

Class I and II offshore powerboat racing, as we know it today, had its' undenied birth in the USA. It began in 1956 with the late Sam Griffith and Capt. Sherman 'Red' Crise staging the first Miami to Nassau race.

High-speed motor competition on the ocean has since attracted a world-wide following. Five years after its birth, the first Daily Express Cowes/Torquay race launched the sport in the UK. This enthusiasm was later followed in several other European countries together with South Africa and Australia, but what is less familiar and seldom referred to in reference books on offshore powerboat racing are the origins of a category which was to become even more popular under the title of Class III.

Some American offshore drivers feel that offshore racing in craft as little as 16ft. overall is madness. Risks there maybe, and in fact looking back on the first Class III race few will deny it was a crazy affair, but what it lacked in size it also lacked in expense and this is perhaps the main reason why Class III became the world's most popular offshore category. But it is unfortunate that the class has never been accepted in the sports' American birthplace.

Lack of interest in the USA is perhaps understandable. When an American driver examines the European scene, he tends to compare the availability of equipment and its cost in the USA.

Until the advent of the Class I Cougar catamaran, the majority of Class I and II craft where American built and all still have American engines. Nearly all British, Italian and Australian drivers have to rely on these outfits which are extremely costly outside the USA.

Not only are the builders conveniently situated in their homeland, thereby eliminating customs duty and freight charges, the actual outlay for an American driver relative to income probably represents less than 50 per cent of the price paid by a British, Italian or Australian enthusiast. This is the prime reason why all Class I craft, such as Cigarettes and Bertrams, raced outside America have long since passed their prime. Most have seen several owners and any less than two years old are considered relatively modern and worth real money on the home market.

Class III is a different story. The craft here are over-grown home produced runabouts or, as in the case of the UK and Australia, hand-built wooden catamarans which are extremely fast. The very fact that they are built locally and often developed by their drivers, tend to give a greater return for a much smaller initial investment.

Although organised offshore powerboat racing did not exist in the UK before 1961, the modern production runabout was in its heyday. Most owners used them for skiing or fun boating, but some drivers soon tired and began competing against other runabout owners in friendly competition.

Runabout producers were also keen to find a means of gaining publicity for their

# OFFSHORE ORIGINS (PART 1)

This month we begin a two part series on the origins of Offshore racing in Great Britain. Few people realise how recently the sport had its advent, or that it was a direct result of a small bet between two boating enthusiasts in 1962. It was from this humble start that organized racing as we know it developed.

**1962 CROSS CHANNEL OUTBOARD RALLY**  
PUTNEY - CALAIS - PUTNEY

**4 WINNERS FOR OWENS**

**"The KENT" 17 ft. RUNABOUT**

Everything included in the name "The Kent" is the standard equipment. Submarine lights, compass, fuel tank, motor, spare parts, etc. etc. etc. It is a boat people will want and will enjoy to use. It is a boat that will give you the best performance and enjoyment. It is a boat that will give you the best performance and enjoyment. It is a boat that will give you the best performance and enjoyment.

**£585** (ex works)

**Brunswick CORPORATION (U.K.) LTD.**  
13 GOSWEN STREET, LONDON, W.1

DETAILS OF OTHER MODELS ON REQUEST

MADE BY REGENT

SPECIFICATION and EQUIPMENT FOLDED AVAILABLE NOW!

Owens utilized the marathon in their advertising.

hulls. All were trying to compete commercially and needed proof of seagoing ability. Until the early sixties the only way of attracting such publicity was to embark on ambitious offshore voyages between England and Europe: the most popular being across the Channel to France. But even these ventures lacked press exposure after it became almost an every day occurrence. However, such voyages did have a strong bearing on the introduction of Class III.

