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At Home on the Road

By Tim Robinson, photos by Jeff DeBevec

The JY 15, a fast-growing one-design class, recently went on the road for its fourth North American Championship.



With the wind dying, a dozen or so boats still ahead, and one final beat remaining, my crew Alyce and I hiked the boat flat around the leeward mark, and scanned upwind for an indication of which way to go. We'd made substantial gains going hard right on every beat of this final day of the JY 15 North Americans, yet most of the 65-boat fleet continued to troop to the left every time. Alyce and I came to a consensus — go with what works. For us, this was not following the leaders. And by the top of the beat, we again moved into the top 10. The reality check of our disastrous first two days got us doing things differently, and it improved our overall placing tremendously.

Going with what works, even if it means not following the leaders, seems also to have worked for the JY 15 itself. Combining a simple design oriented towards an older, heavier group of sailors that had previously not received a lot of attention from designers and builders; using a tougher, cheaper, and quite coincidentally, completely untraditional building technique; and marketing it aggressively with tremendous builder support from the beginning, the JY 15 has dealt quite

a reality check to the industry and sailors alike. Five years, 50 fleets and 1200 boats after its introduction, designer Rod Johnstone's inspiration has carved its own little niche in a sprawling one-design market.

Testament to their success was taking the North American Championship on the road to Texas last September, where 65 boats sailed a tough seven-race series that mirrored what the class has become. A cold Thanksgiving weekend in 1989 was the beginning: 10 boats buzzing around small triangles in the Wishbone Regatta on Stonington, Conn., harbor, with a Johnstone, brother John, showing everyone how it was done swapping with his son Jimmy as crew. By last September, it was the fourth North American Champs, held on a little oasis called Eagle Mountain Lake, about 25 miles north of Fort Worth — far from Stonington, the site of the three previous North Americans. Five of the 10 boats that sailed the Wishbone in 1989 were there, and one quarter of the boats had sailed the previous two North Americans. But while there were many new faces as there always are, the techniques of sailing the boat haven't changed tremendously. The simplicity, durability, and tight class rules have attracted a tremendous variety of sailors

With the Fort Worth Boat Club grounds in the background, the 65-boat JY 15 fleet is greeted by perfect sailing weather during the first day of racing on Eagle Mountain Lake.

from all over North America, the Caribbean and Europe, and this growing number has made the JY 15 a self-perpetuating group.

Nineteen eighty-eight was the year Johnstone put his reputation as the designer of 18 successful J/Boats on the line, and accepted composite technology firm Advance USA's offer to build the JY 15 after unsuccessful attempts to get J/Boats and builder Tillotson Pearson, among others, to produce it. Advance specializes in thermo-plastic boatbuilding — in other words they build boats out of plastic, not fiberglass. And as Advance Vice President Tim O'Neill admits, it was a new and unproven technology in sailboats that was met with more than a little skepticism. Today, the advanced composite process technology (ACP) is being used in all JY designs, as well as powerboats, and most recently bathtubs. For all its merits, it has been a difficult evolution (see sidebar). However, the success of the JY is far more than just its hull material.

Mark roundings were always lively (and loud) places to be, but all was usually forgiven ashore.

Johnstone has been sailing small and large boats out of Stonington his whole life. The first J/24 was drawn there during a spaghetti party in 1976, and he has been winning races on Fishers Island Sound since he grew up sailing one designs in the 1950s. As long as he has been designing, he has always been asked when he would create a small boat with the characteristics found in J/Boats: fast, simple, stable, and created for sailors of all ages. The JY 15 is that boat.

The boat could be considered a mix of a 470's length, sail area, and general shape, a Laser 2's shallow cockpit and flat bottom for planing, and a Club 420's simplistic layout and rig. It's also heavier than all three at 300 pounds, which was unintentional, but adds tremendously to the stability and safety. Competitive crews now weigh around 290 to 340 pounds, which opens the boat up to almost any sailor. "I've got a crew now that is light enough, and we get along great in the boat," said Joe Healey, who was sailing his third NAs, and who, like myself, could never be competitive in most other small boats because we're both heavyweights.

Cost and simplicity are the reasons the boat cannot be altered in any way. Two years ago at the Midwinters in South Carolina, a few boats rigged an outhaul system similar to a Laser, increasing the purchase and making it adjustable from a hiked-out position. That innovation lasted one day before the boats were threatened with disqualification by everyone in attendance. And at the skippers meeting during the NAs, just like other big regattas, someone inevitably warns of disqualification for hiking too hard. (The class



rules set a limit on how far you can get your body outboard for hiking!) While there is always some grumbling from sailors who like to tinker and push the limits, the point is very clear: sailing skill is the requirement to win JY races. And this, of course, leads to less maintenance, lower cost, and happier sailors.

Anything to do with the boat, whether its traveling, racing, or socializing, seems to be greeted with enthusiasm and the query, "When is the next regatta?" The host of the 1993 North Americans was Fleet 25 at Fort Worth Boat Club; and fleet members there have been asking to host the North Americans for the last two years. Starting in late 1990, when a local dealership was set up in Clear Lake, six fleets developed in Texas. With the first group in the Houston area,

FWBC chose the JY in large part because they wanted a boat they could race at other clubs like Houston. They initially ordered 13 boats, but by summer's end it was 22. At 26 they are now the third largest of all fleets.

