

BOTY 2005

A field of two dozen boats new to the U.S. market, four distinguished judges, 10 days of evaluation, and miles of taped conversations were the pillars of Cruising World's 2005 Boat of the Year contest held during the United States Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, last October. A nomination round in advance of the contest whittled a field of 41 entries down to 24 boats, which were then grouped into six categories defined by size, price, design, and purpose. The categories included three for production monohulls (under 40 feet, 40 to 45 feet, and over 45 feet), one for midsize performance cruisers, and two for cruising multihulls (40 feet and under, and over 40 feet).

Of the 24 nominated boats, eight received awards: one from each of the six categories, plus two special awards for Best Charter Boat and Best Value, drawn from the entire field. Finally, two category winners received the ultimate awards for Best Domestic Cruising Boat and the Best Imported Cruising Boat of 2005.

Adhering to a tight schedule and dodging heavy boat-show traffic, the judges climbed aboard the nominated boats and measured angles and distances, scrutinized dark corners, dived under floorboards, and squeezed into tight spots to get the complete picture. Throughout the contest, they remained focused on safe shorthanded sailing in a cruising (neither fully crewed nor racing) context, even when they evaluated the more performance-oriented boats. Before the dockside walk-through, the judges asked each builder to define the target for which the boat was designed. Among other questions, they asked each builder to categorize the boat as inshore, coastal, near offshore (island-hopping), or true bluewater. The judges used these and other yardsticks as they went about evaluating each boat. If a boat's builder deemed it a "coastal cruiser," for example, the judges were less demanding about finding good sea berths and copious tankage; by contrast, a boat sold as a go-anywhere passagemaker better have these, as well as good dinghy and life-raft stowage and a host of other things.

"Do they start with a vision and build a boat that goes with it, or do they start with a boat and try to find customers for it?" veteran yacht designer, boatbuilder, and BOTY judge Bill Lee asked. In the best boats, design was consistent with the builder's marketing message; in those boats, construction, performance, and equipment most closely matched their target audience and intended use.

Of course, a vital question on any boat is its price, and that can shift by as much as 40 percent depending on what's included after the hull. For fair comparison, Bill worked out a sailaway price based on a deal signed in October 2004 that included U.S. East Coast delivery, basic electronics, refrigeration, 110-volt shore power, electrical anchor windlass, bottom paint, commissioning, and working sails. This required adding in some items or backing out others that might be standard on some other boats. It's a bang-for-the-buck equation; or, as Alvah Simon suggested: "If you spend a lot of money, you expect to see a certain density of quality and good thinking that adds up to good value."

Construction method and application were on Steve Callahan's list of judging priorities. He considered safety, market demands, and the execution of such important details as the hull/deck joint. He also looked at performance and handling under power, and found he's getting sold on Flex-O-Fold propellers, which were used on many boats. "They're a bit less powerful in reverse than solid props, but they don't walk as much, which is great for motoring backward in a straight line."

Another question the judges considered was "commercial viability," which includes production volume, dealer structure, and manufacturer or dealer backup in the United States. "If someone invests in a new boat, it's fair to ask, 'If something happens, who'll be around to take care of it?'" said Tom Prior, an avid cruiser and sometimes delivery skipper who earned his place on the BOTY panel of judges by winning an essay contest announced in Cruising World's January 2004 issue. Tom's perspective helped calibrate the panel's evaluation to serve the most important side, the consumer.

After the dockside inspection, the judges boarded each boat for a second time to go sailing. They maneuvered under power and sail, deployed the anchor, reefed the main, steered with the emergency tiller, and sailed all round the compass. GPS and noise meters quantified the judges' sensations, which had been honed by thousands of ocean miles and decades of messing about in boats.

After each day of sailing, the judges discussed and evaluated each boat individually, a process that encouraged and produced several spirited exchanges. Within categories, some of the judges' debates lasted hours. However, when all was said and done, the votes for the two overall winners, imported and domestic, were unanimous. Although vastly different in style and purpose, each boat was found to be the clear frontrunner in its class and a terrific execution of its stated design intent. In other words, both boats did exactly what the manufacturers said they would do, and they did it better than all their rivals.

