

Don't be afraid to sail a small boat again

The older I get, the better I was." Besides sailing, talking about bravery and cunning on the seas ranks high among practitioners of the sport. Without admitting any guilt, I'll let you in on a personal episode that links the glory of the past to the reality of the present with only the slightest bias in my favor.

ON SAILBOATS

DIETER LOIBNER



It all started in the Golden Age of the Laser, in the early 1980s on Lago di Garda near Verona in Northern Italy, which offers lake sailing at its best. My season's high-water mark was the Trofeo Tomasoni in September, a race that drew 150 to 200 boats to the town of Torbole at the northern terminus. No matter how the club tried to control the masses, it always had a whiff of bedlam on and off the course. The regatta usually was raced in the reliable, strong and steady breeze called Ora (Italian for time) that develops around noon and whistles up from the south at 20 knots or more.

Doing well in those conditions was (and still is) more about brawn than brains. Boat speed is key. Hike like a fiend, get to the rocky shore first, nail that tack and clear the pack on port so that you can take care of business and let the others eat "dog meat." It's a simple enough strategy, except that it doesn't explain how to get a good start on a mile-long bulging line that's crowded with crazies who grab your boat and push it back. They'd never do this at home, but the anonymity of a crowd breeds bad habits.

The best weapon of defense I found was an extra-long hiking stick, fitted with a hard end to rap offenders' knuckles. Forget the countdown and the watch; it was first row or bust, praying that some unfortunate fools on either side would screen you toward the committee boat and the pin end of the starting line. The trick, you see, was getting out in front without getting caught. And once I did. I had clear air and nobody around to mess with my game plan.

Focused on the task of hiking and steering, I panted and groaned but didn't look over my shoulder until I had to tack within arm's length of the rocks. The view was epic and will remain etched in my memory until dementia cometh: a forest of masts and sails charging up the course, just far enough back so I could catch the inshore lift and cash in on port tack. I

relived this moment many times as a just payback for my sweat, which I consider a gratifying aspect of sailing single-handed dinghies. Gary Jobson was right when he claimed that's "the beauty of the Laser — it truly rewards effort."

Déjà vu all over again

Fast-forward a quarter-century to the dinghy launch ramp of the Barrington (R.I.) Yacht Club on a blustery New England day. Before me was the CrossCurrent 12, a striking little yacht that's known in Europe as the Truc 12 (French for thing, not truck). It's elegant like a miniature Wally, yet absurdly simple like a Laser.

Traditional elements such as an open hull and plumb bow (resembling an International 14), a wide al-fresco stern (reminiscent of a 1980s Flying Dutchman), mahogany side decks covered with satin varnish, and a cockpit sole of natural teak are contrasted by a three-part carbon mast, slender carbon boom and sailboard-like Pentex sail that comes in two sizes. All is stored in a bag that neatly fits inside the boat.

The hull, centerboard and rudder of the demo boat were Ferrari-red. Not many small boats score that high on the Gucci scale. Only Italians, who collectively bleed fashion, can produce such a vessel. The boat's Italian Web site doesn't forget to mention its use as "a tender boarded on a megayacht." Never heard that about a Laser. Designed by Marco Croci, it's being built by Cantieri Nordest, a small yard near Lake Garda. My glory days may be over, but this felt like déjà vu all over again.

"Want to take a whirl?" asked Craig Crossley, whose company CrossCurrent Marine imports this sexy monster. "Sure," I said.

Uh-oh. Isn't that wind awfully strong for getting back into a tippy dinghy after all these years on boats with kitchens and couches? The day of reckoning might be upon me, but there was no wimping out now. In no time flat the boat was rigged with the taller mast and larger sail. Stripped down to shorts, windbreaker and life jacket, I was turned loose on the shifty, puffy Barrington River and suddenly found myself on a trip back to the future in a ridiculously chic ride. Great, but would I, could I return?

Kneeling in the cockpit more than sitting, I tried hard to avoid embarrassment in front of the club. Eventually I made it down the river into the stiffening southerly breeze — they have Ora in Barrington! — and the CrossCurrent sprang to life as I headed out toward Narragansett Bay. Pushed by a lively ebb and propelled by my fanny on that skinny rail, my mind conjured visions of past battles as the boat planed upwind, occasionally becoming airborne in the chop.

Crossley followed me in his RIB and slyly brought a camera. He got some candid shots that show an honest grin on my face, since the CrossCurrent 12 played along beautifully. The Harken hardware fit the boat well, and the fully battened sail was easy to shape and depower, even though the lines for downhaul, outhaul and vang were a bit of a stretch to reach while hiking. The centerboard and rudder have clean shapes, which makes for precise steering and a quiet ride. There was no need to muscle anything, thanks

to the light and efficient rig/sail combination.

Even straight out of the air freight crate, the CrossCurrent 12 hit all the key points, yet a few simple suggestions should be allowed, like a ratchet foot block, a 2-to-1 purchase for the outhaul, a hint of a foot brace in the cockpit, and a more practical lock-down fitting for the carbon tiller.

The atavistic gladiator

Since I'm all for full disclosure, I must admit that I wasn't spared from the drink. It happened while screaming downwind and running out of water quickly. I was forced into action right when the breeze piped up and veered. Surfing down the face of a wave, I turned the stern through the wind and waited. And waited. The sail didn't follow, so there I went. I didn't mind, because that's part of the fun.



The writer had a blast sailing the CrossCurrent 12, returning to his small-boat roots.

Luckily, Crossley's digital camera had run out of memory so there's no photographic record of the dismount and no smart-aleck comment on the Dr. Crash page. The flotation in the double bottom made up for the lack of side tanks in the cockpit, so I got back on the horse in a jiffy and continued my ride.

Sensing how the boat responds to hiking, steering and trimming was most gratifying, because it proved that even though I'm getting a bit long in the tooth, I still got game. When I stepped back on terra firma I felt like 20 years had been taken off my clock. Even if you swore you'd never sail on fewer feet of waterline than you have candles on your birthday cake, I dare you to indulge in the pleasures of small boats. Risk getting wet — you might like it. Evaluate your boat-handling skills; perhaps you're in for a surprise. Or rediscover the stud only you know you once were. It will make you smile. ■

Dieter Loibner is sailing editor for Soundings.



SPECS

LOA: 12 feet • BEAM: 4 feet, 6 inches • DRAFT (board down): 2 feet • WEIGHT: 123 pounds • SAIL AREA: 73 square feet (Cool Wing, standard), 62 square feet (Soft Wing, optional) • PRICE: unavailable • CONTACT: CrossCurrent Marine, Barrington, R.I. Phone: (401) 330-6135. www.crosscurrentmarine.com