The largest fleet is still in Stonington, which is also where JY Sailboats, the company led by Johnstone and David and Wendy Eck that has been so pivotal to the boat's success, is located. JY Sailboats has pumped money into marketing and developing the boat and itself by introducing other designs like the JY 9 and JY Club Trainer. As a result, the bottom line in 1993 was \$1.4 million in sales. They've certainly raised the level of involvement by a builder and sales/service outfit, attending many of the regattas around the country, moving demo

Is Plastic Fantastic?

The plastic that makes up a JY 15 hull comes from a process called ACP, or Advance Composite Process. It is a combination of thermoplastic sheet, foam core, and fiberglass, melded together to create an extremely strong, lightweight, inexpensive, and environmentally advantageous boatbuilding material. A plastic boat cannot take as much heat as a fiberglass boat, but the problem doesn't arise from direct sunlight, only when the boat is covered in dark-colored covers.

Advance USA can build a JY 15 (now patented) in 10 hours, which is about one fifth of the

time it would take to build a comparable fiberglass boat. According to David Eck at JY Sailboats, the biggest problem is that boats move off a production line so quickly that demand doesn't always keep up with supply.

ACP is nothing earth-shattering. Two thin, flat plastic sheets are laid over a hull and deck mold (at different times), an oven above heats the plastic for three to five minutes, whereupon it is laid in the vacuum molds and forms the hull and deck shape. Cooled, the hull pieces of plastic are laid in another identical mold with a matching mold surface on top, with a thin layer of fiberglass

clamped on. Polyurethane foam is then injected at various points between the mold, filling the gap between the plastic and fiberglass, bonding it together.

The hulls are extremely tough, though the process has not been without glitches. Earlier this year, Advance USA was made aware of some boats that were yellowing, with the super-thin Korad layer on the outside of the plastic, there to give the boat a shiny look, then peeling off. Dow Chemical, the supplier of the multi-layer plastic, was consulted and the problem was pinpointed as an incompatibility between the Korad and the Rovel plastic. As

Advance's Tim O'Neill explained it, "The sun was going through the Korad and effectively attacking the interface between the Korad and Rovel plastics. Oxidation was breaking down the bond between the two, allowing the Korad to release, yellow, and peel."

It has proven to be a cosmetic problem, not structural, which Colin Gordon's win in Hull No. 10 at last year's NAs seems to bear out. And ironically, since a newer plastic had gone into use in 1991, only the first 482 boats were affected, and each of these owners were offered a replacement boat for \$475.

—T.R.



Brian Hill (458), Mike Didyk (973), Carr Boyd (571), and Brian Hartwell (952) close on the leeward mark during the third day (above), while Paul Foerster (57) and Morgan Reeser (58) jockey before the start of Race 3 (left).



boats, and encouraging people like regatta winner Morgan Reeser to sail, going overboard with servicing and spare parts, running the class, and getting people psyched.

Reeser is a perfect case in point. Sitting in the welcome shade of the FWBC patio trying to rehydrate ourselves after the hot, last light-air day of the North Americans, I asked the Olympic 470 medalist (who'd just beaten Olympic FD medalist Paul Foerster by 9.5 points after winning the last two races) what he was doing here. "It's fun to get a kiss after the race, and you can't do that with my regular crew," he said jokingly. "People are just really having fun, and it's a lot less cutthroat than what I usually sail."

During our conversation, sailors had no qualms coming up and asking him what he did, when he would be sailing again, and offering a beer from the keg. "I haven't heard any grumbling about my sailing in the class,"

he continued. "I mean I'm sailing with my fiancé Stephanie. If good people are going to sail you might as well use them because it's got to help raise the standard of the class." Everyone doesn't mind the challenge of sailing against top sailors. Foerster, who sailed with past collegiate all-American Brodie Cobb as his crew, and who dogged Reeser around the course throughout the last day to no avail, sails amongst the Texas fleets. He jokingly said to Reeser afterwards, "I think I'll sail with my girlfriend next time."

Sex, age, ability — it really makes no difference. And at the NAs in Texas during three days of light and medium, shifty lake sailing, there was no hiding inside the air conditioned club if you weren't up for the challenge. The hot land breeze, or at times lack thereof, coupled with a day of wet frontal northerlies, certainly seemed to suit the local lake sailors who filled seven of the

top 10 spots. Less-than-spectacular finishes, which everyone seemed to have, were frustrating, though it never fazes anyone; the battle for 30th place is usually just as hotly contested as the top spot. Four different boats held the overall lead during the seven-race series, and place changes seemed as commonplace as the cattle on the road to FWBC.

On the long Olympic triangles, excellent for clustered early mark roundings and catching up after a bad start, the identical white hulls eventually became so spread out it was difficult to tell who everyone was. Ashore, you'd recognize the faces standing around the beer keg pumping it dry and relaxing on the lush green lawn. With the smell of the barbecue wafting around you, and the drawl of some locals nearby, there was a feeling that however you'd been sailing, you were part of a unique group. And just like previous regattas, a group of past college sailors, or big boat sailors, a husband and wife, or just a boyfriend and girlfriend, would look out on the lake, study the breeze and the short waves, and say: "Yes, we'll do better at the next regatta." And whether they do or not, the point is they will be there. That seems to be the attitude of this JY generation. And that attitude seems to be adjusted just fine.

Tim Robinson is Assistant Editor for Sailing World.