

## CRASH AND LEARN

March 1, 2002

By Peter Beardsley and Francis Shiman-Hackett

A dream shot. That's what Peter Beardsley and Francis Shiman-Hackett thought they'd been given last May when Sailing World handed them a brand new Vanguard Vector, a small budget for incidentals, and a summer regatta schedule. Of course, they might've wondered if it was such a great opportunity, why we hadn't kept it for ourselves.

Skiff sailing is a staple of the dinghy racing scene in Europe and Australia. Yet in the United States, most sailors think these exciting sailboats are fun to watch, but too challenging to try. Perhaps it's because they identify skiff sailing with Australian 18s or the Olympic 49er, a boat that, according to class veterans, requires at least 100 capsize to achieve a basic understanding of how it sails. A couple of slightly de-tuned skiffs have recently pushed into the U.S. market: the 29er, Sailing World's 1999 Overall Boat of the Year, and the Vanguard Vector, a 2001 BOTY winner. Each represents an intermediate step between traditional dinghies and the pinnacle of the skiff class: fast and fun, but manageable. To find out what it's like to sail one of these boats, Sailing World tasked Peter Beardsley and Francis Shiman-Hackett, two 20-something crash test dummies, with learning to sail the recently launched Vector and documenting their experience. After a summer of training, they tested their skills at the class's inaugural North American Championships. This is their report.



Stuart Streuli

BEARDSLEY AND SHIMAN-HACKETT

May 12, 2001

First Impressions  
Shiman-Hackett

When I arrived at Third Beach in Middletown, R.I., for the Vector Demo Day, I was intimidated by the boat Vanguard was loaning us. I'd imagined it would sail like a more powerful version of the 420s and FJs I'd become used to, but just looking at the boat on the beach, I knew that wouldn't be the case. It had an overall beam of six feet that tapered down to a very narrow waterline, and the plumb, knifelike bow was punctuated by a retractable bowsprit. Still, I figured it couldn't be much harder to sail than my Hobie Cat, and it would be much easier to right.

We hoisted the sails on land, launched off the beach into a light breeze, and jumped on board. We immediately submerged a wing, narrowly avoiding a capsize, and went rolling off downwind, much to the amusement of the spectators on shore. Every motion I made to control the boat was amplified. A slightly overtrimmed mainsail, which would've slowed a 420 by a fraction of a knot, could cause a wipeout. Our first few hours on the boat were split evenly between sailing and swimming.

When we managed to stay upright, however, the motion of the boat could only be described as effortless. It accelerated quickly in every puff, and coasted through the lulls. The challenge of sailing the Vector was due to the fact that our reflexes weren't tuned to this level of sailing. The boat reacted more quickly to us and the wind; we had to learn to react with the same speed.

For the first hour or so I couldn't understand why the helm felt so heavy; then I realized what it was telling me. The helm was light as a feather when the boat was dead flat but loaded up quickly as the boat heeled. The feedback was only trying to help me sail the boat. By the end of our first day we were excited that we'd flown the spinnaker and double trapezed. We were also humbled. We had capsized more times than we could count, had barely been in control most of the time, and hadn't been able to handle a power reach. It was the most responsive boat either of us had ever sailed. We knew we had a lot of learning to do.

A few weeks later we took the Vector out from Sail Newport in light air. We sailed well downwind of Newport before the last whisper of breeze died. Without any wind, we discovered that unless we constantly minded our weight, the boat would slowly roll into a capsize. On the long beat back to Newport, when either of us felt some wind tickle the hair on the back of our necks, we would rock the boat hard, trim the sails, and sometimes turn that zephyr into enough apparent wind to cruise several hundred yards.

As we approached the harbor the wind filled, and we worked up a huge amount of apparent wind flying the spinnaker. We started sailing on a beam reach, and as our speed built we headed lower and went faster. We lifted onto a full plane, and blew through a pack of keelboats heading out to race and past a 12-Meter on a sunset cruise. The astonished looks on the tourists' faces was as priceless as the feeling of being the fastest sailboat on that part of the bay.

July 15-16, 2001

A Moment of Truth  
Beardsley

After a couple of months of sporadic practice, Francis and I had become confident in our ability to sail a Vector around a course, but both of us wondered whether we could beat anyone in the process. The first race of the Newport Regatta was sailed in 12 to 14 knots. Despite our best laid plans, we didn't exactly fire off the line, and we rounded the windward mark last. We settled into the reach and began to grind down the next boat.

However, whatever level of comfort we found quickly evaporated when the tail of the cunningham line fouled in the leeward spinnaker sheet block and, unable to ease the chute, we capsized. To add to our misery—as if watching the fleet plane away wasn't enough—with the spinnaker block locked, the chute couldn't be doused and with the chute still up, the boat was impossible to right. With the Vector's flared wings, this mess was three feet underwater. After a lot of effort and some colorful language, we got the boat righted and turned back downwind. We figured we'd save some face by completing our first race, but the wind shut off when we rounded the leeward mark, and we never got a chance to finish.



Norm Grant

**BEARDSLEY (LEFT) AND SHIMAN-HACKETT WORK TO KEEP THEIR BALANCE DURING A TYPICALLY EXITING DOWNWIND RUN IN THEIR VECTOR**

The breeze refused to allow us to redeem ourselves and eventually our race committee cancelled racing for the day. This, of course, was the signal for the sea breeze to finally kick in, which it did five minutes after the three-gun signal, quickly reaching 20 knots. Though we were already planing under main and jib we set the spinnaker, and promptly zoomed past the surprised crew of a Flying Dutchman, which was also under spinnaker. We were standing on the transom to keep the bow from digging in; the wall of spray was like a firehose. We overtook waves every few seconds, launching off each one. The buzz became overwhelming. As we neared the dock, we smugly let the Flying Dutchman pass. Francis estimated that our speed had peaked at around 20 knots. I took his word for it; I'd never gone that fast in a sailboat before.

