

## The minnows are coming

Recent meetings of the International Technical Committee on the technical side and the Management Committee on the policy side have shown progress towards improving the breadth and depth of the ORC rule system. And while the ITC works through a research agenda for the year that includes a revised look at upwind depowering schemes and downwind aero coefficients, on the policy side a new working party has been formed to revise and improve the running of the ORC Sportboat Class.

This is one of three classes that have been described in the ORC Green Book for years and have had an active but limited following in a handful of locations in central Europe. More recently, however, there has been an increase in interest including a diverse and well-attended European Championship last year in Lake Balaton, Hungary, and a good entry for this year's edition in Chioggia, Italy.

The ORC Sportboat Class uses the same rule VPP as other ORC certificates, but is applied for boats whose LOA is 6.0–9.0m; weight less than 2,000kg; DSPL/LSMO<sup>3</sup> below 4.50; with generous sail limits; meeting OSR Category 5; and having a requirement that at least 50 per cent of the crew are Group 1 sailors.

Regional regatta formats are also not as rigorously defined as they are at ORC championships, with local organisers free to structure races as they see fit. One question is whether to implement guidelines to encourage suitable performance goals for the fleet, such as a defined mix of windward/leeward and short coastal-style racing, as was successfully applied in Lake Balaton last year.

Another is size. The recent popularity of boats at the lighter, skiff-like end of the spectrum, as well as larger offshore-capable boats marketed as sportboats, like the Farr 280, indicates a need to take a fresh look at how to define this group. A surprising number of ex-big boat owners are buying these boats for their simplicity and speed, and in regions where there is not enough critical mass to enjoy one-design sailing an appropriate handicap system is needed.

At issue will be size and speed: for example, is it appropriate to expand the size range slightly to accommodate the new 30-footers, and if so can they be fairly raced against boats much shorter? Currently they are all thrown together in one class, but should sub-classes now be considered to promote fairer racing?

This was also demonstrated in ORC 2 at Key West Race Week:

all boats in this class fit within the current definition of ORC Sportboats, yet there was an enormous rated speed difference of some 80-90 sec/mi between the slower but winning J80 and the more 'sporty' sportboats: GP26s, Farr 280s and a Far East 26R. Conditions were windy on windward-leeward courses, there were 10 races in the series, and enough good data to analyse, so the ITC has been summoned to look closely at this issue along with the working party.

Another solution being considered is to reduce the variance in designs by changing the maximum DSPL/Length to 3.50 rather than 4.50. This will help group boats into being closer in performance, and therefore easier to manage on the racecourse and likely to be closer in both elapsed and corrected time.

If the popularity of these boats increases along current trends – the HP30 'umbrella' class is also gaining momentum in Europe – then it will be easier to create suitable groups divided by size, speed, type or a combination of all three.

One other consideration is ORC policy on measurement quality. Currently the rules require certificates to be based on full IMS measurement for non-series-produced yachts, while for series-produced yachts a certificate must be based on full IMS measurement of at least one of the production series. However, variances in some production boats can result in measurable differences in rating, so this policy may change to

require full measurement for every entry to a championship event...

In writing their guidance notes, the working party will have to find the right balance between being inclusive of multiple boat types while keeping the range narrow enough to ensure good racing. This will be difficult given the wide variety of small, light and fast boats we typically call sportboats, and how this definition can change across cultures.

Yet the work will be important for many of those racing this style of boat in a growing market... much like at the other end of the size scale where the ORC Superyacht rule continues to perform well. Even though sportboats won't get the same individual attention as the superyachts, the working party will no doubt improve how ORC rating tools are applied to this important constituency.

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Something would be amiss were a French sportboat to look anything like the boats sailed elsewhere. This brilliant little wing-masted flyer – the Mach 6.50 – was drawn by MIni Transat winner Seb Magnen as an evolution of Finot's similarly alluring Open 7.50. Both classes still enjoy good fleets and are often raced by the best-known offshore professionals (for whom a Dragon doesn't cut it – *ed*). At Spi Ouest this year the Mach 6.50 prize went to Route du Rhum and Jules Verne veteran Yves le Blévec (*above*); the Open 7.50s were won by Marc Guillemot from Vendée Globe winner Alain Gautier

In Chioggia, however, the organisers wanted to change these rules to restrict entries to comply with OSR Cat 4 due to an unusually long commute to the race area... and also eliminate the Group 1 requirement and opt instead to offer a separate Corinthian Trophy (issues around Pro-Am distinctions continue to be unhelpfully weighted towards one European country in particular – *ed*).

While the Cat 5 to Cat 4 change was felt to better accommodate the Sportboat culture in this part of Italy, the reigning Dutch champions who won in Lake Balaton on their Cat 5-compliant Smile 22 would not be welcome to defend their title in Chioggia with the Cat 4 restriction. ORC is equipped to rate Cat 5 boats with trapezes, hiking racks and boards as needed, but this local variance in rules is one of several factors that have prompted a comprehensive sportboat policy review.