At about the same time as the first Daily Express Cowes/Torquay race was being organised, one such publicity

seeking runabout cruise was taking place with far less glory. The craft involved was a little 16ft (4.88m) runabout known as a Healey Corvette which, powered by a pair of 45hp Mercury outboards, was heading for Sweden via the English Channel, the European Canals and Baltic Sea. Aboard was Geoffrey Tobert and Clive Curtis. Both were in the marine retail business. Geoff Tobert had been selling outboards while Clive Curtis ran a marine retail outlet in West London. Their intention was to set a distance record for a small runabout far above the unimaginative Channel crossings which by this time





Left to right: Tobert, Curtis, Bulman, Brain.

were being attempted in smooth sea conditions, often in unseaworthy craft, and hence of little marketing value.

The plan was to draw attention to British built runabouts, using American engines, by travelling the furthest ever in a small powerboat – over 1000 miles – and calling at as many countries as possible. The crew hoped that success and resulting publicity would increase sales at both the businesses. Unfortunately, although the boat reached Badenkop in Langeland, Denmark, rough weather prevented the trip continuing across the Baltic to Sweden and the voyage was abandoned.



Tobert and Bulman in Snow Goose.

Some months later, the Healey Corvette was on display at the London showroom of Clive Curtis. It was covered in stickers boasting the countries which it had called giving the craft the appearance of an international rally car.

The display happened to be seen by the well known British marine artist, Edward Elliot. The Healey Corvette was for sale, but Elliot, needing a new craft from which to work on his canvasses, lightheartedly disbelieved its seagoing capabilities and distance travelled. He therefore offered an unusual deal that he would complete a transaction at the asking price on condition the boat would take him to France and back. Curtis, being a tough seaman and not wishing to miss the chance of a sale, agreed.

The negotiations took place in February 1962 – hardly the season for tranquil trips round the Thames Estuary and across the southern North Sea. Nevertheless, arrangements were made and within a few days *Baltic Spray* – as the craft was called – was trailed to a slipway near Putney Bridge where most runabout owners in London once launched their craft.

Curtis – with Elliot as passenger –

soon had the craft underway and within five hours, after stopping at the South East coastal port of Ramsgate to refuel, crossed the Channel in a force 5 sea to arrive in Calais. He went to the cafe *Welcome*, the nearest hostelry, and cabled Geoff Tobert, his old crew member on the Baltic run. The cable read:

"5 hours STOP 5 tanks of fuel STOP Force 5. Signed Curtis."

By then Geoff Tobert had joined the Brunswick Corporation as the European representative for Owens runabouts and cruisers and here, he thought, was an ideal opportunity to attract publicity for his new line.

Curtis returned to the UK, completed the deal with Elliot and resumed business. Tobert, however, could not resist challenging the five hour crossing and made a £5 bet on racing him from Putney to Calais except that the money would go to the first driver to complete the two-way crossing back to London thereby doubling the distance.

Clive Curtis had meanwhile been made an agent for the Owens craft Tobert was factoring and this runabout was an obvious choice for the duel which he accepted. Although both boats were identical, Curtis chose a single 75hp Evinrude – the largest OMC engine at that time – while Tobert remained loyal to a pair of 45hp Mercury outboards of the type he had used on the Baltic trip one year earlier.



Helmets were not necessary

It was obvious that such an informal competition, which was unusual to say the least in the eyes of the unspecialised press, would gain far more publicity than the earlier sea marathons.

The two contenders decided to invite other members of the marine trade to join in. It would at least prove which make of boat could complete the trip in the shortest time, and in doing so,

determine the fastest seagoing production runabout, and hopefully capture a large slice of the retail pleasure boat market for its builder.

The response and enthusiasm to this 225 mile offshore marathon was quite incredible, but it was obvious few had any idea of the dangers involved. The Thames Estuary with its strong tides and sandbanks is hazardous even to large seagoing vessels with experienced crews, but it is even more dangerous to small pleasure boats piloted by unexpecting enthusiasts more familiar with inland rivers and lakes. The course inside the notorious Goodwin Sands is also dangerous and the English Channel has a world-wide reputation for changing from a flat calm to horrific conditions within a matter of hours. Nevertheless, 25 runabout builders decided to apply.

