

The Ultimate 20 strutted its stuff in the sea breeze off Santa Cruz, California. The boat is now being built at the hilltop Santa Cruz Yachts, Bill Lee's former chicken coop in Soquel, California, having moved from Ron Moore's shop.

Sailing BOAT TEST



Swift Easy Rider

The Ultimate 20 scores as a nimble, stable sport boat

Story by
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with photography
by Patrick Short



Without a backstay, the Ultimate 20 is sailed dinghy style—mainsail shape is controlled with mainsheet tension, after giving the rig prebend with the swept-back shrouds before setting sail.

does raise its weather rail. Response to the slightest tiller movement was quick and sure, like the feel of an International 14 or a similarly light, nimble dinghy. The boat spins through a tack with dizzying speed and requires conscious control by the helmsman to prevent oversteering. Off the wind, any tendency to round up under the asymmetrical spinnaker could be quickly thwarted with a tug at the helm.

The cockpit of the Ultimate 20 is very open and user-friendly. The rolled side decks and raised floor fit our lower extremities well. Raised fore and aft stringers on the floor served as great leverage points for bracing our feet while the boat worked through the waves. For the forward crew, a three-pointed stanchion at the aft end of the cabin offers a valuable handhold and anchors the lifelines. At the dock, it's a sturdy point to tie off the boat, too.

The lack of a backstay further reinforces the Ultimate 20's dinghy characteristics. You can prebend the mast with the swept-back shrouds, but once under way, you adjust mast bend through mainsheet tension. With a large upper roach and full-length battens in the top two slots, the sail resembles a beach catamaran's main. The battens lock in shape, so there's really not too much you could do to the top of the sail by bending the mast anyway. The absence of a permanent backstay gives the leech plenty of room to roam, and avoids the stay extenders that Melges 24s require. With 205 square feet of mainsail and 100 square feet of jib, the Ultimate 20 has plenty of horsepower, although the wide, flat bottom will slow you down in lighter winds. Off the wind, the 452-square-foot asymmetrical spinnaker is likewise adequate.

Our only disappointment on the ride was the lag-time before it would jump into hyperspeed with the kite up. This probably had something to do with the fact that three of us, weighing a total of more than 550 pounds (half the boat's displacement), were just too much. We could easily find the boat's narrow downwind groove, but the reaching angle didn't coincide exactly with the wave pattern, forcing us to sail in a straight line when we really wanted to weave and bob through the waves. Speed dropped off considerably when we went too low and the boat wallowed until we freshened up.



LOA 21'10"
LWL 18'
Beam 8'4"
Draft 5'
Sail Area 305 sq. ft.
Displacement 1,100 lbs.
Base Price \$19,500

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It's hard not to compare the Ultimate 20 to the Melges 24. The latter serves as the touchstone sport boat of the 1990s, the first of a breed of keelboats that behaves more like a big dinghy than small ocean racer. Both are light and fast, with an emphasis on ease of handling and exciting sailing. Both adapt well to trailering.

The Ultimate 20, however, enjoys some distinct differences. Primary is the boat's greater beam for its length. A full eight feet wide, the Ultimate 20 offers a stable platform, both at the dock and when sailing upwind. We discovered this on a fun sail off Santa Cruz, California, in typical 15-knot winds and short chop on top of ocean swells. With a crew of only three, the boat actively resisted the urge to heel as we beat out into the Pacific.

Another noteworthy attribute on this 1,100-pound sloop is its extremely deep rudder, which stays in the water whenever the boat



Trailering the lightweight 20 is a snap, especially with its retractable keel.



The roller furler, recessed in the bow, is just one of the keep-it-simple details of the 20. Below, the cockpit is clean, simple and comfortable for three crew. Set the 452-square-foot asymmetrical spinnaker, right, and the 20 takes off in true sport boat style.



The beauty of the boat's deck-mounted spinnaker launching tube is that you can remove it easily. The six-foot bowsprit doesn't violate the integrity of the cabin and therefore gives you more interior space and keeps the belowdecks drier. For those who want to sail in PHRF events or who would prefer a mast-mounted spinnaker pole, the Ultimate 20 can be adapted rather easily. There's also a slightly larger symmetrical kite (485 square feet) available for more offwind power.

Those who have a sense of déjà vu about the Ultimate 20 will be comforted to know that the boat was adapted from the Hotfoot 20. Jim Antrim did the redesign, lengthening the overall length by almost a foot, softening the bow knuckle and increasing the freeboard. He also helped work out the bowsprit deck arrangement, as well as the unique keel and boat lifting rig. The latter combines both functions into one and simplifies the launch-recovery system.

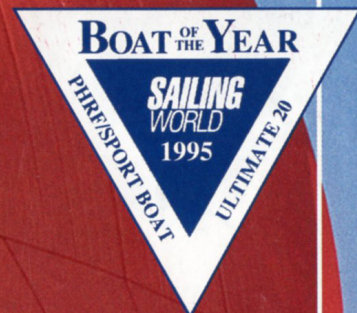
The Ultimate 20 has a cramped but functional cabin arrangement. You're better off thinking of it as a camper shell into which you throw your gear and a place to lie down at night if you don't have accommodations ashore. You can haul a Porta Potti if needed. There's a back hatch in the cockpit for more access to a cooler, bumpers, extra line and other gear. It's also large enough to stow the outboard motor.



Built by some of Santa Cruz's finest boatbuilders, the Ultimate 20 gives nothing away in construction details. Joints are clean and simple. The rolled over hull/deck joint, not unlike one you'd find on a dinghy, provides plenty of adhesive strength and a solid place to anchor the chainplates.

Only two years in production, the Ultimate 20 can be found across the country. It seems natural that one-design fleets will grow where the boats congregate. Speedy and easy to rig and sail, the Ultimate 20 takes relatively little time to maintain and should maximize your time and fun on the water.

Shimon-Craig Van Collie is SAILING Magazine's West Coast contributing editor.



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