



BIG IMPACT

RUPERT HOLMES looks at the accessible big boat class winning a reputation for close racing, good fleet sizes and lots of fun

If the doom-mongers want to tell us about dwindling participation, especially in the big boat scene, perhaps they should take a look at the Performance 40 class, a thriving fleet in its first year with 27 boats competing in a six-event series and an impressive turn out of 16 at the inaugural national championships.

2019 promises to see the fleet grow further, with the Royal Yacht Squadron hosting the nationals, where a turnout of more than 20 boats is expected. Other high-profile events in the programme this year include the Vice Admiral's Cup and IRC Nationals.

The class was established by match racing and Volvo Ocean Race veteran David Swete, with support from North Sails. "I ended up doing a lot of sailing on this type of boat in 2017," he says. "When the teams started talking about what they were going to do for 2018 it dawned on me they needed someone to pull a few regattas together and coordinate the fleet."

Swete struck a successful formula from the outset and the class immediately became one of the fastest growing in Europe. He reckons there are already around 40 boats that fit the Performance 40 criteria in the Solent area alone and he is also getting enquiries from overseas.

A WINNING FORMAT

It is conceived as a friendly Corinthian class in which family and friends

can get a taste of grand prix racing in displacement IRC boats. Given the difficulties owners can face in getting weekdays off work, and the challenges of co-ordinating crew who can do the same, all the regattas are two-day events, with as much racing crammed into that time as possible.

A typical programme has three windward/leeward races on the Saturday, plus a round the cans race with a

Above
Nifty won the the first three events of 2018's season

Below
RORC events form a significant part of the series

finish near the host club. A further two windward/leewards and one more round the cans are then raced on the Sunday.

This format produced some tantalisingly close racing last year, with 10 different race winners across the six regattas.

"Any of the boats can get to the top mark at the same time, whether it's a J/111 or a First 40," says Swete. "There isn't a design in the fleet that





WHAT IS A PERFORMANCE 40?

The class criteria covers a band of displacement designs from around 36ft 6in to just over 46ft. Competitors in the first season included seven J/111s, six First 40s, a pair each of J/122s, JPK 1180s and King 40s, plus a Ker 39, Mills 39, Corby 41, J/121, X41 and MAT12.

The key criteria are:

IRC rating 1.075-1.150
Hull length 11.15m-14.1m
Displacement length ratio 125-205
Maximum draught 2.70m

A First 40 is at the bottom of the rating band and an XP44 is at the top. The plan is to slightly raise each end of the rating band this year, with the aim of enticing boats like old Farr 40s that can be picked up at very reasonable prices. It would be relatively easy to make one fit the rating requirements by cutting down the sail area a little, or by adding weight.

Schenkel doesn't perceive that there's a generic sweet rating spot to aim for in the class. Instead he says the key is to be guided by what's right for optimising your individual boat – for Rumbleflurg, the King 40s and Mills 39 last year that worked out at around 1.015, but First 40s were successful on lower numbers. On the other hand, if a Farr 40 or Swan 42 was to join the fleet it would rate at the upper end of the scale.

can't win, and we often had five boats rounding the bottom mark together."

However, the quality of the action on the water is by no means the only important part of the formula. "The idea is that they are sociable regattas," Swete adds. "I really want it to be a bit of a party that brings the fun back into sailing. I love these boats because you can sleep on them and the young crew members do that, while the owners tend to book accommodation for themselves."

He is clear about wanting to keep the Corinthian spirit of the class, but doesn't think formal rules are needed at this stage. "The whole idea is just to have one or two pros – maybe a coach or sailmaker – on board, plus some really good young sailors," he says. "There's a really nice mix of people in the fleet, the young and the more experienced, male and female."

Nevertheless, he says rules would be introduced if necessary to prevent an arms race towards the level of TP52s or Fast 40s, where running costs are of a different order.

THE FIRST SEASON

Roger Bowden's King 40 Nifty enjoyed a clean sweep of regatta wins in the first three class events of the season. Another King 40, Mike Blair's Cobra, held second overall at this stage.

