play a major role in sharpening the skills on hundreds of promising young sailors. And judging by the migratory habits of the country's most high-profile sailing crews, the more sailors the Squadron can cultivate, the better.

What's happened to the old 5.9s? Funny you should ask. Five have settled into a life of decadent ease and will be spending their remaining years doing nothing more strenuous than a gentle reach around Noumea's azure lagoons. Four have been bought by the Sandspit Yacht Club (where life will be a bit more demanding).

The last one was bought privately - and rumour has it the new owner is an aspirant limbo dancer.