

MAXI YACHT ROLEX CUP

Power play

Matthew Sheahan is impressed by the push-button power and technology of some of today's super-maxi yachts at the Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup in Porto Cervo

Reaching at a steady 16 knots in 22 knots true means it's windy and wet aboard Wally's latest and wildest creation, the 130. When 90 tonnes of carbon superyacht with topsides like a naval frigate hit the short, steep chop of the Bonifacio Straits, spray driven by 38 knots of apparent wind streams over her windward gunwale like snow off an Arctic ridge. You can see why reducing windage is becoming more of an issue aboard high-performance maxis.

Looking aft the picture's very different, an open transom, sunshine and a posse of guests strolling about an afterdeck the size of a double garage are sheltered from the breeze.

Wally founder Luca Basani is at the helm. Alongside him Gianni Sommariva delicately nudges the pen-sized joystick as he trims the main. Boat captain Luca Serra monitors the boat's primary systems behind a desk that looks like a TV editing suite, while Dede Deluca trims the headsail with another simple joystick. Providing the soundtrack to the action, the alternating hum of a high-revving generator is accompanied by the occasional solo rendition of whistling turbos.

Welcome to modern maxi sailing.


To the max

The Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup, hosted by the Yacht Club Costa Smeralda, is always about excess. For the biggest, fastest, or simply the best, the annual pilgrimage to Porto Cervo, Sardinia, continues to



Wally's latest and most extreme design yet, the 130 takes superyacht performance to a new level thanks to her powered systems





draw the latest machines, boldest owners and top sailors. Big courses, big breezes and big seas provide everything sailing's elite could want.

This year's racing got off to an exciting start with sun, sea and wind at max volume. Meanwhile, in the Mini Maxi fleet the intense racing attracted new boats and big names to a class that has been much talked about recently, proving that you don't need to build the biggest boats to get the best racing.

Aboard the Wally 130, as we headed out towards open water, the breeze increased to 25 knots and the boat speed climbed to 17 knots. The sea state became more lively and, while the momentum of a 130ft performance cruiser with 11 tonnes of water ballast provided a heavy-duty battering ram, every now and then she shuddered as her fine bow dug into the back of a wave. With each plunge, her 25-tonne lifting keel 6m below twitched in sympathy and the after deck reshuffled guests like skittles in an earthquake.

Charles Dunstone's 106ft superyacht *Hamilton II* and the J Class *Velsheda* were reduced to tiny silhouettes astern. Passing them to windward or to leeward hardly mattered as our 53.5m (175ft) mast decked in distinctive red PBO standing rigging and setting around 800m² (8,500ft²) of upwind sail area, powered us past without breaking step. 'Fully powered up' barely does justice to the sensation, but adding to the surreal experience was the fact that she was being driven by just four people.

Powered sail-handling systems are becoming the norm in maxi and superyacht sailing. Indeed, the Wally brand has done much to lead this field. This year, in particular, with the growing debate as to whether powered systems should be allowed in the America's Cup, has seen the discussion spread to a broader audience. Yet the use of power has taken another big step forwards.

Sailing aboard Karl Kwok's brand new 80ft maxi *Beau Geste* on the first day was thought-provoking. On the face of it, this Farr-designed racing maxi looks just like any other modern performance boat, until you notice there are no winch-grinding pedestals and the deck layout appears to have several items of kit

missing. There are no genoa tracks, no car pullers and precious few turning blocks and padeyes on her vast expanse of deck. There are precious few crew too, just 12 to handle her vast sail plan. A conventional maxi in the 1980s would have required double that number.

Just three crew are forward of the mast for the spinnaker hoist. The kite goes up, is set and the jib furled away in just 1m 10s. At the leeward mark her giant asymmetric is furled using a top down system in 15 seconds. Fifty five seconds later and the kite head is below decks, the headsail now set as her helmsman Gavin Brady winds her back up onto the breeze.

Beau Geste has been designed around power, but without the complication and reliance on concealed hydraulic rams and captive winches. Instead, her conventional-looking winches can be operated with a handle if necessary to drive the conventional-looking lines. Aside from her fully battened, fat-top mainsail, all sails forward of the mast are furling, using Karver line drive units which can be rapidly connected to the deck and halyards as and when required. But it is ▶▶

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Main picture: march of the Wallys – *Open Season*, *Y3K* and *Magic Carpet 2* on the charge.

Right: compare and contrast – Karl Kwok's new Farr maxi *Beau Geste* is a masterpiece of powered handling.

