

OK DINGHY



PHOTO: JEREMY EVANS

Almost 50 years since it first appeared, how does the OK rate? **Jeremy Evans** sails the classic singlehander.

The founding father of the OK was a sailing enthusiast from Denmark who had emigrated to the USA. Axel Dangaard Olsen knew what he wanted when he asked Danish yacht designer Knud Olsen to draw the lines for a fast, lightweight dinghy using plywood construction, which could also be a stepping-stone to the Finn. The first OK was launched in 1957 - a year after Jack Holt's

Enterprise and Solo - with Knud Olsen's initials reversed and coloured to create both the name and class logo.

The OK grew rapidly throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, when racing fleets were established for over 10,000 new boats around the world. After that, the Laser (launched in 1971) drove a wedge into the dinghy market, driving the OK and other popular singlehanders into a backwater. More

Y&Y
TEST



PHOTO: JEREMY EVANS

Above The OK has an elegant rig with its smoothly curving mast and the covered deck design provides an enclosed working area for the driver.

recently, growing numbers of singlehanded sailors have decided they want to race something a little different, helping the OK and other classic singlehanders to stage a revival.

Design and development

The OK has followed the usual development of dinghies originally designed for plywood. 'Tolerances' were necessary when large numbers of boats were home built, allowing small variations in hull shape which are effectively eliminated when boats are produced out of the same mould in glassfibre. Our test boat, Nick Craig's current OK (his sixth), was built in New Zealand to the 'Icebreaker' shape which first appeared in 1976 and has proved a regular winner.

Below Offwind the OK is pure fun to sail – powerful but responsive, with no nasty rolling.

OK dinghies are now built in all-plywood construction which is perfect for purists, or glassfibre foam sandwich for practicality with the option of a wooden deck as an aesthetic

compromise. Tony Thresher builds all-wood OKs near Oxford, but there is currently no glassfibre builder for the class in Britain. The closest are Jurgen Hein near Hamburg and P Oddeborgs near Copenhagen (which come in £500-£1,000 more expensive than all-wooden), although the UK association is hoping to appoint a major new builder. Further afield, OKs are built in New Zealand and Australia – where the 2006 world championship is being held in New South Wales this February. Some European sailors have opted to buy a new OK 'down under' for the worlds, using advantageous exchange rates to balance the cost of bringing their boats home.

Nick Craig's OK was built at Cookson Boats in New Zealand, best known for top racing yachts like 'Pyewackett', 'Virbac', 'Playstation' and the NZL America's Cup series. His rig combines a North sail (approx £600) with a Celidh carbon mast (approx £1,100) made by Irishman Thomas Wilkes in Holland. The North sail is based on Finn technology with OK input from world champions Jim Hunt and Craig, and is established as top choice in Britain. Elsewhere, different countries tend to favour their own sailmakers for the class.

Nick Craig has raced the OK for the past 14 years. For him, the big attraction of the OK is international racing. Apart from Britain, the OK is big in Germany with an enthusiastic following in Belgium, France, Poland, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand, plus a scattering in the USA, India, Thailand and South Korea. This is reflected in major events – the 2004 worlds had a 81-boat entry from 10 different countries, making it a genuine world championship.

The OK also has an active home circuit and well attended national championship, plus three European classic events always attract a strong class entry – Medemblik in Holland during April, followed by Kielwoche and Warnemunde on Germany's Baltic coast in June and July.



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Far Left Gybing it fast with the power on requires some expertise. You can see how far world champion Nick Craig rolls the boat to windward, a technique he also uses for sailing by the lee downwind

Left The OK is capsiz friendly, floating low enough to grab the centreboard and pull the boat back upright without much effort.

Sailing

Nick's Icebreaker is clearly fast, but doesn't win prizes for aesthetics! While contemporary builders of Jack Holt classics, such as the GP14, Enterprise and Solo, have done their best to make the modern glassfibre versions look attractive, the Cookson hull is pure utility. But how the OK performs is what matters. I owned an all-wood OK for several years and rated it one of my favourite dinghies. I loved the elegant rig with its smoothly curving mast and the covered deck design with a cockpit that provides an enclosed working area for the driver.

Taking a ride in Nick's boat brought it all back – the OK really is a delightful small dinghy! Getting upwind may be a bit grunty, as with any hiking boat, but at least Nick's felt reasonably comfortable with adjustable straps and side deck 'cushions' for pure luxury. The OK rig has moved on a long way from my wooden Collar mast with a rather flat Elvstrøm sail. It has the same elegant silhouette, plus much improved control and power.

Nick rates the optimum weight for OK sailors at 80-90kg. Lake sailors can be competitive at 70kg, but will struggle in a breeze on the open sea when it's no fun getting mown down by some 105kg monster having a blast in Force 5! The trick for optimum performance is to choose a mast with the right degree of stiffness to suit your weight, ensuring the luff curve of the sail is a perfect match. With the OK sail size between a Laser and Finn, you should be fully powered in Force 2-3. Rig control upwind is initially governed by mainsheet and traveller – as the wind increases, you let off inhaul and outhaul to move draught back and tension the cunningham to bend the mast. Changing mast rake to suit wind strength is possible during a race day – stop the boat with wind abeam, lean forward and move the chocks.

The OK is a high pointing dinghy, but needs to be sailed free to get through waves. You don't require kicker upwind, particularly when it would pull the boom lower and increase hassle in tacks. Instead, the kicker lever is an important offwind control, pulled down as the wind builds to keep the leech 'working' by opening and closing on the waves and effectively pumping the sail.