On Sunday, in a light northerly, we decided to focus on our upwind sailing, as the day before we'd found both our pointing ability and our speed to be lacking. There appeared to be two schools of thought in those conditions—some people footed in the light air, others stayed hard on the wind. We were unable to master either style and lagged upwind. Fortunately our downwind speed was much better. After another poor upwind performance in the last race, solid tactics and focusing on keeping our apparent wind forward allowed us to round the leeward mark less than half a boatlength out of third. We

footed a bit more upwind, and managed to hold our position, finishing ahead of five boats.

Aug. 26, 2001

Tapping Our "Unlimited" Potential  
Beardsley

We were becoming very familiar with the boat, and though our boathandling still left something to be desired, it was markedly better than when we started in May. Since we no longer had to worry about capsizing every two seconds, we began to focus more on rig tune and sail shape. Vanguard provided the class with a tuning guide, but there were few bonafide go-fast tips for the new boat. The best way to know if an adjustment worked was to experiment.

Tipping the scales at slightly over 330 pounds, Francis and I were one of the heavier duos in the Newport Unlimited Regatta. To generate more power, we raked the mast forward and tightened the lower shrouds. With this setup, we finally began to perform well upwind in light to medium breeze on Saturday, staying in the top half of the fleet. Speed is king in the Vector—a bad start isn't so painful if you can sail upwind at 10 knots while others are only doing 8 knots.

With a southerly filling in by 9 a.m. on Sunday, we elected to rake the mast back and tighten our upper shrouds. However, the big breeze never materialized, and we were drastically underpowered. When the wind came up to 15 knots later in the day, our speed improved, though not enough to make up for our poor performance in the morning. While Francis and I were frustrated with each other and ourselves over the decision to rake the mast back, it was hard to stay angry while double trapping and planing upwind. The speed and spray were therapeutic.

On the way back to Sail Newport, Francis and I capsized after snagging a lobster pot buoy with our spinnaker sheet. While righting the boat, we realized it was our first flip of the weekend, a far cry from that May afternoon off Third Beach.

Oct. 7, 2001

The Final Test  
Beardsley

Due to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, racing was postponed two weeks from the date initially set for the North Americans. While the original weekend, Sept. 22 to 23, had featured slightly warmer air temperatures and a light to moderate breeze, two weeks later we were faced with a nasty cold front and 30- to 40-knot winds. Only six boats showed up for the regatta—the collegiate sailing season was in full swing and others had trouble rescheduling their flights. Still, Vanguard's Dave Kirkpatrick was encouraged with the season as a whole. "We had a lot of great events throughout the season," he said. "The one we happened to label as the North Americans was the small one."

In addition to the five teams who'd been sailing the boat regularly, there was a wild-card entry, a pair of Polish 49er sailors who'd never sailed the Vector before, but probably had more skiff experience than the rest of us combined. With a sustained 30-knot breeze, however, Saturday's racing was cancelled at 11 a.m.

Sunday greeted us with sunnier skies. As the race committee was setting the course, the breeze began to build. The lulls averaged around 12 to 15

knots, while some gusts were well over 25. We hoped, in vain as it turned out, that the race committee would somehow keep the windward mark away from the shore—skiffs don't particularly enjoy sailing blindly into a 30-degree header and a velocity change. Having both skipper and crew on the trapeze when such a shift occurs often results in an instant capsize to windward. In the first race, however, it was strategy, not boathandling, that was our nemesis. Our choice to go to the right upwind in the first race to get away from the land was a mistake. Although we sailed in steadier breeze, we had to come back to the mark on a monster header that negated any gain.

The wind continued to build as the second race began. Learning from the first race, we headed left and bounced quickly in and out on the wire to cope with the 15-knot differential between the gusts and lulls. We rounded the windward mark a boatlength behind the leaders, the 49er duo Mike Marzynski and Sebastian Zarzecanski-Rozanski. A sloppy downwind leg cost us a boat, but featured our smoothest leeward mark rounding to date—we went from a full plane under spinnaker four boatlengths from the mark to a quick douse, and then hopped right back on the wire to trim in and plane upwind, nearly grazing the mark with our lifejackets. Normally we would have exchanged a high-five, but Francis had his hands full with the main and tiller.

By the third race, the wind began to take its toll on the fleet, and Francis and I were glad that we'd stretched before heading out. We locked horns with Mike and Sebastian all race, though our match race ended when we flipped during a jibe on the final downwind leg. By the fourth race, we were just trying to get around the course and capsized several times due to fatigue. Mercifully, the race committee called it a day at that point. At the makeshift awards ceremony, Francis and I accepted our second-place trophies. It had been a war of attrition and, apart from Mike and Sebastian, we were the only boat to finish every race.

The Vector demands a style of sailing that I'd never known. We had to get comfortable, crash a few times, test new ideas, and learn from our mistakes. Still, there was so much more we could've done, and I regret that we didn't have additional time to practice, especially on the wire and in heavy air. Mostly, though, now that the boat is at Vanguard and I'm stuck in an office in New York, I wish that I'd had more time to take friends who've lost some of their enthusiasm for sailing out for a spin. I know I'd have seen their eyes light up as they stretched their legs on the wire and felt the spray in their faces as the boat accelerated onto a plane.

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