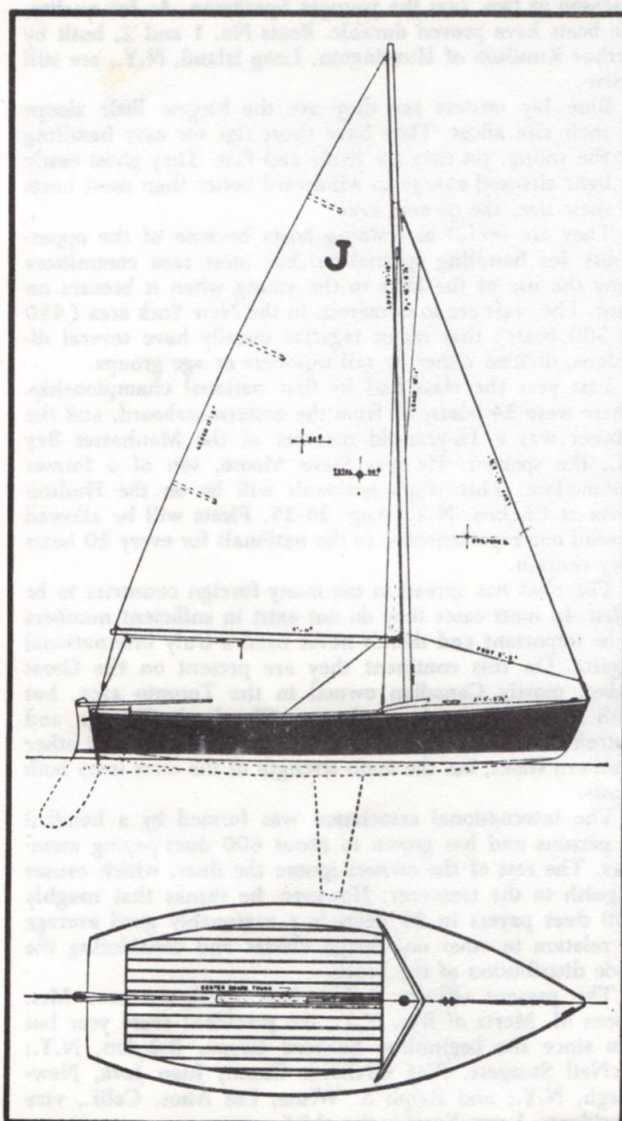




Bradbury



THE *Blue Jays* ARE FLYING HIGH

And there are some solid reasons why these 13½-footers have become a leading one-design

By JOHN RENDEL

ADHERENTS OF THE Blue Jay Class of small racing sailboats think there must be something special about a boat that has become one of the world's leaders among one-design classes in the 15 years since the first one was built. These 13½-foot, hard-chine, V-bottom, marine plywood centerboard craft now number about 3,500, and are being built at an average of one a day. They have spread to many countries and are governed by the International Blue Jay Class Association, formed in New York in 1954.

There has to be a reason behind the popularity, of course. In the case of the Blue Jay, it lies in price, sailing qualities and the fact that it has ridden the do-it-yourself movement of the last several years. They can be assembled from kits, built from the ground up from plans or purchased in slick finished form ready to sail. The cost of a kit is about \$325, exclusive of paint, hardware and sails. A complete finished boat runs to about \$1,200. It's doubtful that a good second-hand boat can be had for less than \$700.

The Blue Jay started as a junior boat, but she has been adopted by adults in many places. For example, most of the 200 boats that race on San Francisco Bay are sailed by adults. On New York's Long Island Sound, cradle of the class, the Blue Jay remains a junior boat primarily, but the older folk are crowding the picture more and more. At several clubs women and children sail them during the week and the men take over weekends. Parents buy them for kids and end by using them themselves. Others buy a boat to learn sailing, then turn it over to the children and get something bigger.

Drake H. Sparkman, head of the New York designing firm of Sparkman & Stephens, Inc., fathered the class. As chairman of the Larchmont YC junior sailing committee for several years, he had seen a wide variety of boats come and go.

"It was hard to get any two persons to agree what made a good junior boat," he said. "I didn't think any of the Larchmont boats were satisfactory. I wanted a boat that



A junior christens her Blue Jay at the beginning of the season. While designed primarily for juniors, Blue Jays are popular among senior sailors too

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(Continued from page 41)

three youngsters from 9 to 12 years old could handle well and still be a fun boat when they got to be 14 and 15. Several of the existing boats were kind of tubby and the kids outgrew them."

Sparkman went to Olin Stephens, his partner and chief naval architect. He suggested a boat 13 or 14 feet long on which the juniors could get spinnaker-handling experience. What developed was a smaller version of the Lightning, which S&S also had designed. Now Sparkman says that the Blue Jay is one of the most successful designs his busy firm ever has produced, though still far behind the Lightning in numbers.