It should be remembered that entry was limited to members of the marine trade. This is an important factor – explained later – for there is little doubt that the race and the breed of runabouts it encouraged has since had a lasting effect on the design of small pleasure boats used throughout the world today.

Many craft were unsuited for the open sea. Even small flat bottom hydroplanes, dangerous in all but clam seas, arrived at Putney on that May day in 1962 for what was then the world's longest event.

The Thames rowing club – scene of the famous Oxford and Cambridge University boat race – was chosen as race headquarters with its atmosphere of past pleasure boating where man used his muscle for speed. Many members of the Thames Rowing Club in singlets and shorts watched in amazement on the eve of the race at the type of craft arriving for this epic cross Channel event.

Unlike offshore race organisers today, officials had no experience of the problems the race would hold. Crash helmets were not introduced in British offshore powerboat racing until several years later, but perhaps most interesting, was the fact that life jackets were not obligatory and only recommended. No driving licences existed and hence boats and crews were uninsured against third party risks. Safety equipment was also only recommended. Most craft did carry flares but few crews used life jackets and only five boats had any mechanical means of clearing water which would come aboard as spray or through split hulls. Instead, they carried crude buckets or bailers.

The Port of London Authority – who control the River Thames – had forbidden the organisers to start the race upriver at Putney. The committee boat therefore lead the group down river at 6a.m. on a bright summer morning in May 1962. The pack drove at planing speed through London until reaching the famous Tower Bridge landmark in the Pool. It was here boats were flagged away.

Next month we hear what happened during the first cross-Channel dash, and how it led to the birth of organized racing.



The differential in speed, no rules on engine capacity – the maximum allowed being either two 50hp outboards or a single 75hp engine – soon spread the fleet. Compared to the annual Putney to Calais today, speeds were incredibly slow. By the time competitors reached the Thames Estuary, where they faced the open sea for the first time, the upriver sections were littered with broken and sinking craft quite unable to stand the kind of punishment being taken. Others were heading in the wrong direction as crews discovered good navigation was as important as out-and-out speed.

The first driver to arrive at the South East port of Ramsgate for re-fuelling was Clive Curtis in his Owens craft crewed by Brian Braine – two names that in later years were to become synonymous with offshore racing. (Clive Curtis later navigated Don Aronow in his 1969 Cowes/Torquay/Cowes victory in the prototype Cigarette and now partners James Beard at Cougar Marine).

Second to arrive was Geoff Tobert in an identical craft with twin outboards. Some distance separated the third and fourth boats. All were Owens runabouts – now long since out of production – and it was obvious Geoff Tobert had already gained a sales benefit over the competition. The fourth to arrive carried a radio reporter from the BBC complete with broken tape recorder which smashed to pieces in the first few miles.

To ensure all completed the course, a British official had crossed to France to time arrivals and it was with continued enthusiasm, after a 60 minute compulsory stay at Ramsgate, that those left in the race set off for Calais in the same order in which they had arrived.

Navigational errors cost Curtis precious time on the cross Channel leg and it was surprising that more boats were not lost. He was first in to Calais with Tobert only slightly behind. Thirty minutes compulsory stop for refreshments provided by the local French Yacht Club – and the stalwarts were back on the homeward run heading for the second refuelling stop at Ramsgate.

It was on the cross Channel section that Curtis really began to suffer problems. A large split appeared in his hull, and while slowing down to bail with his bucket, Geoff Tobert levelled alongside. A neck and neck battle followed. The split in the hull was getting larger by the minute, but Curtis managed to pull ahead once again to arrive first at Ramsgate.

The boat was filling fast. Curtis and Braine had to bail constantly during their 60 minute stopover to prevent the boat sinking completely. No official, in those days, thought of forcing them withdrawal from the race and they were allowed to put to sea in what can only be described as a totally dangerous condition. By removing the drain plugs in the transom, much of the water coming through the split – now 5ft in length – ran clear but Curtis could not afford to stop for fear of sinking. Geoff Tobert was

# OFFSHORE ORIGINS (PART 2)



Last month we saw the birth of the London/Calais/London race. Clive Curtis and Geoff Tobert made the trip to promote Owens runabouts, and found themselves inspiring a field of 25 to compete the following year. Only five were to return to Putney, but at the start no one could imagine the course would be so taxing . . .

only three minutes astern.

