

Design



A boat for all ages

The spectacular success of the Melges 15 already extends way beyond its obvious appeal to young racers...

Melges Performance Sailboats has always been a family-run company, so it's hardly surprising that their latest design, the Melges 15, is drawing together sailors of all generations for some family-centric competition. Here's one example: at a recent regatta, the first race was won by Dana Haig and her father/crew – just ahead of her sister Emily and Zoe Fisher. Crossing the line in third were Claudia and John Bartlett, the eventual winners of both the Grand Masters (age 60-69) and Couples trophies.

Like its still-thriving patriarch the Melges 24, the Melges 15 was designed by Reichel/Pugh and won *Sailing World's* Boat of the Year shortly after its initial launch. This two-person dinghy incorporates many lessons learned over

the past three decades. Maximum beam carries well aft along lengthy hard chines that both maximise stability and promote planing. The high boom, ergonomic cockpit and light sheet loads create a package that's easy and fun – at any stage in life.

Teens love it

14-year-old Maija Andert raced the 2024 Winter Series #1 with her father, Chris, as crew. 'What I like about sailing the Melges 15 is that people can rip at any age,' Maija says. 'People can be 70, and they're rolling us!' Older sister Anna agrees. 'There's Opti kids to old guys and we all learn from each other.'

Continuing education

Now that she's out of school, Dana Haig says Melges 15 regattas are key to her

next sailing chapter. 'I get to continue to sail with the people I sailed with in college, but also sail with my Dad so it's a family thing too. The winter series events are great, because they're at the weekend and fit in well around a regular nine-to-five job.'

'The class is very centred around learning,' she adds. 'Melges does a great job of encouraging communication between sailors, talking about different settings and what works.'

Mid-life return to dinghy sailing

Dublin-based John Sheehy was an avid team racer in his 20s, but after starting a family he couldn't find a sailing dinghy that fitted his new reality. A few years ago, he went searching for a boat he could sail with his three children and discovered the Melges 15. It ticked so many boxes that he immediately talked several friends into buying boats too; enough to order a full container (12). 'I was very conscious of

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John Reichel takes the lid off the Melges 15

This project was conceived right from the start to allow everyone from new sailors to experienced racers to not only have fun, but really get the most out of the boat very quickly.

The hull features a wide beam, a chine along most of the length, high stability and plenty of sail for fast, responsive, forgiving performance for a wide range of crew weights.

The Melges 15 design focuses not just on performance, but also durability and low maintenance, which is a necessity for any individuals or organisations looking to build their fleet for beginner instruction, junior sailing, club, or international racing. Built with the composite construction quality Melges Performance Sailboats is known for, these dinghies are sure to last for many years.

Over the course of 2019, our team at Reichel/Pugh worked closely with Melges to continually refine the deck and sail plan design and incorporated design improvements learned from sailing the prototype on Geneva Lake in Wisconsin. Ergonomics were a priority right from the start, with a deep cockpit and wide side decks for comfortable hiking. The daggerboard trunk and mainsheet block are supported on a low, central spine with enough depth to be a foot brace, but substantially lower than a conventional centreboard dinghy. Conspicuously absent are any uncomfortable athwartship supports in the cockpit.

The sail plan is thoroughly modern with a large jib and tight upwind sheeting angles. The square-top main provides plenty of power in a very efficient high-aspect platform. The large asymmetric spinnaker is easily handled and, with the bowsprit extended, provides plenty of power for planing off the wind. The rig utilises a 'gnav' above the boom rather than a conventional boom vang underneath, to provide more space and comfort for the crew.

'I really enjoyed working on this project, the bottom line is that the Melges 15 has a very high fun-to-cost ratio in one high-quality package,' concludes John Reichel.



The sailplan is thoroughly modern with a large jib, a high-aspect square top mainsail, tight sheeting angles and a big asymmetric kite for planing performance

people saying, "Oh, another new class, why don't you sail X, Y, or Z instead?" But 80 per cent of our Melges 15 owners are coming back to dinghy sailing.' The typical buyer didn't leave another class, he explains; like him, 'they just hadn't seen anything they wanted to sail, until now.'

Most of the Dublin fleet members are parents, he adds. 'There's a family here, and the father and mother used to race together back in the day. So they sail together, their three kids sometimes crew for them, they sometimes crew for the kids – and the kids sail with each other or with their friends. So you have this kind of multiple use scenario. That's exciting.'

Masters excitement

Perhaps the Melges 15's most surprising demographic are the equally excited elders – not just parents and grandparents but couples and friends who want to sail something fast but comfortable. Four Mega Masters teams (70-plus) competed at the first 2024 Winter Series regatta, a division won by husband and wife windsurfing legends Ron and Bonnie Steele.

