Used Boat Notebook

OLSON 30

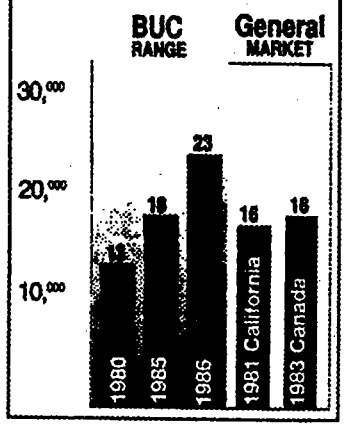
The affordable ULDB that showed the world light is fast and fast is fun

The Olson 30 was a part of the Santa Cruz revolution that permanently altered the face of sailing. A small but progressive group of builders (the most well-known is Santa Cruz 70 designer Bill Lee) began designing and manufacturing incredibly light and fast boats in the mid-70s. These new boats were dubbed ultralight displacement boats. The phrase "fast is fun" became part of the sailing lexicon and 6 knots went from being a standard of performance to being simply slow. George Olson's 30-footer rocket ship is a classic example of early ULDB design that has stood the test of time. Although it has been out of production for more than a decade, it is still considered a very fast boat and routinely surfs at 15-plus knots and claws upwind at 7.

TECH LINE

■ **Olson 30 Price Data**

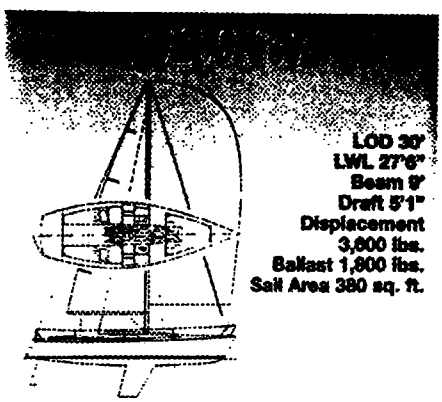
Prices range from a low of $11,100 for a 1980 model to a high of $23,100 for a 1986 model.



Olson built one of the first ULDBs, the 24-foot flyer *Grendel*, which later became the prototype for the popular Moore 24. Olson worked briefly with Lee and together they developed another legendary West Coast flyer, the Santa Cruz 27. The two parted ways when Olson formed his company, Pacific Boats, located in Santa Cruz. His first and ultimately most successful project was the 30, introduced in 1978. In all, 244 boats were built before production stopped in 1986.

First impressions

The Olson 30 looks fast even when it's tied to the dock. Olson masterfully created a long 27-foot, 6-inch waterline without the stubby, blunt-nosed, wide-body look of today's vertically ended sport boats. The profile view reveals a bit of sheer, and the relatively long tapered deckhouse, low freeboard and reverse transom combine to give the boat deceptively soft, sexy lines. The numbers, however, jump off the page. The Olson 30 displaces just 3,600 pounds with 1,800 pounds of ballast in the keel. To put that in perspective, the 21-year-old Olson 30 weighs nearly 1,000 pounds less than the Mumm 30 and nearly 2,000 less than the J/92.



Construction

In the early days of ULDB construction many predicted that the boats would never hold up, that they were just too light to take the relentless pounding of wind and waves. What the experts didn't realize was that lighter boats are subject to lighter loads and by dramatically increasing speed when sailing off the wind, the apparent wind is much less, reducing loads even further. ULDB manufacturers also introduced new building techniques and higher standards of construction. Many of these techniques, which included vacuum bagging, have become common even among cruising boatbuilders.

The Olson 30 has a balsa-cored hull and the vacuum-bagged method of construction of the 30's hull has proven to be not only light and strong, but durable. Vacuum bagging is the process of placing the core against a wet mat or cloth and then covering it with a plastic bag. A vacuum is applied, causing the bag to collapse onto the core. The even pressure created across the entire surface draws resin through the cloth, removing any excess. The vacuum also sucks out air pockets or bubbles, eliminating the voids between the skin and the core. The result is a well-saturated laminate using as little resin as possible. This produces a light, stiff and extremely watertight sandwich hull. The balsa-cored deck is also vacuum bagged.

