

SPRINT 15



PHOTO JEREMY EVANS

Launched as the Spark almost 30 years ago, then known as the Dart 15, the Sprint 15 has three sailing modes. **Jeremy Evans** gets reacquainted with the UK's most popular singlehanded cat.

Having designed the Tornado in 1967, Rodney March moved on to the Dart 18 in 1976 and Spark (which became the Dart 15) in 1978. Both Darts were originally built by Panthercraft in Cornwall, a pioneering cat manufacturer whose directors had been building and racing Tornados from the beginning.

The Dart 18 became Britain's most popular cat class, closely pursued by the Dart 15 which in recent years has made a strong challenge for the biggest cat championship attendance. Meanwhile, the Laser Centre took over marketing both cats and eventually moved production to White Formula in Brighton. But, in 2004, the Laser Centre decided the Dart 15 no longer fitted their product range. This gave Ian Fraser – one of the founders of Panthercraft – the opportunity to regain the rights to the Dart 15, which has now been relaunched as the Sprint 15.

The obvious question is why bother with a boat that has been dumped by Laser? The first answer

is that the Sprint (ex-Dart) has one of the most supportive class associations in the dinghy universe, always looking to help new members and providing a good racing circuit with 86 boats racing in the 25th anniversary National Championship in 2003, followed by 59 boats a year later. That put the Dart 15 at the top of cat championship attendance for two years running, but this year they slipped to third behind the Dart 18 and Hurricane 5.9 – it seems Pwllheli was not a popular choice! The second answer has to lie with the boat itself. Almost three decades since it first appeared, is the Sprint 15 still a good boat?

Out of Africa

The Sprint 15 is built by Collins Fibreglass in South Africa and marketed by Brian Phipps of Windsport, who has come full circle. Brian worked for Panthercraft in the early days before setting up the Cat Clinic sailing school near Falmouth, and now spends much of his time as a performance

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Above The Sprint 15 can be sailed in two-up hiking mode with main and jib – perfect for lightweight son or daughter crew.

cat coach. Clearly, he's never lost his enthusiasm for Rodney March's 15ft cat.

Bob Carter, one of the longest-serving members of the class association, brought the first Sprint 15 'Out of Africa' for our test session in Chichester Harbour, where he was particularly keen to show off the multi-role capability of the boat. In essence the Sprint 15 is three cats in one: singlehanded hiking mode with the mainsail; two-up hiking mode with mainsail and jib; and singlehanded trapeze mode with mainsail and jib, which is called Sport 15. The two non-trapeze Sprints race boat-on-boat at all class association events, while the faster Sport has a handicap of four minutes in a 100 over the standard Sprint, plus its own national championship each season.

Older sailors tend to race the non-trapeze Sprint, mainly singlehanded but with the option of taking a lightweight crew. Thanks to Hattie for stepping in as Bob's 10-year-old crew, a perfect age to join dad (or grandad) for a spot of cat racing. Thanks also to Tom Gall who took time out from North Sails to race his favourite small boat in dynamic Sport mode. Tom is typical of the '15 family' type of sailor, out at the front on the Sport while his dad hikes round on the standard boat, trying to maintain that 4/100 advantage.

Right Older sailors tend to race the non-trapeze Sprint singlehanded under main only.

Design and updates

The Sprint 15 may be almost three decades old, but it doesn't appear outdated. As Tom says, 'It's a classic,' and the new boat looks exciting, dynamic and considerably more stylish than many monohull dinghy classics. The only notable changes from the Dart 15 are new shroud and hatch covers – which were very difficult to open on this pre-production boat – plus a simpler righting line, 4mm shrouds and an easier replacement system for toestraps and tramp sliders. The 'Out of Africa' boat appeared clean and well built, with a slim, classic hull shape reminiscent of a scaled-down Tornado without centreboards.

One potential advantage over most cats is that you don't have to transport the Sprint 15 on an expensive cat trailer. Beams slot and lock into the hulls using the original Dart system, which makes it reasonably quick and easy to disassemble the boat for carrying on a roofrack with the standard two-part mast. That also means you can tow a caravan or travel by ferry without paying double the cost – useful, as two Isle of Wight clubs are Sprint and Sport 15 strongholds.

Rigging and launching

If you appreciate a boat that's as quick as a Laser to rig, the Sprint could be for you – pull up the



mainsail, plus jib if required, attach the rudders and go. With small dimensions and relatively light weight, it's easy for one adult to wheel around the boat park and launch. You've also got a very stable platform to hop on and get sorted, a simple rudder lock system and no daggerboards to worry about.

In fact there's not much to worry about at all. No boom, so you don't get hit on the head, with the top block of the multi-purchase mainsheet just hooking onto the clew. The only other mainsail controls are downhaul, which requires a grunty pull to flatten the sail for stronger winds, and the mainsheet traveller which slides down the beam for sailing deep downwind. If you're with a crew there's obviously a pair of jib sheets for them to pull, and if you're in Sport mode there's the trapeze.

Compared to a modern racing cat with square top mainsail, multiple sail controls and a kite for offwind blasting, the 15 rig does look distinctly old-fashioned. The mainsail is an elliptical pinhead that holds its aerofoil shape with full length battens, but no boom means there's no foot tension apart from the pull of the mainsheet and no chance of getting a super-flat foil for strong wind control. But the great thing is that it's simple, quite effective and in boating terms cheap to put right if things go wrong. The lack of kite doesn't affect the 15. It wasn't designed for a kite, can't be raced in class with a kite, but no doubt could be fitted with a shute if an owner wanted to for fun.

Three in one

Tom Gall gave 'Out of Africa' a great shakedown in Sport mode, demonstrating that it's a lot of fun for a blast in a fresh wind. Personal experience has shown that the 15 is also a small cat with hull volume that is by modern standards low at the bows. Tom didn't put a foot wrong – less experienced cat sailors will find the 15 offers an exciting challenge and may indulge in occasional trips down the mine.

