

Sailing Magazine, May 1986

West sail 32: A cruising idea that spurred an industry

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For a long while we had racing boats and character type boats and you could cruise in either. The character boats were genuine traditional types and exaggerated traditionally styled spin-offs of these would soon become mistaken as traditional types themselves. When a boat was past its prime on the race course, it was a "cruising boat." All of a sudden that began to change.

By reviving an old set of GRP tooling and instituting a genius public relations-advertising campaign, the builders of the Westsail began convincing many of us that if you owned a Westsail you could sail anywhere. A lot of people bought the boats and did just that. The focus was on offshore passage-making and a specialty market was created. I'm not complaining. I fueled a lot of my own early fires with arguments against the "fat and slow" Westsail. In my youth I argued long and hard against the Westsail type in order to attract attention to my own "performance cruiser" goal. I felt certain that the Westsail success (more than 800 hulls molded) was created by a myth.

Myths are sometimes created unfairly. Riding on the crest of its success, the Westsail began to be attacked by another myth. It soon became "in" to talk about how poorly the Westsail sailed. In the heat of an argument at the yacht club bar if you felt you were about to lose a point, you could always pull out, "Boy, those Westsails sure are slow." Now everybody would nod in agreement and you could feel like a mavin again.

I remember one sunny day reaching back from Catalina in a well known and performance respected 40-footer. We slowly overtook a Westsail 32. We had about 20 knots apparent and the apparent wind was at about 65 degrees. This Westsail had a big drifter reacher up and it was really moving along. It took us a painful long time to pull clear ahead. I earned a new respect for the fat, little "Wetsnail."

I will agree with you that this design was not aimed at speed made good to weather. We all know that. But at 32 feet LOA and a full 19,500 pounds displacement, the Westsail 32 packed a lot of useable interior volume. In my early articles I usually used the Westsail 32 to anchor the heavy end of the displacement to length ratio table. The D/ L ratio of the

32 is 419. If you consider that the Westsail 32 only had a ballast to displacement ratio of 33 percent, you have to stop and wonder where all the weight was.

A lot of the weight was in the lay-up. These boats were built with very thick hulls. They were freed of any pressure to lightweight materials and procedures because their performance characteristics relied upon this weight and ballast to displacement ratio. Of course, I think they probably could have used some stability increase but a boat of these dimensions had plenty of form stability as a function of gross displacement.

It was easy to knock the Westsail but in retrospect, it may have been the golden goose for a lot of us in the industry. Coinciding with the rise of the Westsail was the introduction of the IOR to American racing. While cruisers were hunting for their fisherman knit sweaters, the racing fleet was on its way to Cortex. It was the beginning of the high-tech era. Racing boats were getting radical very quickly in the hands of the ultra manipulative International Offshore Rule. As sterns were squeezed and mid-sections bulged with grotesquely exaggerated tumblehome, many of us said “there must be something in between this and the Westsail.” This is where the performance cruiser came from.

There are some that hate that name but names aside, we did see a new trend in the design of cruising yachts. At the same time, the Westsail tradition (an obvious extension of William Atkin’s fascination with the Norwegian lifeboat developed by Colin Archer) established the marketplace for designs like the Tayana 37, the Babas, Alajuelas, Hans Christians, Lord Nelsons and Tashibas, my newest . This has done wonders for the sales of fisherman knit sweaters. The newest boats in this genre are less symmetrical fore and aft and built lighter and thus require much less designed displacement. Still, they do owe their popularity to the Westsail 32.

In San Francisco they have the annual Colin Archer regatta. This is open to almost anything with a joint on both ends. It is a gathering mg of double-enders and the group is broken down into classes for some very serious racing. We sail for very different reasons. None of the reasons will stand up well to close, objective scrutiny. Sailing is very subjective. We all have that image in our mind of time on the water and how we best fit ourselves into that picture. For that stringy kid with the long blonde hair the picture is best realized hanging onto a Windsurfer with the last three toes of his left foot. For others it’s commanding a brawny racing boat with an obedient crew of uniformed beefy boys. Many of us like the idea of a dimly lit cabin with dinner on the small, wood burning stove, a little haze from the St. Bruno’s mixture and the gentle motion of our Westsail or

similar type swinging at the hook in our own private cove. The whole Westsail movement did a lot to promote that dream.