The hull has a 3-inch inward-turning flange to support the deck, which is bolted through an aluminum toerail on 4-inch centers. Two plywood structural half-bulkheads below are well tabbed to the hull and support the chainplates. A tie rod and turnbuckle connects the deck to the keel-stepped spar. The early boats had an inadequate wooden maststep. The lead keel section is quite narrow, approximately 5 inches, and held in place with nine 5/8-inch bolts and a single 1-inch bolt that doubles as the lifting ring. This ring is accessible through a deck hatch, making it rather easy to lift the boat in and out of the water when it is dry stored. Interestingly, the rudder stock is solid fiberglass

What to look for

There are a few common problems in Olson 30s. The original wooden maststep didn't hold up very well although chances are that it has already been replaced with an aluminum I-beam athwart. Be wary of a fore and aft retrofitted maststep that might make it difficult to access keel bolts. Also, be sure to examine the bulkheads for cracks or delamination. Because these are half-bulkheads, replacing them is not a huge job. These structural members often carry high loads and need to be strong. Also carefully check the keel-to-hull joint at the stub—some boats have leaked, especially if the wrong sealant was used when the keel was last removed.

The key to buying an Olson 30 is to honestly assess how you plan to sail the boat. This will help you to accurately determine how much of the inventory is useful. Larry Rota, who recently bought a 1981 Olson 30, sails out of Santa Cruz

and doesn't plan to race the boat, at least not initially. He was happy to find an older boat that had few modifications over the years. "It was almost like buying a stock boat," Rota said. "This way I can make the changes I want."

Steve Maseda, who sailed his 1980 Olson 30 *Holy Guacamole* out of Southern California, advises prospective racers to have a sailmaker check the value of the sails. "While the purchase price for the boat might be $15,000, if the sail inventory has to be completely updated, you can easily spend $7,000 to $10,000 to be competitive," Maseda said. He suggests looking for lightweight polyester chutes as opposed to the heavier nylon ones. The boats that win the most races have been retrofitted with a double-spreader spar, which can add another $3,000 to $4,000 to the price.

Another potential problem area is the bottom. While many Olsons have been dry-stored, those that haven't might well have blisters. Having a fair bottom affects speed over ground, and a complete bottom job can add an additional $2,000 to $4,000. Over the years, certain key deck and rigging changes have become critical to successful racing. If you want to race at a high level, look for a boat that has an adjustable tackle for headsail leads, Kevlar halyards, and additional backstay purchase.

On deck

The Olson 30 cockpit seems outdated when compared to the open-style sport boat cockpits of today's boats, but when racing off shore, (Olson 30s were designed for offshore racing and cruising) the companionway sill and large lazarette astern lend a feeling of security. The mainsheet traveler cuts across the aft end of the cockpit, which provides good end-boom sheeting but doesn't help an already small working area. There are two decent-sized drains and, because the actual well is quite small, they are more than adequate. Some owners have removed the small teak coamings, which isn't a bad idea. Coupled with the aluminum toerail, there is no comfortable place to sit when at the helm or on the rail. The primary winches were Barient 22s, but there is a good chance that these have been upgraded. A man-overboard pole tube in the stern is standard.

Maseda strongly recommends replacing the Schaefer headsail leads and the T-track with an adjustable ball bearing system. Remember, you need to be able to adjust everything from the windward side, which is made easier by the Olson's narrow beam. Maseda also notes that the trend among competitive Olsons is to make the foredeck person self-sufficient by leaving headsail and chute controls at the base of the mast. Most leads originally led back to the cockpit with the winch controls on the aft end of the doghouse.

The nonskid is aggressive and the standard boat came with double lifelines. Be careful to check the lifeline hardware; these were often loosened to allow the crew to sit farther outboard on the rail. The stanchion bases are set into molded deck sockets and not very well supported. The yoked backstay can use all the purchase you can give it. A Headfoil II came standard with later model boats. The tapered mast is a fairly beefy aluminum section. The standard standing rigging was Navtec rod.

Down below

"You can cruise the boat," Maseda admits with a wry laugh, "but any way you look at it, it is glorified camping." The headroom below is less than 5 feet. The arrangement includes a V-berth forward, with a Porta-Potti underneath. There is a tiny galley to port, usually with a nonpressurized alcohol stove and a small nondraining essentially useless sink. A nav station of sorts is opposite. Two quarter berths aft make good sea berths and there are small ice chests at the head of each bunk. There is not much storage in the boat. The wood and painted finishes are all designed to be hosed down after sailing—not a bad design concept. The furniture in the boat is all extremely well tabbed, which is more for structural support than for human comfort. Several Olsons have been sailed from California to Hawaii.