Unlike the outward journey, competitors were allowed to race back to the original launching point at Putney. Once the leaders entered the river they found conditions in complete contrast to the open sea for they were now heading for London in relatively calm waters of the upper tidal Thames. Curtis miraculously managed to increase his lead still further to make good the distance lost with his damaged hull in the Estuary. He arrived back at Putney five minutes ahead of Geoff Tobert.

As soon as the winner pulled into the slipway, Curtis and his co-driver had to jump in the water and literally hold up the boat to prevent it sinking and flooding the outboard. Meanwhile, only five of the original twenty-five starters had lasted the distance, the rest retiring on the outward journey to France.

The race captured the imagination of all runabout enthusiasts and it was immediately obvious that a need existed for a new offshore class incorporating craft of this type.

No other events were held during the '62 season but a great deal of

discussion took place. Early in 1963 a group formed from the original band of drivers, under the leadership of Clive Curtis and Geoff Tobert, held a meeting in a London public house. They resolved to launch a club with the object of staging similar races to the Putney to Calais Rally. The world Rally had since been included in the title as the Port of London Authority (PLA) – who control the River Thames – would not allow racing unless the event was disguised as a non-competitive rally.

The 1962 competition was one hundred per cent trade orientated and contained standard production craft. It was therefore decided to maintain this approach in order that future races could also be held as a publicity platform and a development testing ground for builders of production runabouts and the manufacturers of outboard engines. All entries had been outboard powered and this aspect was maintained and included in the initial rules of what was to become the United Kingdom Outboard Boating Association.

This title, soon pronounced UKOBA, was perhaps misleading for the word "Outboarding"



purely applied outboard powered craft on the sea and had no connection whatsoever with the already well established sport of circuit (inland) racing.

The 1963 Putney to Calais Rally was the first race held under the UKOBA banner. Even a greater number entered this time but the event had severe weather conditions. Only eight boats reached the Ramsgate refuelling stop. The cross Channel section was abandoned, three retired and the survivors raced back to London over the shortened course with Curtis and Braine taking the chequered flag for the second year.

The loose set of class rules made by the new association were exploited in 1964 by the crew of a high powered production circuit boat in the flat calm conditions. It was fitted with a pair of potent 50hp Mercury outboards (the twin maximum total horsepower had since been increased to 150hp) and easily captured the overall prize from the production followers. Honour was satisfied, however, as this entry was conveniently slotted into a hastily created experimental category and the Cross Channel Trophy – presented by the old Regent (now Texaco) oil company – was taken for the third time by the original winners, Clive Curtis and Brian Braine. They finished second overall in yet another Owens runabout.

By now the Royal Yachting Association (RYA) had become the national authority for powerboating in the UK. It immediately recognised this small offshore category, gave it the title of Class III and a place in the official rule book. The class was still sub-divided by catalogued horsepower and it was not until some years later that the weakness was seen in this approach. Today all Class III sub-divisions are categorised on engine capacity; either cubic centimetre or cubic inches.

Class III had arrived. It showed the powerboating world that offshore racing was not solely confined to expensive craft and could be undertaken in small, simple boats. But its effect on all aspects of offshore racing was to prove vast. It was not only to influence powerboat design but also the attitude of builders and provided an important pool of enthusiasts some of whom would later graduate to drive in the larger offshore



Racing in North Wales 1968, categories.

The RYA gave the class a three litre engine maximum with no restriction on engine type. UKOBA made their own interpretation of the rules. Their maximum was a catalogued 150hp as stated by the engine manufacturers. Unfortunately this had little bearing on the actual power developed but it was not until three years later that UKOBA admitted that cubic capacity, as chosen by the RYA, was by far the best method of dividing the categories.