"While designed primarily for juniors, the Blue Jay is by no means only a junior boat," he said. "The men's and women's training classes at Larchmont use them and husband-and-wife regattas are held on Wednesday evenings during the season."

The Blue Jay just grew and grew, but before getting into the expansion here are the vital statistics: length overall 13' 6", waterline length 11' 5", beam 5' 2", draft 6" with center-board up, 3' 6" with the board down; sail area 90 square feet exclusive of spinnaker, weight fully rigged, at least 275 pounds. Hull construction of 1/4-inch marine plywood, framing of oak, ash, mahogany or spruce.

If Sparkman sired the idea and Stephens the design, the man who sparked the Blue Jay to maturity was the late Robert B. McKean, a Mamaroneck, N.Y., boatbuilder with a remarkable flare for promotion. He was an imaginative, energetic salesman as well as a skilled builder. He thought nothing of trailing two Blue Jays to Florida or anywhere else that seemed a likely market. He got free national publicity by having one year's Miss Rheingold pose alongside a Blue Jay in living color, no less.

McKean was no laggard in seeing the benefits of the do-it-yourself craze and sold kits in various stages of completion as well as finished boats. Today a quarter of the registered boats still are credited to him. There were other builders, of course, of which the Saybrook Yacht Yard at Old Lyme, Conn., which started in 1949, remains the oldest still active. The biggest is Roberts Industries, Inc., of Branford, Conn., which is following McKean with completed boats and kits.

You don't have to go to a builder, though. Anybody will-

ing to part with \$15 for a set of plans from S&S can build one. Many do, particularly as part of amateur work gangs. 'Tis estimated that one-third of the existing boats have been built or assembled by amateurs.

Groups of 15 to 20 men, women and children, often working on a family basis, get together in an old barn or other suitable structure to work from plans. They gather their own materials and pool tools for all to use. Behind them usually are yacht clubs, adult education projects, civic organizations, Boy and Girl Scouts or high schools. Robert J. Sparkman, Drake's son and the association's secretary-treasurer since it was organized, says that no yard could afford the management, technical, purchasing and wood-working skills thus gathered together.

The usual practice is for the groups to build a boat or two more than is required for themselves. They are sold to help defray operating expenses. The rest are drawn for by lot so that there is an equal incentive to work. The drawing serves another purpose. Inexperience may lead the first one or two boats to be "dogs." Everybody has a chance of drawing one and can't complain if he does.

The Blue Jay's design is simple enough so that the results usually are good. For the amateurs it's a labor of love and they try extra hard. Also, the association maintains standards of quality and one-design characteristics that must be observed before the class name is bestowed.

Outside of a few minor changes, the design is the same now as when it was drawn. It is important to maintain the one-design aspect so that old boats will not be outbuilt in a season or two, says the younger Sparkman. As for quality, the boats have proved durable. Boats No. 1 and 2, built by Arthur Knudson of Huntington, Long Island, N.Y., are still active.

Blue Jay owners say they are the biggest little sloops of their size afloat. They have short rigs for easy handling by the young, yet they are lively and fast. They ghost easily in light airs and can go to windward better than most boats of their size, the owners aver.

They are useful as training boats because of the opportunity for handling spinnakers, but most race committees deny the use of the kites to the young when it breezes on hard. The craft are so numerous in the New York area (450 to 500 boats) that major regattas usually have several divisions, divided either by sail numbers or age groups.

Last year the class had its first national championship. There were 34 boats, all from the eastern seaboard, and the winner was a 16-year-old member of the Manhasset Bay YC, the sponsor. He was Steve Moore, son of a former commodore. This year's nationals will be on the Hudson River at Chelsea, N.Y., Aug. 24-25. Fleets will be allowed to send one representative to the nationals for every 20 boats they contain.

The class has spread to too many foreign countries to be listed. In most cases they do not exist in sufficient numbers to be important and there's never been a truly international regatta. On this continent they are present on the Great Lakes, mostly Canadian owned in the Toronto area, but with isolated boats in Rochester, Cleveland, Chicago and Detroit. There are several active fleets in Florida and other southern states, but the main strength of the class is on both coasts.

The international association was formed by a handful of persons and has grown to about 600 dues-paying members. The rest of the owners ignore the dues, which causes anguish to the treasurer. However, he thinks that roughly 600 dues payers in 99 fleets is a reasonably good average in relation to other one-design classes and considering the wide distribution of the boats.

The present officers besides Bob Sparkman are: Mrs. James M. Mertz of Rye, N.Y., the president every year but two since the beginning; Sanford Rague, Babylon, N.Y.; McNeil Sturgess, Pine Orchard, Conn.; Juan Jova, Newburgh, N.Y.; and Ralph S. White, Los Altos, Calif., vice presidents. Larry Kean is the chief measurer.

The officer to write to for further information is Robert J. Sparkman, 11 East 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.