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SPECIAL ISSUE

2015 BOAT OF THE YEAR

JANUARY 2015

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OPPOSITES ATTRACT

The 2015 Boat of the Year competition produced an impressive array of champions in six dedicated divisions. Yet when it came to honoring the year's top Domestic and Import selections — the otherworldly Gunboat 55 catamaran, built in North Carolina, and the compact Jeanneau 349, a sweet French flyer — in style, purpose, size and price, the respective winners couldn't have been more different. Story by Herb McCormick
Photographs by Billy Black

When all was said and done, some serious numbers had been crunched. For *Cruising World's* 2015 Boat of the Year contest, an eclectic fleet of 19 new yachts, ranging in size from 32 to 57 feet, was nominated as entries at last fall's U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland. And then the fun started.

Over the next 10 days, an independent panel of three judges spent nearly 60 hours conducting dockside inspections and sea trials, in winds ranging from a mere zephyr to over 30 knots. At the close of each day's sailing on Chesapeake Bay, the judges convened to deliberate on the merits of each boat, adding another 12 hours to the process. The transcripts of these sessions are the length of a good book: over 150 single-spaced typed pages and 80,000 words.

Yes, the judges had a lot to talk about, ultimately choosing half a

**GUNBOAT 55
DOMESTIC BOAT OF THE YEAR**



The top prizes in the 2015 Boat of the Year competition went to a pair of boats seemingly on the opposite ends of the new-boat spectrum: the Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 349 (left), the best value in the fleet, and the Gunboat 55 (above), the first cat launched from the company's new boatyard in Wanchese, North Carolina.

dozen winning boats in six classes determined by size and/or purpose: the Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 349, the Beneteau Oceanis 35, the Salona 44, the Garcia Exploration 45, the Dufour 560 Grand' Large and the Gunboat 55.

**THAT'S CORRECT:
YOU COULD BUY 17
JEANNEAUS FOR THE
COST OF A GUNBOAT.**

The judges also honored a pair of very different boats as 2015's biggest winners. From a field of five nominees made in the U.S.A., they named the Gunboat 55 the Domestic Boat of the Year. From the 14 yachts built in China, Croatia, Denmark, Germany and France, they chose the Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 349 as the Import Boat

of the Year. It was the first time in the contest's history that the field's most expensive entry — the Gunboat, at a cool \$2.1 million, and the least expensive — the Jeanneau, at \$125 grand — were so honored.

That's correct: You could buy a veritable fleet of Sun Odyssey 349s — 17 of them! — for the cost of a single Gunboat. Yet the judges' impartial mission was to reward excellence, without regard to the bottom line. And in their reasoned and well-considered opinions, the radical, no-holds-barred, futuristic Gunboat cat and the economical, entry-level, value-oriented Jeanneau best exemplified what their designers and builders had set out to achieve with their design briefs.

In the next 12 pages we'll break down the individual classes, analyze more figures and explain what separated the winners from their competition.

Finally, on pages 44 and 45, you'll find specs and performance stats on the entire fleet, contact info for the manufacturers, judges' bios and more. The 2015 Boat of the Year contest was one of the more interesting and unusual ever, with an impressive roster of entrants. Flip the pages to find out why.



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CATS IN A CLASS OF THEIR OWN



Gunboat founder Peter Johnstone was at the helm of his latest creation, the Nigel Irens-designed **GUNBOAT 55**, when a 30-knot squall with blinding sideways rain raked Chesapeake Bay during our BOTY sea trials. It was, in a word, surreal. Outside, as the powerful catamaran ripped along under full main and screacher, topping off at over 20 knots of boat speed, the horizon was a blur. Yet in the enclosed main cabin — with its centered wheel, its adjacent suite of winches and sail controls just forward of the steering pedestal, and its full 360-degree visibility — not only was it dry and cozy, it was serene.

Great swaths of watery real estate were gobbled up in a flash. You actually had to look twice, or a third time, at the integrated B&G wind and speed instruments to fully grasp the forces in play. With regard to the space/time continuum, sailing this Gunboat put one in an altered state.

OK, in the puffs Peter did lean hard on the helm to keep the apparent wind

aft and the screaming cat tamed (though the windward hull, on occasion, did lift clear of the chop). Pushing the boat hard, at all times an experienced hand was on the mainsheet and traveler, ready to depower the boat at a moment's notice. Yet despite the storm, in our warm and comfortable pod, foul-weather gear wasn't required. In fact, Peter was barefoot.

"This," he said, "is [freaking] awesome."

Yes, we agreed, it was.