The Overall Winners

This year, for the first time in the running of Cruising World's Boat of the Year contest, judges were asked to award prizes to two overall winners--one to a U.S.-built boat and one to an imported vessel. Though the judges were instructed that each boat didn't have to win its category (which had been a rule in past contests), as this year's deliberations played out, the two winners did happen to be unanimous winners in their categories.

When The Moorings decided to replace its venerable 3800, the longtime charter company contracted with speed merchants Morelli & Melvin, the designers of Cheyenne (née PlayStation) and the Gunboat 62 (winner of last year's BOTY innovation award), it was fair to expect radical changes. Enter the Moorings 4000, built by Robertson & Caine in Cape Town, South Africa, the winner of the 2005 Cruising World Best Import award.

The 4000's curved topsides, her huge, convex side ports, and a hardtop bimini with sliding hatch signal that she was redone from the inverted bell shape up. Co-designer Gino Morelli calls it a "tulip shape" that features an outward step in the hulls, which is still rare in cats but more common in trimarans. "It boosts the volume and livability inside at very little cost," Steve said of the hull form. "And it has structural advantages, almost like a chine ridge, which adds stiffness."

The 4000 is bigger and sails better than her predecessor; according to Morelli, it's lighter by 4,000 pounds. The hulls also have a shallower forefoot, rocker, and a mini keel designed to be exchanged without hauling the boat. "It tacked really well with just the main in light air," Steve said of the boat's maneuverability. Under power, she managed about 7.5 knots at 2,500 rpm, and, thanks to her saildrives, she did it quietly. Meant for the tropics, her design provides open spaces, a large cockpit table, and an indoor/outdoor bar at the sliding door of the saloon.

But the boat's most remarkable feature was sailing-related. "The sailhandling center by the helm should become an industry standard," Bill noted. And Alvah loved the safety aspects: "By bringing the sail controls all to one spot, you take a lot of the stress out of handling the boat in rough conditions when sailing shorthanded." Missing handholds and bad ergonomics, his pet peeves, were pleasantly absent. "It felt safe moving around, and every time I put out my hand, there was something to grab." Tom was pleased with the interior arrangements and the engine-access hatch at the top of the transom steps. "You can drop right in there and work around the edges."

The 4000 is offered with a four-cabin/two-head layout for charter or with an owner's version that's sold as the Leopard 40. R & C expect to have 30 boats built by the end of 2005. "I think it's so good because it's a true second-generation boat," Bill said. "They started with a list of everything that could be improved on the [older] boats, then re-engineered from scratch. And they did a really good job with it. " Congratulations to Robertson & Caine and The Moorings.

PRODUCTION CRUISERS UNDER 40 FEET

MULTIHULLS 40 FEET AND UNDER

In the smaller of our two multihull categories, we had a remarkably close contest: all three entrants were catamarans between 38 and 40 feet, all are priced between \$300,000 and \$320,000, and all were built in South Africa.

The runaway winner in this class was the Moorings 4000, the boat that was most consistent with its design objective and did so many things so well. Bill applauded the fact that she wasn't a stretched makeover of the old 3800 but designed and engineered from scratch. Gino Morrelli and Pete Melvin have used their experience in the performance-multihull game to come up with a bigger yet leaner boat that will perform well even when loaded with a full complement of crew and gear. Not only is the boat a staggering two tons lighter than the 3800; her weight distribution is better, too. The hook is deployed on a bridle, directly from the anchor locker, which cleans up the foredeck, reduces weight, and increases safety. The rockered hull shape promotes maneuverability and is flared out above the waterline to increase interior space. Saloon and cockpit are linked by an extendable bar, emphasizing the boat's purpose as a tropical party platform.

But most important, the 4000 set a new standard for functionality and safe shorthanded sailing with a helm station that put all sail controls within arm's reach of the skipper. Restricted visibility under the bimini, the judges' recurring complaint on other boats, was addressed with a sliding hatch so the driver can clearly see the sail trim. Alvah found "good workmanship and good ergonomics throughout, good workstations, and good safety features." Steve summarized the panel's impression of the Moorings 4000: "It's a very good execution."

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