When trophies were handed out at the second Winter Series regatta, Grand Master winning skipper Claudia Bartlett was "a little shocked" to learn that she and her husband/crew were also the top-finishing couple. 'We love the boat; we have grandchildren, they love the boat. It's easy to sail and it's so stable.'

Fast growth on both sides of the Atlantic

Eddie Cox, one of the Melges team members who helped develop the Melges 15, says that clubs all over the US are buying fleets because they offer a clear pathway from beginner to expert while providing a rare link between generations. 'You can teach an adult in this boat, someone that's really never sailed before,

And if your local club is also racing the boat, it's not going to be hard to get involved. The platform is so flexible, you can get people together who wouldn't normally be in the same boat or on the same racecourse. Youth sailors, the guy who owns a Melges 32; anybody can sail this boat. Clubs that want to bridge the gap between youth programmes and adult sailing, this boat seems to be fitting the bill.'

Fortunately, he adds, the boats are built to be 'used and abused in an institutional setting, with a ton of extra durability. Your average beginner running into the dock, it's not going to be a catastrophic thing.'

In Europe, boats are already sailing in Scandinavia, Portugal and Switzerland. Another container will soon double the Dublin fleet numbers and John Sheehy says a third is in the works. It's quite impressive growth from only a year ago, when he nervously rigged for the first time. 'No one had ever even seen one and I'd

persuaded everyone! But as soon as they sailed the boat, I mean, in anything over 10 knots, it's a game changer. Now I

keep saying to myself, "Imagine if this was your first experience of sailing; you pull one rope, and the spinnaker goes up..." "

Boats sell themselves

Sheehy says the M15's stability was his biggest surprise. 'I'm six foot three, 87 kilos, and when I step aboard it doesn't tip. That gives me the confidence to push the boat as hard as I can downwind. I've had my eight-year-old trimming the kite at nine knots of boatspeed. And the other two, 12 and 10, we've done 14 knots together. From the beginner who can't believe the stability to the top racer who wants strict one design... when it's windy, we can all absolutely just let it rip! I'd like to say the success here in Ireland is all me, but the boat is the principal reason; you just put people in and it sells itself.'

'We love the boat and our grandchildren love it. It's easy to sail and so stable'



The Melges 15's winning combination of superb performance, high stability and excellent weight carrying ability allows a wide range of sailors to race against each other on an equal footing

Cox agrees. 'I always say to our dealers, if there's any wind during your demo, I guarantee you're going to sell boats as soon as people put the kite up for the first time. Downwind, the boat takes off and performs.' Excitingly fast but stable enough to feel comfortable in all conditions, that's why this new class is already attracting hundreds of sailors to its annual championships.

History repeating itself?

Anyone thinking the Melges 15 might just be a flash in the pan should consider the ongoing success of its patriarch, the Melges 24. More than three decades after winning *Sailing World's* Boat of the Year, there were close to 50 boats from 13 countries at the 2023 Melges 24 World Championship, sailed by a potent mix of professional and Corinthian sailors.

What's the secret to such impressive longevity? 'I think it's the support that we offer,' Cox says. 'If you need spare parts

or replacement rigging, we have it all in stock – and we'll ship it pretty much the same day. That's unheard of, at least in the US.'

Strong classes, of course, help to maintain used boat values. 'We just sold a new 24 to a gentleman in Chicago,' Cox continues. 'And he sold his old boat, which was from the early 2000s, for \$10,000 more than he purchased it new from us, back in the day! If a boat's taken care of and you can get new parts and equipment from us to keep boats fresh, they can last for a really long time.'

A lifetime of fun without leaving the family

With a third generation in charge at Melges Performance Sailboats, it's quite fitting that three generations now gather together at Melges 15 regattas. 'I think it really has everything to do with our company's culture of innovation,' Eddie Cox says. 'Harry III, I have to give him all

the credit; he really instils thinking outside the box, how we can advance the sport but also make it more accessible.'

And as their newest class grows, smart buyers will look to Melges family history for the comforting assurance that this design will also be around for a generation or three. 'The boats that we've had a lot of success with,' Cox points out, 'they've all been on the cutting edge. And I'd definitely put the Melges 15 in that category. There's a lot of doublehanded dinghies out there, but there's nothing that is a total package like the Melges 15.'

'By accident or design,' John Sheehy agrees, 'Melges has created a new class of boat: a double-handed performance dinghy that almost anyone can sail. Now we're looking at the forecast saying, "Hey, it's 25 knots gusting 30. Let's go!" As someone who loves sailing and growing the sport, it's nice to see that enthusiasm being transferred to the next generation.' www.melges.com □



Big fleets of Melges 15s are already established in both the US and Europe, and the class continues to grow rapidly