Class III (d) up to 150hp. Although included in the national rule book, inboard and outdrive units were still not allowed by UKOBA, and as this organisation was the only club staging Class III races, they were able to dictate their own regulations.

More and more enthusiasts were attracted to this new class. Other clubs were later formed and over 20 events per season became common place. It was an obvious alternative to the more expensive International Class I and II



Scrutineering at Putney.

The minimal overall length for Class III was 14ft (4.26m) with no maximum. Boats of 30ft (9.14m) were therefore possible, but as they were still limited to three litres power, most, in those early days, were little more than 18ft (5.48m) overall.

The 150hp was broken down yet again into four sub-divisions, Class III (a) up to 50hp, Class III (b) up to 75hp, Class III (c) up to 100hp and

categories and by the late-sixties, UKOBA had opened its doors to non-trade membership, dropped their allegiance to outboards and production hulls and began organising events for pure racing craft.

Later still, when the main outboard manufacturers began to produce units above 150cc, it suddenly became difficult to obtain two engines for use in the large Class III sub-division without breaking the three litre limit. Therefore, in 1970 the RYA increased the maximum power of Class III to 250 cu.ins – exactly half the size of international Class II, which at 4.1 litres gave a margin for growth in the outboard industry. Today, this maximum still remains although the production requirement of motors, which has been a condition of the sport since its conception, is now causing problems. Twin engine rigs need handed transmission for safety and speed and this is a facility not always obtainable with standard outboards.

The final instalment of *Offshore Origins* shows how the newly formed class of racing led to amazing developments in the design world.



At 22', Wildcat was the largest Class III outfit racing in the 60's.



The most interesting aspect in the short history of Class III is the effect it has had on international racing as a whole. Not only has it provided many Class I and II drivers much like Formula Ford in motor racing, it has also been a testing ground for designers and ideas later incorporated in the larger racing categories.

The UIM gave Class III international status in the early seventies. By then several other countries had adopted the sport including Scandinavia, Australia and South Africa. America has shown little interest and remains to this day a non-Class III powerboat nation. Unfortunately had Class III been adopted in the United States, the larger open categories, high in number as they are, would probably have seen even a stronger following by the additional enthusiasm Class III would have encouraged. But it is the effect of Class III on offshore design which has been its greatest contribution.

Many of today's top international offshore designers first made their name in Class III. The most famous must be Don Shead who now not only designs high competitive racing powerboats, he is probably one of the leading names in the field of large fast luxury motor yachts.

The first boat Don Shead ever designed was a Class III racer. A 21ft (6.4m) monohull, this particular hull later became a byword in the late sixties and early seventies when it was produced by the old Avenger Boat Company. Known as the Avenger 21, this boat not only provided the backbone for Class III at the time, it was also sold in quantities abroad. Later still, Shead designed a small Delta configuration hull based on the Avenger 21 for racing in Class II. Given the name Telstar, it was owned and driven by Tommy Sopwith and gained world-wide fame overnight when it won the 1968 Cowes/Torquay/Cowes classic against tough Class I competition. Telstar was later followed by other Don Shead designed hulls including the two Class I Enfield boats, one of which Sopwith used to challenge the world championship in 1970, and Double-O-Seven with which Allen Pasco-Watson - original owner of the Avenger Boat Company - and Tim Powell also challenged the title. The effect of Class III on Don Shead's career in powerboating can easily be seen, and was the testing ground to which he owes much of his fame.

# OFFSHORE ORIGINS (PART 3)



Class III racing moved into the seventies, and inspired designers to try for larger and more powerful craft. Cougar Marine was already a force to be reckoned with, and Don Shead's Avenger 21 started a whole family of famous monohulls. Times were changing fast . . .

No other group has been more effective than Class III in the development of the offshore catamaran. The first offshore catamaran was commissioned by Tommy Sopwith in 1966. This was a Class III boat built in Miami by Marine Dynamics to a Jim Wynne and Walter Walters design. Called Flyover, it only competed in two UK races before the hull disintegrated. She was extremely fast and far outpaced the monohulls of the day, but unfortunately little was known of the stress factors of aerodynamic craft and she could not survive the punishment given by uncalm seas.

