

ONBOARD

SAILING WITH WHOOPER



The Laurent Giles sloop is the boat to beat in the Solent. We join owner Giovanni Belgrano and crew during Cowes Week

STORY MARINA JOHNSTON



RICK TOMLINSON

I will always remember the first time I sat up and really noticed *Whooper*. I was cruising along the Jurassic coast off Dorset on a 38ft yacht last summer on quite a lively reach but not in any particular hurry, when another yacht came over the horizon and slowly caught us up. A similar size, she gradually slipped past us, so we had plenty of time to get a good look at the gleaming varnish work, and the distinctive hull shape and transom. She seemed to use every wave for a bit of extra performance, and was cutting effortlessly through the sea without any movement other than forwards. I remarked at the time that she looked like she was racing, because of the way that she was so expertly sailed. But there was no racing

fleet about in the area at that time. It turned out that *Whooper* did have a race crew on board – she had retired from the RORC Myth of Malham race due to the heavy seas, and was making her way back to her home port of Cowes from Weymouth. It also turned out that she was on the angle of sail that suits her most and at which she excels, a beam reach.

From that point on I was a committed admirer of *Whooper*, and that admiration turned to awe this year when for the second time in her life, the first being in 2004, she won the JP Morgan Asset Management Round the Island Race – first on corrected time against a fleet of 1,681. To underline the victory, she won the EFG Round the Island Race during Panerai British Classic

Week in July. Last year, she won Panerai British Classic Week overall, winning every race. If it hadn't been for her owner's prolonged stint working abroad, there would no doubt have been even more victories. So when the invitation came to sail on board during Aberdeen Asset Management Cowes Week for a day, it was a no brainer, a chance to experience the yacht up close.

Ignoring the pouring rain which persisted through that morning at Cowes, dubbed Wet Thursday, the first thing that struck me about *Whooper* was the combination of all things traditional and modern on the boat. The decks are of teak, as you would expect, while the mast is of spruce. Yet the boom is pure black carbon, and so are the state-of-the-art North racing sails.

Whooper with wooden boom and Dacron mainsail, the set-up she uses for classic events

I'm introduced to owner Giovanni Belgrano, an Italian who has spent most of his career in the UK, with a nine-year spell abroad supporting America's Cup campaigns. He explains the set up. "When we are racing the modern yachts, our goal has to be to beat them. So to be competitive we use our modern boom and sails. When we race against the classics we use our wooden boom and Dacron mainsail. It doesn't change our rating either way, and we might be marginally slower against the classics, but it is important to sail in the spirit of tradition when we are amongst them. I am as strongly committed to racing with the British Classic Yacht Club as I am going head to head with the modern IRC fleet."

Whooper was designed by Laurent Giles and was



ICE MOUNTAIN

On her way to victory
in Aberdeen Asset
Management Cowes
Week



built and launched in 1939 from Woodnutts Boatyard in St Helens on the Isle of Wight. *Whooper* has a shallow draft for her size, at 4ft, and, remarkably, below her long keel shape, a wooden centreboard. "The centreboard is kept down permanently," says Giovanni.

Whooper did leave the Isle of Wight for much of her life. Her first owner, Cdr Arthur Johnson RNVR, kept her at the Royal Northumberland YC and raced her in 1947 to Norway, amongst other adventures. Giovanni found the boat in 2001 in Ireland. "She wasn't in too bad condition," he recalls. He sailed her to back to the same location where she had started her life, in St Helens, to be restored at H Atrill & Sons. The iron ballast keel was replaced for lead, the daggerboard and rudders were enlarged, and a new mast was built by Spencers. She was gradually restored with the aid of the original drawings. It's not clear if there are any other *Whoopers*. "There was one sister ship, but her traces disappeared in Majorca," says Giovanni.

What made Giovanni buy *Whooper*? He says: "I went into the yard and she was literally the first boat on the left that I saw. I was intrigued by the mast tabernacle and thought to myself 'what a really cool hull shape'."

"We were never intending to race her," says Giovanni, who is often accompanied on the boat by his wife Christine. "But in our first year of ownership, 2001, we thought we would have a go at the Round the Island Race. We found out that as soon as we cracked sheets she just flew! It's like a big surfboard."

Giovanni has made a few more modifications along the way. "She had a wheel but it was awkward to squeeze behind it, so the boat now has a tiller, as originally designed." During a previous restoration her hull was given an epoxy and glass external coating, but you only have to look into the saloon to see the original yacht, with her pitch pine planking and oak frames revealed. Lifting the locker lids on her aft deck, of which there is several feet behind the tiller, reveals the same original hull construction. A new galley with beech wooden worktops has been installed but "the design is true to the original," says Giovanni. "The galley was replaced by a really unattractive one later on, so I put it back to how it was in the first place." The elegant transom was re-veneered, one of the yacht's visible trademarks, in his own words "to make it look nicer."