Above right: more traditional deck action aboard *Roma – Aniene*



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her kite system that's perhaps the most impressive, if only for its simplicity and effectiveness.

Instead of a load-bearing forestay within the luff of the sail as it would be on, say, a Code 0, the part-time forestay is tensioned between deck and mast with the sail wrapped around it. Each kite is deployed in the same way as you would unfurl a headsail, but with the sail flying free of the stay when set. To furl, the stay starts wrapping the kite from the top down, drawing the sail back onto the rotating stay.

It could be argued that furling sails on big boats are not new – offshore machines such as the Open 60s have been doing it for years – but such systems have often come at the expense of round the cans performance. Although not pushed hard by any other competition on the water at this regatta, *Beau Geste* clearly bucks the trend. If nothing else, once the kite's furling and below decks, it's ready to be deployed again at a moment's notice. Only masochists and those who enjoy tying pieces of wool around acres of wet sail below decks in a hot, sweaty, bucking environment will miss the time-honoured method.

Conventional keel

But while her powered winches provide a step forwards for performance and handling, she doesn't sport a canting keel. Instead her 5.5m deep fin and bulb configuration lifts 2m to allow her to get into the world's main harbours and marinas. Other than that and her twin rudders, she's pretty conventional.

So what had inspired such a concept? "I was keen to do more of the bluewater classic races," explained Kwok. "I wanted to do the Fastnet again, the Middle Sea race, the Newport to Bermuda and perhaps some of the newer ones like the Caribbean 600.

"We're living in a changing world where hybrid power systems are becoming more common and I believe race organisers are taking a different view on power aboard boats. A canting keel or water





ballast is a step too far and would have placed us in a different division and I wasn't keen on that."

When she's fully powered up, it's easy to see what he means. Power reaching in 18-22 knots true, she will blast along at 16-20 knots, whereas a VO70 would be well into the mid-twenties.

Mini-Maxi magic

But not everyone has been seduced by the lure of push-button sailing. Neville Crichton was one of the first owners to talk about scaling down from his super-maxi into a 60-70-footer. His latest, *Alfa Romeo 3*, was designed by Reichel/Pugh and is 71ft LOA, having grown from 69ft in a recent refit. Beam was also increased and 1 tonne added to her keel.

Hap Fauth's 69ft *Bella Mente* and Niklas Zennström's 72ft *Ran* were also pushing hard in this competitive class. Others have been lured into the STP65 class, with sisterships *Container* (Udo Schutz) and *Luna Rossa* (Patrizio Bertelli, with Torben Grael and Robert Scheidt aboard) going head to head with Roger Sturgeon aboard *Rosebud*.

But the newest boat in the fleet was also the smallest. Peter Ogden's brand new Judel/Vrolijk designed 60ft *Jethou* was always going to find it tough to grab line honours from boats 10ft longer. Yet the grins on the faces of the crew after the first few days sliding downhill at 22-24 knots proved that all was well aboard the jet black boat.

"It's great, it's like sailing a Laser with 18 mates," said Ogden of his new flush-decked machine, which looks like a cross between a modern TP52 and the notorious *Numbers* by the same designers.

Built by Green Marine, the standard of finish

throughout this boat is exceptional, but it is perhaps Ogden's confidence in building the boat he wanted rather than conforming to a box rule that is most impressive. Nevertheless, the fact that the Mini Maxi fleet in Sardinia comprised both box rule and one-off boats proved that there is room for both approaches.

Meanwhile, back in the world of unlimited length and complexity there were some new launches stirring things up. Among them Claus-Peter Offen's Wally Y3K, a new Wally 100, but from the same mould as his previous Y3K. Various tweaks, including moving the rig and keel positions, appear to have transformed the performance of this boat over her predecessor of the same name.

Also in the big-is-best league, Albert Buell's monster 148ft Wally *Saudade* gave Hasso Plattner's similarly sized *Visione* some company, while Ronald de Waal's J Class *Velsheda* gave both boats something to think about as she started her series with three straight wins. To see a 76-year-old design take on such modern technology is quite a sight.

Velsheda may have the benefit of modern systems and as much power on board as her competitors. She may even have a handicap that favours her in breezy conditions, who could say for sure? But the fact that a boat that represented the cutting edge of sailing technology in the 1930s is not only at the same regatta, but racing head to head with the newest boats must surely be the greatest validation of an event that sets out to celebrate the biggest, fastest and latest yachts in the world.

Little surprise then that when there's no America's Cup and no Volvo Ocean Race, the world turns up in Sardinia playing for power.