Bob demonstrated how mature sailors prefer to hike the boat, which I don't altogether comprehend. Trapezing the Sport may require some monkey-like scrambles, but hiking up the beat has never been my definition of fun. However, Bob looks pretty relaxed in the photos and the Sprint 15 should be quick enough to get to the windward mark in reasonable time.

Hattie had a wonderful ride as crew, and appeared to be just the right size and shape for the boat. Bob reckons the perfect age range for a crew is 10-15 years, beyond which they start to get a bit big and heavy. My own experience at a Dart 15 open meeting confirmed that it's a lot of fun to race the boat with a young teenage daughter, but tricky to keep up with the experienced singlehanders who make 15s go very fast at the front of the fleet.

One problem with a singlehanded cat is having enough leverage to get it upright after a capsize. The 15 is small and relatively narrow, with a sealed mast and slim, high aspect mainsail not providing the dead weight that so often holds a cat down. Bob righted 'Out of Africa' three times in succession and reckons that a 50kg (eight stone) helm could get the 15 upright without too much difficulty. We did not put this claim to the test, but suspect some experience and the right weather conditions might be required.



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

Class and circuit

The Sprint 15 is quick because it's a cat and fun because it's small. It's quick to rig, easy to sail and will generally be forgiving if the driver gets things wrong. In cat terms, it's cheap to buy and own, with an active second-hand market thanks to the dynamic class association. Apart from separate national championships for the Sprint and Sport, the class runs both a summer and winter series at various locations where usual turnout is 15-30 boats.

There is also a good selection of clubs with Sprint 15 fleets, split between standard and Sport. Grafham Water is the biggest, followed by Instow in Devon, Gurnard and Shanklin on the Isle of Wight, Carsington in the Peak District, Beaver near Doncaster, Marconi on the Blackwater, Open Dinghy Club near Worthing, Whitstable and Seasalter on the north Kent coast, Stewartby in Bedfordshire, Thorpe Bay near Southend, Halifax

Above The popular Sport mode, singlehanded trapezing with both main and jib.

Below left The Sprint 15 is simple to rig and launch, and manageable enough for one person to wheel around.



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PHOTO JEREMY EVANS

ANSWER BACK

from Brian Phipps

Thanks to Y&Y, Jeremy and the sailing team for giving the Collins-built Sprint 15 a good shake-down. Great sailing conditions and good sailors show off any boat at its best but the real value is relating the boat to the needs of potential sailors.

The Sprint 15 has attributes no other catamaran can match, many of which Jeremy very effectively identified. Looking at the comparisons shows that the Sprint 15's attraction is far more than outright speed or plastic durability. The sail cut may look a little dated to some when compared with current thinking but the way it can be tweaked in light or strong winds using downhaul, traveller and mainsheet control, will see a Sprint 15 slipping along in the lightest of breeze or out in a blow when more modern catamarans might feel happier back on the shore.

For a potential catamaran buyer making a list of key sailing requirements it is likely the Sprint 15 will come out close or on top, unless you want extremes of complexity or durability. Everything is a compromise but the Sprint 15 is one of the best small catamarans at getting that right.

The basic price of £5,500 is great value for a boat that is light enough to put on a car roof, can be sailed one or two-up, and launched singlehanded. Windsport are also offering their special 'Out of Africa' edition, including coloured sails, trolley and top cover, for a limited period.

Product support will be via Windsport's personal service, from a team that have the interest of the class and the sailor at heart. Demonstrations and catamaran tuition or coaching sessions will be available via Windsport or the class programme. Windsport look forward to a long association with current and future Sprint 15 sailors of all ages.

and Filey in Yorkshire, Queen Mary Reservoir, Swanage in Dorset, Thornbury on the River Severn, Draycote near Rugby and Netley on the River Hamble which is starting to build a fleet.

The Sprint 15 is not just for racing. The national championships generally incorporate three days of fun sailing and family cruising, often bolstered by multi-boat families – the current record is four Sprint 15s owned by one family for mum, dad, daughter and son! Many 15s are used as holiday fun boats and never race at all. If the wind doesn't blow, it's nice to have an exclusive seaside swimming platform! ■

Above The 'Out of Africa' boat has a slim, classic hull shape reminiscent of a scaled-down Tornado without centreboards.

Thanks to Cobnor Activities centre (CAC) for providing facilities for this test. CAC runs a full programme of residential and non-residential sailing courses and activities in Chichester harbour. For more information visit www.cobnor.com

Specification Sprint 15

DESIGN: Rodney March in 1978
 BUILDER: Collins Fibreglass, South Africa
 SCHRS: 1.32 una-rig, 1.37 2-up, 1.23 Sport
 LENGTH: 4.54m
 BEAM: 2.13m
 SAILING WEIGHT: 104kg
 MAINSAIL: 10.19sq m
 JIB: 2.1sq m

PRICE: (Out of Africa edition) £5,795

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COMPARISONS... Where does the Sprint 15 fit in? Here are some alternatives...



■ Shadow

Superb and totally modern singlehander designed and developed by Yves Loday and Reg White.

LOA:	4.8m
BEAM:	2.4m
SAILING WEIGHT:	99kg
SCHRS:	1.07
SAIL AREA:	
Mainsail	13sq m
Spinnaker	10sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£8,194*



■ Dart 16

Low-cost polyethylene hulls keep the price down on this entry level cat, which also has a spinnaker option.

LOA:	4.8m
BEAM:	2.3m
HULL WEIGHT:	48kg
SCHRS:	1.28
SAIL AREA:	
Mainsail	10.4sq m
Jib	3.16sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£5,045*