

Fun, Fun, Fun



With five dedicated, dual-purpose racer/cruisers measuring in at under 37 feet, the Performance Cruiser class was not only the largest and most competitive division in the 2020 Boat of the Year contest, but it was also the most fun. Putting this roster of compact, peppy sailboats through their paces was nothing short of a blast.

Judge Ralph Naranjo was perhaps the most performance-oriented sailor in this year's judging panel, and he had strong opinions on all of the nominees. Regarding the Italia 9.98—one of two boats in the class built in Italy—he said: "The Italia appealed to me. I'm really looking at these smaller boats that offer both performance as well as some cruising amenities to get people into the activity. From that vantage point, what I saw here was a boat that performed well. She's not overburdened with go-fast technology, but she has a good sail area-to-displacement ratio (26.0), and the hull is designed to be more performance-oriented. While I did find a certain elegance to her, I'd also say she has to go on what I'd call a 'rigging-simplicity diet.' There are so many twings and tweaking lines that the cruising fraternity won't put to much use. But she also sailed very well. I liked this vessel."

Judge Ed Sherman had strong thoughts on the construction of the other Italian entry, the Grand Soleil 34. "This is a boat I really wanted to love and had a lot of good feelings about," he said. "It's got a carbon grid that's glued into the boat with Plexus, which is kind of intriguing

because the floorboards were inlaid in small sections in between the grid work. So the grid is exposed, and it all makes for a very interesting cabin sole. I enjoyed sailing the boat. I think it would make a pretty effective club racer with the ability to take a small family for the occasional mini cruise. I liked it."

All the panelists got a big kick out of sailing the Jeanneau Sun Fast 3300, but all of them also came to the same conclusion: This pocket rocket has no real desire to be a cruising boat, even a part-time one. "Let's put it this way," Sherman said, "it's a racing boat you can sleep on, not a cruiser. All that said, it sailed really well. I enjoyed that aspect of it very much, even though it would take me a week to figure out what all the freaking lines do. But I'd enjoy it." As is turned out,

"THE LITTLE BENETEAU HAD DUAL WHEELS, WHICH MIGHT SEEM LIKE OVERKILL, BUT THEY WORKED."

the judges had the Sun Fast 3300 well-assessed; it was later named the overall Boat of the Year by our sister publication, boat-racing mag *Sailing World*.

So the deliberations came down to two boats: the J/99 and the Beneteau Oceanis 30.1. Naranjo made his feelings known unequivocally: "I'm a quirky guy, an old dude, but I love to sail. And I love the J/99. Sure, it's more of a camper cruiser. But if you can put up with minimal accommodations—a comfortable bunk, a galley that



works, a private toilet—she's a great coastal cruiser/club racer. She's truly the kind of boat I love sailing."

When it came down to final deliberations, however, Naranjo was overruled by his fellow judges, whose votes enabled the **Beneteau Oceanis 30.1** to be named the year's **Best Performance Cruiser**. Ed Sherman offered up these observations:

"It's a cool boat, a nice little starter boat for a family getting into the sport. At \$160,000, it was also the least expensive boat in this group, so it represents good value. We sailed it in a pretty good breeze, and it absolutely sailed wonderfully. It has dual wheels, which might seem like overkill on a boat

this size, but they actually worked well; they weren't big, monstrous things—they were appropriately sized. I actually had a feeling of security driving it in the heavy air.

"It's also a boat that can be configured in a multitude of ways," he continued. "You've got four different keel options, as well as a centerboard option. You can get a tabernacle mast that you can raise or lower easily, so the idea there is you can use it to take a mini vacation, and it becomes a home away from home. You can just trailer it to a new waterway versus spending a whole bunch of time sailing it there. I've always liked boats that give you that kind of capability. I mean, you're not going to sail

It's not every year that we get a full class of dedicated performance cruisers to test, but we did for 2020, and it was a blast putting them through their paces. Boasting bold graphics, the Beneteau Oceanis 30.1 (above) rose to the top. But it had stiff competition from a quartet of contenders (right, from top). The J/99 was certainly the top choice of judge Ralph Naranjo. The Sun Fast 3300 kept us hopping. The Italia 9.98 has twin headsails to shift gears effortlessly. The Grand Soleil 34 is truly a dual-purpose yacht equally at home club racing or coastal cruising.

to England on her. But the reality is, this is a very nice little coastal cruiser or one that would be right at home on a big lake. It's perfect for that."

"This 30-footer was a handful of pleasure," Naranjo confirmed. "The twin wheels were linked to twin rudders, and under way she was just a stellar example of a well-balanced boat. The dodger was sized correctly, and big enough

to break the wind flow that was coming back at the person at the helm, which is a handy and very useful capability. The side decks were on the narrow side but still quite safe. What I was most taken by was that we put some punishing loads on her, and we didn't hear squeaks or groans on deck. She's small but solid." Amazingly enough, the class's smallest boat came up very big.

