

NEW ZEALAND

Some six weeks before ISAF was to meet in Russia to finalise the slate of medal disciplines for the 2016 Olympic Games, a newly turbo-charged 6m keelboat slipped unheralded into the water in Auckland. Its designer, Greg Elliott, believes this boat has all the characteristics to retain a men's keelboat in the Games. But he is under no illusions that, ranged against the clamour from the powerful seasoned lobby groups that populate the corridors of power in world yachting, the merits of his argument might amount to a mere whisper.

Elliott's case is strengthened, one might think, by the fact that



his Elliott 6M will be used in 2012 for the women's match racing and has been well received by the sailing community. More than 100 boats are now distributed in 28 countries. 'It provides quite a racing spectacle and has been taken up with enthusiasm at World Cup events,' he says.

As a logical progression, Elliott has taken the same hull and turbo-charged it by adding a 1.6m carbon prod and a more powerful sailplan on the existing rig. This simple modification, which can be easily retro-fitted, has resulted in a lively high-performance keelboat, modern in concept and technology, that would make for exciting racing as a two-man (200kg) boat. 'It would make a good successor to the Star,' he says.

Of course, the politics of Olympic selection are frequently unfathomable. The chances of this, or any other men's keelboat, staying in the Games might seem bleak, as the discipline has been removed from ISAF's proposed slate to be finalised in St Petersburg. But Elliott's argument is that this disenfranchises a significant proportion of the sailing population. 'I find the absence of a

women's match racing, the proposed ISAF slate for 2016 does not specify match racing at all. 'It is quite clear that for 2016 ISAF is simply proposing the Elliott 6M for a women's keelboat medal,' says Elliott. 'It could be match racing, or fleet racing, or both.'

Anyway, given the vagaries of Olympic selection, Elliott is not putting all his eggs in that particular basket. 'I am not doing this only for the Olympic Games,' he says. 'But I do believe it is a fantastic opportunity to use the same platform for men and women. If it doesn't get selected it is still a great boat.'

He describes it as a high-performance keelboat, as opposed to a sportboat. 'The ballast ratio is about 50 per cent, which means it does not rely on crew weight to keep it upright, unlike sportboats which typically have a ballast ratio of about 35 per cent.'

'This is something I always wanted to do with the Elliott 6M. It is just that up to now I have been so tied up with organising the Elliott 6M project that I've not had the chance.' In fact, he has come up with two turbo versions, the first he calls the Elliott 6S and the second of which has a bigger rig plus a masthead gennaker. The

first is intended as a three-man boat (265kg) – the Elliott 6SS. The standard Elliott 6M is built by McConaghy's in China and they also made the modifications for the retractable bowsprit.

Given the requirement to reduce athlete numbers at the Olympics, the two-man version would probably be the one to push. 'It is intended as a tight one-design and, if it made it to the Olympics it would be best as supplied equipment,' says Elliott. 'It is not intended to be over-technical. I believe the Olympics should be more about sailors than equipment. It should be about who is the best sailor, not who is the best at tweaking and tuning.'

'The best sailors generally come through anyway. Take Anna Tunnicliffe: she won the Laser Radial gold medal in 2008 and now she is campaigning the Elliott 6M to try to make the US team for 2012. Her crew are already up now in the top five in the world in the class in the space of one year. World-class sailors adapt very quickly to the equipment.'

For the modified Elliott 6S the additional sail area is achieved with a very slightly larger headsail (from 7.7m² to 7.81m²) and a mainsail increased from 15.9m² to 16.55m² through the addition of a square top. The gennaker is

38.32m². 'In this configuration the boat is probably best suited for fleet racing,' says Elliott, 'but it could be used for match racing as well. You can match race any boat – look at the America's Cup, they are using catamarans!'

On its first outing under this rig the boat was helmed by Guy Pilkington, who heads the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron's much admired Youth Programme. With one of his students crewing their combined weight was right on the 200kg target. Conditions were about 12-14kt.

'It was physical and demanding, but very rewarding,' says Pilkington. 'It certainly gets up and boogies very quickly and you can hold it on the plane. Mark roundings would be a proper test of skills and athleticism. It is a big gennaker and getting it down tidily and setting up for windward work is demanding for a two-person crew. You need to be on your game. Coming into a leeward mark on the plane, it all happens pretty quickly. Getting your gybing angles right would also be critical.'

The Squadron Youth Programme have used Elliott designs for the past 20 years, starting with Elliott 5.9s, moving up to 6m boats and last year changing to Elliott 7m four-person boats. As such, Pilkington is familiar with their characteristics. He reckons the modified Elliott 6M would be an ideal two-man boat for the Olympic Regatta.

'At that level they are supposed to be elite athletes. They are



Suitably demanding... in two-man guise the turboed Elliott 6M will keep its crew busy with a bigger sailplan set on the current rig. It is this version – rather than the rerigged three-man boat – that proponents are advocating as an Olympic keelboat in 2016. Given the 6M hull's one-design history, the Elliott '6S' does at least give ISAF something modern against which to measure the continuing claims of the Star boat

men's keelboat medal from the proposed slate very surprising,' he says, 'particularly when you consider that by far the biggest form of sailing worldwide is in keelboats... This design offers a modern interpretation of keelboat racing with a great future.'

His proposition is further undermined by the fact that Elliott's own national authority, Yachting New Zealand, does not even support retaining a women's keelboat for 2016, let alone reinstating a men's version. New Zealand is aligned with the lobby favouring, among other medals, the 470 for both men and women, which leaves Elliott bemused and wondering how what he describes as a low-performance dinghy does anything to raise the excitement factor half a century after it was designed.

Explaining Yachting New Zealand's position, chief executive David Abercrombie notes that close attention was paid to the criteria set out in the Olympic Commission Report. 'We then evaluated which events we believe best meet these criteria,' he said.

'We concluded that the cost of campaigning a keelboat in the Olympics limited access for sailors to compete in women's match racing on the international stage and the costs involved in hosting keelboat races mean that this event does not best meet the criteria. Yachting New Zealand believes that Women's Match Racing in the Elliott 6M is in an exciting position to build its own World Series, aligned with international men's match racing.'

Elliott is quick to point out that, while the medal for 2012 is for

meant to be strong, clever, fit sailors. They would need to be all those things with this boat. If the Olympics are looking for excitement and boats that look good on TV, this is exactly the type of boat they should be sailing. The hull is proven and the ability to turn it into something else at very little cost is a great option.'

Sailing three-up with the SS rig was arguably less demanding with one more set of hands for handling the sails and adjustments. But, with a big 45.40m² masthead gennaker, the demands of holding it flat kept the crew on their toes – literally.

A first competitive outing in this configuration saw the 'new' boat finish second on handicap in the local sportboat fleet, beating plenty of much larger boats over the line. 'It was fun to sail,' says Elliott. 'It is challenging, but it rewards good sailors. Which is exactly what it is meant to do.'

Ivor Wilkins