Nick favours a fixed rudder for max rigidity which is a personal choice – fixed or lifting, the

OK should feel light and easy on the helm, with the tiller the only carbon allowed in the boat apart from the mast. The OK boom is aluminium for the best mix of low cost and light weight and still looks incredibly low, which is one reason why the rig is so elegant. A full depth cockpit means there should be no problem getting under the boom during tacks, which are quick, fairly easy and reasonably forgiving if you get out of sync.

Offwind the OK is about pure sailing fun – you can really work the boat because it feels small and responsive with quite a big rig. We had Force 3-4 with small waves and it was a pleasure to drive the boat to its maximum potential. But if the breeze is up, the OK has a lot of sail area and experience will be required to keep on top of the situation. It's essentially a well-behaved boat with a forgiving and controllable hull shape. You know how a Laser gets those nasty rolls to windward downhill in a blow? The OK can be just as bad if you want it to be, but the difference is you can back right off when there's no escape with a Laser.

On a reach you can expect a fast, wet ride if it's windy, with the compact cockpit allowing the self-bailers to dispose of water taken on board. Be aware that the view to leeward is not great, with appreciably more sail than window and little chance of being able to see under the boom. Gybing the OK during this session actually seemed easy, with no problem from that low-slung boom. Gybing it fast with the power on will require some expertise. You can see how far Nick rolls the boat to windward, a technique he also uses for sailing by the lee downwind. Both are good recipes for a capsiz if you get things wrong. The OK does not have a fast draining double-bottom common to modern dinghies, but otherwise is capsiz friendly. If you're down in the water, the OK floats low enough to grab the centreboard and pull the boat back upright without much effort. The cockpit takes in enough water to slosh above your ankles, which can be planed away through the self-bailers.

The verdict

The international class association neatly defines the modern OK as: 'A light, responsive sailing dinghy that may be raced in fair and equal competition all over the world, without getting into cut-throat Olympic competition and with the



PHOTO: JEREMY EVANS

freedom to appeal to the individual in each of us.'

The OK has become a strict one-design class with individuality expressed through construction (glassfibre or wood), tolerances in the shape of the sail and a free choice of equipment that fits the rules. Despite a sophisticated rig based on Olympic Finn technology, the class has also been successful at keeping costs down. No problems building hulls down to weight and no complications with rig tension means a new OK should stay competitive for a long time. An OK is easy to own, a pleasure to sail and remains one of my all time favourite dinghies. ■

Above The key to optimum performance is to choose a mast with the right degree of stiffness to suit your weight.

Thanks to Cobnor Activities centre (CAC) for providing facilities for this test. CAC runs a full programme of residential and non-residential sailing courses and activities in Chichester harbour. For more information visit www.cobnor.com

OK specifications

DESIGN:	Knud Olsen in 1957
LENGTH:	4m
BEAM:	1.2m
HULL WEIGHT:	72kg
LATEST PN:	1110
SAIL AREA:	9.5sq m
PRICE:	£3,700-4,700

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COMPARISONS... Where does the OK fit in? Here are some alternatives...



■ **SOLO**
Jack Holt's best-known singlehander, available in marine ply, FRP or composite options with an enthusiastic class providing racing at home and abroad.

LOA:	3.78m
BEAM:	1.55m
HULL WEIGHT:	70kg
CREW WEIGHT:	65-100kg
SAIL AREA:	27.3sq
LATEST PN:	1155
GUIDE PRICE:	£6,500**



■ **LASER**
The world's biggest-selling singlehander, all levels of competition are available for the ubiquitous Laser, from the Olympics to club level.

LOA:	4.23m
BEAM:	1.42m
HULL WEIGHT:	59kg
CREW WEIGHT:	60-85kg
SAIL AREA:	7.06sq m
LATEST PN:	1078
GUIDE PRICE:	£3,300-4,100*



■ **BLAZE X**
If you like the idea of rack-assisted hiking, the Blaze is a good performer on open water with updated X-rated rig.

LOA:	4.2m
BEAM:	2.5m
HULL WEIGHT:	72kg
CREW WEIGHT:	70-95kg
SAIL AREA:	10sq m
LATEST PN:	1047
GUIDE PRICE:	£5,995*

ANSWER BACK

from Andy Turner, OK class association

Thanks to Jeremy for an article that captures the OK sailing experience – something that keeps sailors coming back for more every year. The circuit of international events at fantastic venues in Holland, France, Germany, Poland and Scandinavia is also a great attraction. As we write, a team of British OKs are shipping out to Australia for the upcoming 2006 worlds in February.

Whilst the standard of sailing in the domestic fleet is pretty high, beginners and particularly juniors get lots of support and encouragement at club level. We've made use of some excellent training weekends organised by the RYA at Grafham, and John Derbyshire (an ex-OK sailor himself) was part of the training build-up to last year's worlds. Jim Hunt won that event, the first British winner in the long international history of the class.

Second-hand OKs are cheap to get hold of, yet remain competitive. Prices start at around £400, through £1,500 for a race-spec boat and up to £3,500 for an OK with a carbon mast and North or P&B sail. The UK association used boat list can be found at www.okdinghy.co.uk

OKs are equally at home on rough sea venues and the calmest ponds. Their PY number of 1110 is quite a challenge, but their ease of handling and ability to compete in all weathers more than make up for it. There is a strong open meeting circuit, mainly based in the Midlands and at South and East coast venues. Come and join us!