For 2015, the three-boat Multihull division consisted of a trio of interesting catamarans, though in many ways they couldn't have been more different from one another. In size and price, the Gunboat 55, the inaugural offering from the company's new plant in Wanchese, North Carolina, was in a league of its own. At 50 feet, the **SABA 50**, from the popular French builder Fountaine-Pajot, was a boat that could appeal to private owners as well as charter fleets. And veteran catamaran sailor, builder and broker Phil Berman's **BALANCE 451**, the first model from a new enterprise he's launched in China, was a dedicated live-aboard blue-water cruiser.

Given the breadth of choices, this wasn't a

particularly easy class for the judges to sort out. "Each of these boats serves different purposes," said judge Tim Murphy.

Of the Balance 451, Murphy continued: "Throughout his career, Phil has been gathering ideas about what makes the best sort of performance catamaran for cruisers. He used the word 'balance' for the name because he was looking for the balance between sailing performance and comfort aboard. He designed this boat in reaction to the mass of cats that go into the charter market but leave the real cruising sailor behind. He offers this boat with daggerboards instead of keels, though you can get both if you really want them. But the daggerboards are a statement: They should give you better balance and better performance."

The Saba 50, designed by the design consortium of Berret-Racoupeau, is a multitiered vessel with a smart and efficient sail-handling station, abundant lounging areas (including a sensational "sun porch" on the upper deck) and several optional accommodation plans. A company rep said the first batch of orders was split "50-50" between charter operations and private ownership. "This is one of those boats where there are a lot of different

spaces and I actually found myself delighted by them all [when under sail]," said Murphy. "It's lively," added judge Mark Schrader after a test sail in which the boat recorded better than 10 knots of speed in 14 knots of wind. "They wanted to keep weight down and performance up, yet they've still got a beautiful galley that could be a commercial kitchen. Fabulous!"

In other years, either the Balance or the Saba might've made its way to the winner's circle.

But for 2015, the Gunboat 55 would not be denied. And that's saying something, given that the price tag, which is north of \$2 million, would make it prohibitively expensive for consideration in most year's BOTY contests. "It's for 1 percent of the 1 percent," said judge Ed Sherman. However, the



BY THE NUMBERS

NOW HEAR THIS

What constitutes a quiet boat, one with a well-insulated engine room and a well-installed auxiliary engine? And what does a loud one sound like? Armed with a dB meter that records decibel levels, the BOTY judges get a pair of motoring figures for every boat (page 43): at normal cruising rpm, and with the throttle down. Normal conversation has a decibel level of 60. The quietest boat this year? The Dragonfly 3200, with a dB of 71. The noisiest? The C&C Redline 41: dB of 91.

**GUNBOAT 55
BEST MULTIHULL CRUISER**



Gunboat was so innovative, so well executed, and so damn cool that the judging panelists were unanimous in their praise and selection. And hey, we can all dream, right?

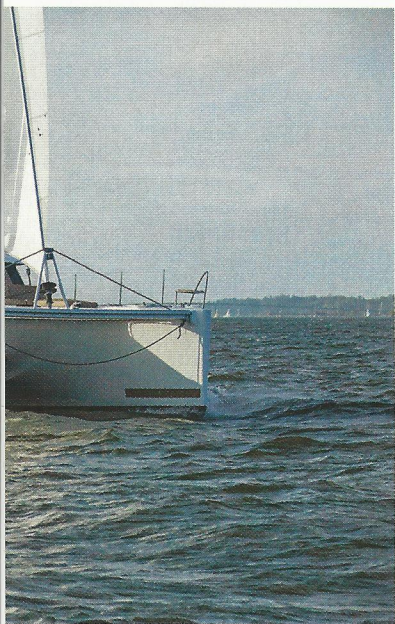
"The Gunboat 55 is the first of what looks poised possibly to be a long run of this design," said Murphy. "I was really stunned — I guess that's the word — with how many things I felt they got right. The construction is infused carbon fiber and West System epoxy, it's stiff and light, all top notch. The helm and workstation, all inside the main cabin — not outside as with previous Gunboats — is a marvel of design and engineering."

**BLINDING RAIN
RAKED CHESA-
PEAKE BAY
DURING OUR
SEA TRIALS ON
THE GUNBOAT.**

Murphy noted it is the most expensive boat in the competition, but said that we've had previous Gunboats in BOTY that were also expensive but didn't win their class because they weren't of the same caliber. "This one they've really gotten right," he said.

"The systems are sophisticated," said Mark Schrader. "There's an applied focus. It's for a serious sailor."

"I love the Gunboat," concluded Sherman. "It's a high-tech product that's assembled beautifully, with great attention to detail and high-quality equipment. No, it's not for everybody. But I feel it's a good example of what American craftsmanship can be. I really believe that."



With its chined hulls and wave-piercing bows, the Gunboat 55 stands apart from previous models (top). Fountaine-Pajot's Saba 50 sports a dedicated raised helm station to starboard (above). With a pair of headsail options and a powerful main, the Balance 451 has a versatile sail plan (right).