Flyover was followed in 1967 by the Class III Fat Cat. This was designed by Sonny Levi and built by Double M Hulls - no longer trading - for Lady

Violet Aitken. Unlike Flyover, Fat Cat was built to heavy scantlings and although she survived the stress she did so at the cost of weight. Flyover was therefore extremely uncompetitive with two 100hp Mercury outboards, the Class III maximum available at that time. It was not until two years later that catamarans really began to have an effect on the sport.

Meanwhile, the strict Class III production rules relating to hulls had been dropped, and in their place came a new breed of racing monohull. These were extremely fast and were basically miniature versions of the large offshore racers, but most were still outboard powered for no inboard motor existed within the class limits which could compete with the efficient power/weight



Sonny Levi designed Fat Cat for Lady Aitken in 1967.



ratio of the outboard.

Early in 1969 Clive Curtis – the winner of the first ever Class III race – and James Beard who had been a very keen Class III driver of the mid-sixties, visited Lake Havasu in Arizona to take part in the famous circuit marathon. It was here that they saw the American Switzer Wings; a type of multihull common in the USA in the late sixties. The lake at Havasu is a large expanse of water subject to cross-winds which produce choppy conditions not unlike those experienced on the sea. On their return, Curtis and Beard immediately began to investigate the possibility of adopting the stress principle seen in the Switzer Wings in the construction of an offshore catamaran. They formed a partnership and launched a business under the title of Cougar Marine and it was this company which has grown to the predominance it holds today.

Clive Curtis and James Beard worked on a catamaran design which they gave to a sub-contractor, Gorey Boat Yard, in Jersey to build. The finished boat made its first appearance at the 1969 Swanage 80 race. It looked extremely ugly and the sceptics, remembering the fate of Flyover and Fat Cat, laughed to themselves. Here, they thought, was yet another futuristic experiment doomed to failure.

Called Volare III, it was 18ft (5.4m) overall and powered by a pair of 115hp Johnson GT outboards. It was not a pretty craft. The sponsons looked like two pointed boxes joined by a large hump deck, but no sooner had the starter's flag dropped, then this ugly creation left all others astern. Even in the rough sections, the monohulls were no match and the sceptics laughter turned to dismay when they realised the days were numbered for any large investment in monohulls.



Aquaglide, a Cougar design, winning through to the eighties.



Sopwith's Flyover, designed by Wynne and Walters.

Drivers were also to accept the Cougar catamaran. All believed its performance a fluke and that in rough conditions the boat would break up. It never did and slowly top Class III drivers

turned to Cougar for their winning craft.

The first boats from Cougar were full sponsored catamarans. Later, when Keith Dallas, who was to drive the first ever Class II Cougar catamaran, Penthouse Rizla, commissioned a Class III catamaran called Aristocat, the builders altered their design to full tunnel hulls.

Within a short while the Class III catamaran had virtually taken over the lead in the highest powered sub-division. Another Class III builder, Ray Stapley, himself an ex-driver, began producing a very successful range and later eliminated monohull competition in the smaller IIC category.

The success of Class III cats was followed in Class II and in 1977 Cougar produced the world's first successful Class I catamaran, Yellowdrama III owned and driven by Ken Cassir. Not only did Ken Cassir gain his first taste of offshore racing in Class III seven years earlier, the effect his new catamaran was to have on powerboating was measured by his success when he became the first driver ever to win a major trophy in a Class I multihull at the 1977 Cowes/Torquay/Cowes.

It was perhaps the nursery slopes of Class III to which Cassir owes his success – a success always acclaimed by Class III enthusiasts who today drive out in their small craft to the Cowes finishing line to see the result of the embryo born through them into a new era of powerboat sport. ●



Volare II, the first Cougar, built at the Gorey Boat Yard in 1969.