The yacht races with nine or 10 crew, as she did on our Cowes Week Wet Thursday. As with many older boats, none of the halyards are led aft and there are no visible jammers near the companionway. That means there is a lot of work to do around the mast base where the halyard winches are mounted, so extra able bodies were concentrated in that area. In the cockpit are the sail trimmers, decision makers and Giovanni on the tiller.

Crauford McKeon joined *Whooper* last year and has sailed regularly with Giovanni for the past couple of seasons. The former national champion in the RS Elite

WOOPER

LOA
38ft 10in (10.63m)
LWL
30ft 20in (9.14m)
BEAM
9ft 6in (2.9m)
DRAUGHT
4ft (1.22m)
SAIL AREA
1000sq ft (93m²)



BERRY OF COWES



JOE MACCATHY

On her way to victory in Aberdeen Asset Management Cowes Week



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WOOPER

- LOA
38ft 10in (xx.xm)
- LWL
xxft xxins(xx.xm)
- BEAM
9ft 6in (x1m)
- DRAUGHT
4ft (xxx5m)
- SAIL AREA
xxxxsq ft (x.xm²)



BEKEN OF COWES



MARINA JOHNSTON



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Left: Modern winches. Right: crew weight is positioned carefully

class is sail trimmer and tactician on board *Whooper*. Asked why he thinks the boat performs so well, he says: "Gio is fanatical about preparation. All the on board systems work really well. The sails are designed to within a centimetre of their template and the foretriangle is maximised to the largest possible size."

He points out some other features: "Even the stanchion bases have been moved as far outboard as the deck will allow, so that crew weight can keep the boat flat while going upwind. The boat has very little stability, so it has to be sailed as flat as possible. In a blow it's a bit like sailing a dinghy, where every bit of weight and its position on board counts for a lot."

It was noticeable during our race how often Giovanni asked the crew to move backwards and forwards, the sort of fine tuning normally associated with lightweight modern yachts.

Whooper has her challenges. "She is quite difficult to steer," says Giovanni, "and because of her low freeboard she can be very wet in rough conditions. She is also slow to tack because of her long keel shape."

"We did have a go at offshore racing a few times, but her lack of stability makes her hard to steer well at night. In addition, the bunks are not designed for staying in once the boat is heeling or pitching!"

His comments explain why they gave up the Myth of Malham Race that weekend last year. The English Channel was quite rough and there was a long beat to windward involved. But he insists: "We love the challenge of her quirks."

Why does he think he does so well in the Round the Island Race? "*Whooper* has a big overall length for her rating and that gives us the advantage," he says. "But we also prepare and try really really hard. In each of the last couple of years we have held two days of crew coaching, bringing in an outside coach. Keeping the weight on the rail is the most important thing."

Clearly the coaching has paid off. Andy Day is *Whooper's* bowman and only started race crewing seriously last year. Two other Italians sail on the boat as well – there are dual language communications on

board. Roberto di Salle is Giovanni's brother-in-law, and Roberto's own brother Philipo, a former 420 world champion, is also on board. Rosie Parkes, a midwife in her other life, claims not to have sailed for 10 years until last year but took the helm in the Panerai Ladies' Race and won.

Giovanni is too modest to talk about his own brilliant helming skills. But they were evident on Wet Thursday as he picked off boat after boat, following a not too brilliant start, to edge his way to the front of the fleet. He says: "We are close bunch of friends and family but once we are out on the water we are giving it 110%."

Giovanni was a co-founder of composite engineering company SP systems, along with (*Whooper* bowman) Andy Day. "I was surrounded by high performance yachts but didn't really sail big boats until now," says Andy. The pair sold up in 2002. After this Giovanni worked for two America's Cup campaigns with Emirates Team New Zealand, central to the technical team during the design and build of the boats. He now runs PURE Design and Engineering, which has a number of high performance yachts in build, plus the engineering of the foils that are being used in the current generation of America's Cup yachts.

Giovanni works hard to mix business and pleasure. He still manages to find time to sail an RS Aero at Gurnard Sailing Club on the Isle of Wight. He will often be at work in the early hours, to be able to talk to the Southern Hemisphere where a lot of his work is being carried out, and then by midday can be found tinkering on *Whooper*. "There's always something to do," he says.

Does he have any plans to sell the boat in the near future? "Definitely not," comes the answer. "With a yacht like this you have a responsibility, you are the custodian. She's 76 now and the aim is to get her to her 100th birthday. Every race that you finish without a collision and with nothing broken is another day closer to that milestone!"

Of course, *Whooper* won the race on Wet Thursday at Cowes, and went on to take the series with four first places. Bring on the next 24 years!



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