



Fleet for the future

Ten times seven adds up to a great investment in our sailing future. Rebecca Hayter reviews the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron's new fleet of Elliott 7 yachts.

IT'S A design-build combination worthy of a high-performance maxi: Greg Elliott, one of New Zealand's most successful designers of racing yachts, and Yachting Developments, specialist in hi-tech composite superyachts.

But this is not a multi-million dollar glamour project. It's the fleet of 10 Elliott 7S yachts launched by the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron for its Lion Foundation Youth Training Programme.

The programme has spring-boarded many Kiwi sailors to sailing stardom. An early graduate was America's Cup skipper Gavin Brady, a more recent one, world match racing champion Adam Minoprio. The programme's founding coach, Harold Bennett, says that during the 32nd America's Cup in Valencia he counted more

than 30 sailors, shore crew, sailmakers and weather crew who were graduates of the RNZYS youth programme.

"I attended a Louis Vuitton function at a monastery in Valencia and I could have sworn I had walked into a youth programme reunion at the Squadron," Bennett says.

Training fleets for yacht clubs around the world are usually production yachts, but the Elliott 7S is custom-designed-and-built, representing an evolution from the Elliott 5.9 yachts which founded the Youth Programme in 1987, followed by the Elliott 6 fleet in 2000. Both fleets were later sold to Circle de Nautique in Noumea, and the Elliott 6 has since been selected as the women's match racing yacht for the 2012 Olympics in London.



The Elliott 7S was training apprentices at Yachting Developments from the day construction began. The yard's apprentices usually work on superyachts over many months, but the 10 Elliotts were built in just six months to meet the programme opening in May. Chief executive officer Murray Greenhalgh says the Elliott 7S project gave

apprentices an excellent grounding in lofting, building the plug, tooling and fit-out through to delivering the boats to RNZYS.

The construction is hand-laid, multi-axial E-glass with high-strength foam cores, representing a high standard in fibreglass construction. It promotes stiffness for fast, light boats and good

IN BUILD AT YACHTING DEVELOPMENTS



longevity. Emblazoned with their sponsors' logos, the yachts look sharp.

Sailors on the programme train in drills, match racing and fleet racing virtually every weekend from May to November, in up to 25 knots. The upgrade to 7-metre boats was mainly to give the sailors, aged 16 to 21, an experience close to keelboat sailing, but as training manager and coach Guy Pilkington says, it has to be exciting.

"There's no point giving them a slow boat to sail," he says. "They won't join the programme, because they want to go fast."

While the Elliott 6 has all controls on a central pillar, the Elliott 7S has spread the controls around the cockpit for skipper, mainsheet/traveller trimmer, jib trimmer and bow. Halyards, vang, tack line and control line for the 1.1m retracting prod are controlled from the base of the carbon-fibre mast. The mainsheet and traveller are trimmed from just in front of the helmsman and, in another first, the Elliott 7S has jib sheet winches, and they're well forward so trimmer and bowman will need to negotiate elbow room in mark roundings. Hiking straps, a non-keelboat feature, run the length of the cockpit.

"One problem with the Elliott 6 was that the skipper could do a lot with regard to pulling strings," Pilkington says. "But on the Elliott 7, the only thing they can play with is the traveller and the mainsheet because they can't reach anything else."

This teaches the skipper to delegate, and with four crew the Elliott 7S can develop dedicated bowmen, whereas the three crew on the Elliott 6 tended to be jacks of all trades. The Elliott 7 has a 43m² gennaker and a 34m² spinnaker, the Elliott 6 only a spinnaker. A pit for'ard of the mast helps the bow person stay onboard and provides stowage for the kite. A hatch here gives access to a lunch locker and for maintenance.



For my sail onboard the Elliott 7S, we had about 15 knots in wet, gusty conditions and it seemed appropriate that the programme's founding coach was on the helm. Harold Bennett says the boat's forgiving nature allows for inexperienced sailors.

"When you get into a bigger boat you can get into a lot of trouble, so we were keen for a boat where you could get out of trouble fairly easily."

He particularly likes the boat's response to gusts; it leans over to the turn of the bilge and from there remains totally obedient to the helm. Bennett attributes this to the buoyancy at the waterline, particularly forward, and the superb balance of the mast, keel and rudder combination.

"The balance of the boat is pretty critical. If you get one of them in the wrong place you're struggling. The boat will want to round up or it will feel heavy, but Greg's

[Elliott] got this absolutely right. It does have to be challenging but you're not going to be lying on your side if you've got a bit of breeze."

He enjoys the fingertip control of the tiller too, which will teach the subtleties of helming.

"You don't want to row it," he says, demonstrating an aggressive helming action.

The carbon-fibre rudder also reflects lessons learned through the 5.9 and 6. Under spinnaker in a breeze, the Elliott 6 is quite a handful so the Elliott 7S has a decent-sized rudder.

"If the rudder is too big, it's too easy," Pilkington says, "but if it's too small, it's too dangerous. In the Elliott 6, they go to dip and someone forgets to ease the vang, then there's a crash and that boat's out of action."

In the likely event that sailors will find

other ways to collide, the Elliott 7S have black, solid rubber stems to soften the blow.

Tacks are easy, with good space for ducking beneath the boom, and gybing the big gennaker will hone up the team work for accelerating out of manoeuvres. We were clocking around 9 knots in some fun rides, but on a recent outing in about 20 knots, the crew surfed at 14 knots under gennaker. This sail loads up significantly and women's regattas may be raced with spinnakers only.

The greatest challenge was dropping the gennaker without trawling, which is a matter of perfecting a good drop technique: jib up, run deep, blow tack line, grab the foot of the gennaker and then blow the halyard. The Elliott 7S may be the programme's biggest yacht yet, but it still has its challenges, and that will be part of its contribution to the next generation of sailors.

Helm Jaime Dawson, mainsheet Aaron Reynolds, trimmer Sylvie Admore and bowman Jay Prestt