Engine

There is even less to say about auxiliary power since only a few 30s came from the factory with an inboard. A 7-horsepower, lightweight BMW diesel was offered as an option but few checked it on the purchase order. The Olson 30 is light enough to be pushed along adequately by a very small outboard. A 6-horsepower is required to achieve a 6-knot minimum. Mounting the outboard on the 30's reverse transom is a bit of a challenge, and as a result, the bracket must be fairly low on the hull, making it difficult to reach the controls. It doesn't make any sense to leave the engine astern for racing and it's usually removed, schlepped below and placed on the cabin sole: another good reason for choosing a small, lightweight outboard. The only time you will really need an engine is for close maneuvering in congested marinas or for motoring back home on utterly calm days.

Under sail

It takes awhile to get used to the fast motion of an ultralight-displacement boat. The boat rides on top of the water, not in it. While "fast is fun" became the market slogan for ULDBs, "flat is fast" is the sailing mantra for the Olson 30. "You have to keep the boat on its lines," Maseda said, "even if it means flattening the jib and flogging the main upwind. Be ruthless about keeping the boat flat and you will be fast." The Olson 30 shines in light air, accelerating rapidly after tacks. But in moderate air, especially upwind, it is vital to put weight on the rail and shorten to a No. 2 headsail to keep the boat flat. Otherwise the boat makes a lot of leeway.

The Olson 30 comes to life when it turns the weather mark in heavy air. The boat planes in 20 knots and easily surfs in big seas. Speeds in excess of 20 knots are not uncommon. Maseda remembers an offshore race from San Francisco south to Los Angeles, screaming before the wind and routinely burying the speedo. "It takes tremendous concentration to keep the boat under the spinnaker," Maseda said. "About 30 minutes was all we could take at the helm. You have to remind yourself that you are in control of the stern, it is not in control of you." In fact, slowing down after a wild surfing ride requires skills that many heavy boat sailors don't have as you steer off waves and through troughs.

While the Olson can certainly sail to its PHRF rating, which ranges between 96 on the West Coast to 112 in Florida, one-design racing is the most fun. The class association keeps the rules simple and there are lively Olson 30 fleets on San Francisco Bay, in the Pacific Northwest and Lake Ontario.

Conclusion

With prices ranging from $10,000 to $20,000, the Olson 30 offers exhilarating sailing at truly affordable prices.

TECH LINE

SAILING Magazine's Value Guide

Olson 30

(5-sailboat rating system)

PRICE: Although the days of the super cheap Olson 30s may be behind us, with prices generally still less than $20,000 the boat is a great value.

DESIGN QUALITY: The boat is what it is, an ULDB that offers blistering off-the-wind performance. The Olson 30 was very innovative in its day and the design has stood the test of time.

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY: Considering that these boats have been sailed hard, it is a testament to their original construction that they have endured so well. The original construction was sophisticated.

USER-FRIENDLINESS: You need to be a skilled sailor and stay one step ahead of the boat to get the most out of sailing a ULDB.

SAFETY: Olson 30s often sail off shore, but the lack of comfort is fatiguing, which is a safety concern. The motion isn't very friendly in rough seas. The deck features secure handholds and aggressive nonskid, but I wouldn't want to put a lot of weight on the stanchions.

TYPICAL CONDITION: Like most race boats, Olson 30s show signs of wear and tear and much of the inventory must be upgraded. But because 30s were well built and cared for, Olson 30s are still viable used boats.

REFITTING: The changes to keep the boat competitive are well documented and not difficult to achieve, but finding original parts is a bit of a challenge.

SUPPORT: Pacific Boats is no longer in business, but the Olson 30 class association is well organized. Mainsheet, the web page of the San Francisco Bay fleet is very informative and helpful. Their address is: www.winterlan.net/vml/o30

AVAILABILITY: The demand for the Olson 30 has outstripped the supply. The West Coast is definitely the place to find used Olsons; check the fleet online classifieds.

INVESTMENT AND RESALE: It can be costly owning an Olson 30 if you plan to race. But because the initial cost is so low, it's less painful with an Olson 30.

OVERALL 'SVG' RATING