

CRASH AND LEARN

Our two test pilots, now with one regatta and a number of practice days under their respective belts, take to the course one last time before the North Americans in October

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By Peter Beardsley and Francis Shiman-Hackett

Skiff sailing took center stage at the Sydney Olympics; the speedy 49ers were the most popular class with spectators and television crews. But while many Americans now know what a skiff looks like, few have ever sailed one. Vanguard is hoping the Vector, a 2001 Sailing World Boat of the Year winner, will bring the challenge and excitement of skiff sailing to the American public. For a first-hand view of what it's like to sail the Vector and the growth of this fledgling class, Sailing World assigned Peter Beardsley and Francis Shiman-Hackett to learn to sail and race the boat. They'll file regular internet reports and wrap up their experiences in a spring 2002 magazine feature.

July & August 2001

Preparing to Tap into "Unlimited" Potential
Francis:

The weekend after the Newport Regatta in mid July, Peter and I met in Newport to continue our Vector Training. We had a classic 10- to 15-knot seabreeze and short chop and we headed out for an afternoon of serious tuning and practice. To compete with the talented bunch of sailors that the Vector has attracted we must have our boatspeed and boathandling down so we can focus on tactics.

I had spent that morning cruising around Newport Harbor with my friend Kalil. Before his ride on the Vector, the fastest boat he had ever been on was a Laser. He'd also never flown a spinnaker before, but we were quickly reaching at windspeed in flat water and a building seabreeze. Teaching spinnaker trim was surprisingly easy without the confusing control lines of a symmetrical chute. The self-tacking jib and spinnaker hoist system made the crew's job so simple that we never came close to capsizing.

Sailing with Peter a few hours later reminded me that while the crew's job description may be simplified, the crew's role in racing is at least as important as that of the skipper. We practiced wire to wire tacks until we were both too bruised to move, then we worked on our sail trim. Peter and I alternated trimming the mainsheet as I steered. We were getting the hang of this but decided we need more practice time before we can do it on the racecourse. Having Peter on the main upwind will allow me to get my head out of the boat enough to spot puffs and shifts.

The highlight of our afternoon was the sail back to Newport Harbor from the mouth of Narragansett Bay. We lined up even with a F-28R trimaran reaching under spinnaker and launched ours. We jibed across its bow and beat the tri down to the Newport Bridge by a few minutes.

The next weekend I took a number of people out for rides. Sailing with inexperienced crew proved very helpful at the Newport Unlimited regatta. Each new person I took out on the boat needed time to adjust to its instability. I had to compensate by working the mainsail harder. I started to notice how much aggressively trimming the mainsheet helped to maintain speed. During the Unlimited Regatta this point would be reinforced as the combination of crew movement and heavier main adjustment allowed Peter and I to get the boat fully planing upwind.

The surge of power we felt when the boat rose up on a plane was an incredible reward for the effort of learning to sail the Vector. It also highlighted how much I still had to learn about making a sailboat go fast, and it made me remember the joy that comes when you first learn to harness the wind and set your boat on that perfect reach that hooks you on the sport for life.

Aug. 25 and 26, 2001

The Newport Unlimited Regatta
Peter:

With one regatta under our belt, the Newport Unlimited Limited Regatta didn't seem as daunting. We were becoming very familiar with the boat, and though our boathandling still left something to be desired, it was worlds better than when we started in May. In addition, my new skiff trapeze harness had arrived 16 hours earlier. It had fewer buckles to become snagged on trap wires while crossing the boat (a frequent cause of capsize). We were psyched.

However, as we fought through an ebb tide and light air to get to the racecourse, our enthusiasm diminished slightly. Tipping the scales at slightly over 330 pounds, Francis and I were one of the heaviest duos on the course, especially compared to teams like Tracy Hayley and Ezra Smith, and Stu McNay and Brendan Shattuck. Both of those teams were comfortably under



Norm Grant

PETER BEARDSLEY (LEFT) AND FRANCIS SHIMAN-HACKETT WORK ON THEIR DOWNWIND FORM DURING THE NEWPORT UNLIMITED REGATTA.



Norm Grant

BEARDSLEY AND SHIMAN-HACKETT LOOK TO PICK UP A FEW BOATS ON A DOWNWIND LEG DURING THE NEWPORT UNLIMITED REGATTA.

300 pounds. Our boat was moving well, but there was still a mental block over our weight. To compensate, we raked the mast very far forward, and tightened the lower shrouds to power up the rig. With this setup, we finally began to perform well upwind in light to medium breeze. In the morning races, we experimented with me sitting to leeward and Francis slowly bopping in and out on the trapeze. Provided we remembered to foot and not to pinch, we—despite two poor starts—managed to stay with the top half of the fleet.

In fact, on Saturday our issues had less to do with boatspeed and more to do with tactics. A misunderstanding as to what the race committee meant by "the finish will be to windward" caused us to lose three boats in the first race, and though a timely spinnaker set after a shift on the windward leg of the second race helped us round the windward mark in second place, not dousing immediately after rounding (we had hoped to carry the chute to the finish) allowed Tracy and Dave Kirkpatrick to sail over us to windward and finish a few boatlengths in front. In the afternoon, while the seabreeze materialized, it never really blew north of the bridge, and we sailed in less than 12 knots of breeze for most of the day. After one day of racing we were right in the middle of the pack. As we ate dinner Saturday night, we were extremely excited about our improvements in our rig setup, and consequently, in our upwind performance, which had been the bane of our existence at the Newport

Regatta.

Sunday morning brought hopes of bigger breeze, and with the wind out of the south by 9 a.m., we elected to rake the mast back and tighten our upper shrouds. Practice had taught us that the boat can be difficult to control if the mast is too far forward in heavy air. However, our hopes of big breeze were dashed after two races, and the boat was drastically underpowered, especially for a heavier team. The Vector can be tricky to tune—the rig setup needs to work when none, one, or both sailors are on the wire. Frustration began to set in when teams that we had been comfortably ahead of the previous day started to consistently beat us. Part of that, however, could also be attributed to the steep learning curve in the Vector—at first it seems like a different beast, but, on the whole, it's not too quirky and easy to get humming. The other teams were getting up to speed. Meanwhile, Stu and Brendan, with an ultra-loose rig, planed through the fleet, showing amazing boatspeed. When the wind did come up to around 15 knots later in the day, our speed improved dramatically. Sailing five degrees lower than some of our competitors during beats to windward resulted in scenarios I hadn't seen since my junior sailing days—catching up to a boat who was 50 yards ahead of us in less than 20 seconds, sailing through its lee, and experiencing no noticeable wind shadow. While Francis and I had been frustrated with each other over the decision to rake the mast back, it was hard to stay mad at each other while double trapping and planing upwind. The speed and spray were very therapeutic.

On the way back to Sail Newport, Francis and I capsized after snagging a lobster pot 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 when we spent equal time swimming and sailing.

We finally feel comfortable with everything about the boat, including tuning the rig—trial and error have finally paid off. Our only question is whether we can put everything together for North Americans. Right now, we're cautiously optimistic.

For more on the Vector log on to www.teamvanguard.com

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