

Powerful secret



Geoff Holt

The former professional yachtsman who was paralysed in a swimming accident and inspired sailors when he became the first quadriplegic to sail the Atlantic.

THIS may come as a surprise to many, but Geoff Holt the “disabled yachtsman” has a liking for speed.

I’m not talking amphetamine, although my addiction offers a similar natural high, albeit a more expensive one.

I’m talking power boats, in particular, powered fishing boats.

I’ve owned a few in my time and have become a bit of a nerd in the range of powerboats which can take wheelchairs; from the ghastly flat-bottomed aluminium “Wheelyboats” designed for a Beaufort scale of zero and an ever lower credibility rating, through to the magnificent Cheetah catamarans with side access for a wheelchair capable of handling most sea-states but you won’t see much change from £100,000.

I started tearing up £50 notes and leaving big black carbon tyre marks around the Solent about ten years ago. I opted for a bright orange – look at me I’m disabled – Pioneer

Multi, and yes, it has only one “e”.

I named her “Jaffa” and together we caught a fair few fish at my secret marks around the Solent, mainly bass.

The Pioneer Multi is made from injected-moulded polyethylene, robust enough to drag across concrete should you wish so to do, but its most-notable feature is its landing-craft style drop-bow.

Interestingly, despite buying it for this feature, I never once used it, preferring to wheel into the boat backwards off a pontoon, a procedure which caused most onlookers, myself included, to shut their eyes before undertaking.

Fitted with a 20HP outboard it planned, just about, at 12 knots max, on flat water so long as there were only two of you in the boat and one of you was hanging over the bow.

But that was its Achilles heal. When you go fishing for cod south of the Isle of Wight in winter, you rarely get flat water.

In fact anywhere I went to sea in Jaffa was turbulent enough to ensure I kept one hand on the EPIRB button, and the other on the inflate toggle on my life-jacket, just in case.

It is however ideal as a rescue boat on flat-water lakes and reservoirs and remains the safety boat of choice for many Sailability groups around the UK.

My next purchase was almost the perfect choice. A NAB 23 dory powered by a four-stroke 90HP Suzuki, “Liberty” was a fully MCA coded ex-commercial powerboat.

With speeds up to 26 knots, we had a lot of fun together and burned countless litres of irreplaceable fossil fuels, thereby doing our bit to deplete the earth’s natural resources.

If I had a £1 for every time I returned home empty handed from a fishing trip to be greeted by my wife who would say, predictably: “It would have been cheaper and easier to go to the fishmongers . . .” They just don’t understand do they?.

But for me, Liberty failed on two counts, especially when needing to get out to those mid-Channel wrecks. With a double-cathedral hull, she doesn’t like powering at speed through waves, well, not without slamming so much your head hurts and sounding like she’s going to snap in half.

And secondly, the lack of protection from the elements, not least the spray kicked up into your face when travelling with the sticks pushed right forward. The one huge advantage of this class is that Liberty has two sisters, both designed and operated by Port Solent based powerboat school Boatability. Believed to be the only commercially operated



Pioneer Multi

wheelchair accessible powerboats in the country, qualified wheelchair users can not only charter the boats for their own pleasure, but also take their RYA level 2 powerboat training in the boat whilst remaining seated in their wheelchair. Coded for up to eight people (max 4 wheelchairs), I’d highly recommend anyone to give them a go.

So what’s the next boat for me? Well, Liberty has now gone, she has a new life providing pleasure to a wheelchair user on the Isle of Man. My options are fairly limited, if not by choice then certainly by cost.

With a well-proven hull shape, ideal for choppy seas, Orkney boats will adapt one of their 21-footers with a side-access modification for about £30,000, and the Powercat 6.9 made by Multimarine has also started to take orders for a similar modification and a similar price.

From my research, I think it has to be a catamaran for me, purely from a stability point of view. It must also have full weather protection and ideally a cabin with an accessible bunk and galley,

I’m hoping that concession may win the approval of my wife. Of course, I’m talking myself into a Cheetah catamaran but I always did have champagne tastes with lemonade pockets.

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