At the same time, the then RORC Admiral Andrew McIrvine's First 40 La Reponse proved a mainstream production boat at the lower end of the

rating band is competitive in the fleet. At the mid-way point McIrvine held third overall, just two points adrift of Cobra, but subsequently missed out by not being around for later non-discardable events.

SURPRISE WINNER

The Performance 40 nationals saw an impressive line up of 16 boats for the inaugural event at the Royal Southern YC – and an unexpected winner. Underlining the tightness of the racing in the class, Cobra

Below
A variety of First 40.7s have done well in the opening season

and Ian Schenkel and David Cummin's Ker 39 Rumbleflurg both finished the seven race series on 15 points.

Rumbleflurg won the trophy – a stunning model of a Performance 40 crafted by Hamble boatbuilder Hedley Bewes – on countback, while Rob Bottomley's First 40 Seaplane rounded out the podium. There was close competition right through the fleet, with half the competitors notching up at least one podium result. For instance, only half a point separated two J/111s from Susan Glenn's First 40 Olympia's



Tigress in places 10 through 12.

"We only bought the boat in January, so it was more than we expected to win the nationals in our first year," says Schenkel. "But what David and I really like about the class is that the events are so good throughout the season. As an overlay series it fits with your normal programme, but makes it much more exciting. It's very well organised and a fantastic concept."

"The tight banding of the class and the type of boats make this as close to one design racing as you can get with big boats. Most of the time you're racing in a tight bunch, often with the top five boats finishing within a minute after a 90 minute race. Rumbleflurg – Mike Greville's former Erivale III – is a proper performance boat that can be pushed hard, right to the absolute edge. That's what we were looking for."

SEASON FINALE

The national championship was a non-discardable event, with a 150 per cent points weighting, which shook up the overall leaderboard. Cobra and Nifty retained their comfortable overall podium positions, while Sailplane slipped ahead of Nifty into second overall.

While these boats looked almost unassailable at the top of the leaderboard, just two points separated the next four boats – Jitterbug, Rumbleflurg, Juno and Journeymaker, with only one event left.



“You’re racing in a tight bunch, often with the top five finishing within a minute”

A second consecutive regatta win at the final event, run by Hamble River SC, wasn't enough to propel Schenkel and Cummin's team onto the overall podium for the season's points. Mike Blair's Cobra took first overall, with an impressive 6.5 point cushion. Nifty and Sailplane finished the season on equal points with the tie break going in Nifty's favour, thanks to her three overall wins in the early part of the season. Rumbleflurg took fourth overall

Above
The close racing between similarly rated boats has proved popular

and will clearly be a boat to watch next season, when she will have a new upwind sail wardrobe from North Sails.

GETTING STARTED

What's the best way to get started in the class? "Give me a call and ask some questions," says Swete. "If I'm not offshore [his day job involves sailing a MOD70 and Z86] and have my phone switched on, then I'm always happy to have a chat."

When asked Schenkel about the advice he would give new teams, he says: "Give it a go if you have a boat that fits the rating band – learn from every single race and from your previous performance."

"It is a really friendly class among owners and crew and the apres-sail is also important. We all share tips for performance, tactics and so on, because that's how strong classes develop. If you join us for the racing, then come and find us for a chat in the bar afterwards."

LOOKING AHEAD

This year's programme has been planned to avoid conflicts with the Rolex Fastnet Race, in which a lot of the fleet will compete, and with qualifying races in advance of the Fastnet.

Swete has also avoided clashes with the J Cup, Round the Island Race and Lendy Cowes Week, as a large number of Performance 40s will compete in these events. In addition, the International Paint Poole Regatta at the end of May will be a new event for the class in 2020. ■



2019 PERFORMANCE 40 EVENTS

Warsash Spring Championships – April 27-28

Vice Admiral's Cup, RORC – May 11-12

IRC Nationals, RORC – July 5-7

September Regatta, Royal Southern YC – Sep 14-15

Performance 40 Nationals, RYS – Sep 21-22

Hamble River Season Finale, HRSC – Oct 5-6

Contact and more information: www.p40class.com