The Mini Transat race has been at the cutting edge of boat design since its inception in 1977. Peter K Poland discusses the influence the event’s ‘flying machines’ have exerted on ocean racers and modern production yachts alike.
within the budget of ‘ordinary’ sailors. Ignoring detractors and prophets of doom, he completed the inaugural race from the Penzance Sailing Club to Antigua in an Anderson 22. Having suffered rudder failure just outside English Harbour, drifted onto a reef, been towed clear and then sculled by Salmon across the line, Anderson Affair was the first British entry home.

Predictably, a large French contingent took part. Since Eric Tabarly had become a national hero after winning the second OSTAR in 1964, his countrymen took to long-distance solo sailing with a vengeance. It was no surprise, therefore, that the first Mini Transat was won by a Frenchman – Daniel Gilard in a Serpentaire class cruiser. Still with a hard chine plywood hull, the Gros Plant boasted many new features including a considerably wider stern. Jean-Luc Van Den Heede piloted one to second overall and designer Harlé took the helm of another, coming fourth. This race also saw Bénéteau enter the fray with a couple of modified First 22s. Further down the fleet, the Brit John Tomlinson put up a fine performance in a modified Julian Everitt-designed E-Boat, Smiling Tree. A slightly shortened stem, extra laminate, beefed-up rig and heavy-duty rudder were the main changes. John gave a lucid description of what it was like to undertake a Mini Transat in those early days, writing: ‘In the week before the start, the other boats begin to arrive. With only three main rules (the boats must be 6.5m maximum length, be self-righting and carry no more than six sails) there is a great diversity of designs, from Norton Smith’s American Express to Margaret Hicks’ Hurley 22. Anonymous Bay, with the E-Boat coming halfway along the scale in terms of speed and weight. ‘It is obvious that I am not going to win the race. Just one look at the assembled machinery makes that absolutely clear, but to do well amongst the production boats would be an achievement. We manage to pass scrutineering OK, which is more than can be said for some of the others. Smiling Tree is well prepared. There are one or two boats here that I wouldn’t take for a trip on the River Thames. It is difficult enough being only 6.5m long and having 4,000 miles of ocean in front of you: but to build and rig your chosen steed like an Osprey dinghy, as some of these guys have, is asking a bit too much of lady luck. You have to try to stack the cards in your favour, even if you don’t know how they will be dealt.’

He describes events shortly after the start, saying: ‘Enda O’Coineen is just behind me in the Limbo 6.6 Kilcullen 2. The next day, in light winds, I cross tacks with Bob
Salmon’s Anderson Adventurer, but he is not on deck so he does not see me. It is a good job someone is awake around here. ‘Middle of the night, October 6. The wind is up to full gale plus a bit, from the south. I have three reefs in the main and no jib on at all. Heading west at about four knots on the log, the noise down below is ear-splitting, with the flat-bottomed bow slamming into every breaking wave. I cannot sleep or cook any food. I am living on GORP (good old raisins and peanuts). It is very uncomfortable.’

Later, he writes: ‘A horrible black morning… squally, wet and windy. Then a real gale, then flat calm again. Very frustrating, and not much progress. Changing rig continuously all day. Up spinnaker. Only for a few hours, though. Drop the kite, sheets in again. So it goes on, day after day. Feeling a need now for fellow human beings.’

Then, approaching Tenerife: ‘I have to scull the last two miles in the dark. Elapsed time is 16 days, 12 hours, 42 minutes. Too long, really: however, only 12 boats are in before me so I am not the slowest. American Express arrived first, nearly four days ago, followed by a bunch of the French boys.’

From Tenerife to Antigua, John took 25 days. He writes: ‘I am just a few short steps from my first Planters Punch. A lot of the other boats are in and the welcome is beautiful. I only manage to finish 19th on this leg but hold my 13th place overall, which is about fourth production boat. I feel quite pleased with myself. I have sailed over 4,200 miles, single-handed, in an overgrown Enterprise dinghy, at an average speed of just under 5 knots – and that’s not slow by any standards. All of which sums up the highs and lows of Mini Transat racing.

Exciting innovations
In the next Mini Transat (1981), Brian Sanders took Smiling Tree (renamed Age of Steam) on a second successful jaunt, joined by Ian McDonald who raced another E-Boat called Ocean Delivery across. And this was no mean feat, because cyclone Irene wreaked havoc on the first leg of the race, with only 13 of the 29 entries completing the course. The overall winner was a prototype designed by the young Jean Berret.

In 1985, the French took over the race. Founder Bob Salmon had followed his dreams and – against all the odds – established an event that had become a success. But now he felt it was time to hand over the reins, and journalist Jean-Luc Garnier set about convincing the establishment that the event was well founded. He obtained the support of the town of Brest, and the Mini Transat rules became tighter – including ‘unsinkability’ and specifying compulsory safety equipment. Yves Parlier won overall, becoming the first sailor to use a carbon mast: an innovation that soon became commonplace on leading race boats around the world.

The 1987 event saw another breakthrough. Coming second overall and first production boat, the new Harlé-designed Coco class, sailed by the great Laurent Bourgnon, had a pronounced rounded bow.

Since the very first Mini Transat in 1977, many of the boats had adaptations that were way ahead of the times. This largely trade wind race encouraged the use of features such as twin rudders, twin daggerboards and movable ballast. In 1991 Michel Desjoyeaux pioneered the use of asymmetric spinnakers set on a long bowsprit on a Faouroux-designed Mini that also featured a canting keel and pivoting carbon mast.

However, the 6.50 class now realised that there was a risk attached to all these exciting yet high-cost innovations. There was a chance that the boats could become so expensive that ‘normal’ sailors would become excluded, so the Minis were divided into Prototype (Protos) and Production (Series) classes. The Protos are custom-built while the Series class is for production boats, featuring a simpler ‘box rule’ that stipulates alloy spars, GRP or wood (no carbon) construction, fixed keels, less draught and shorter rigs etc. Put simply, the Protos now represent the cutting edge of innovation while the Series boats have wider appeal. Indeed, there are now several new Series designs that are not only much cheaper than Protos but also boast desirable modern design features – and several of these boats give the exotic Protos a real run for their money.

Adventure and intensity
So, are any Brits making names for themselves in these remarkable little yachts these days? The two most famous in recent years have both been female. Back in 1997, a very young Ellen MacArthur took her first step on the ladder of international solo-sailing fame by coming a creditable 17th in a Mini called Le Poisson that she bought second-hand then refitted herself.

In 1999, Nikki Curwen developed from a Mini Transat 6.50 racer Yaka 650, an example of a neat twin-keel French cruiser. A recent arrival, the British sailor Nikki Curwen and her Proto Mini 650

The Yaka 650, an example of a neat twin-keel French cruiser developed from a Mini Transat 6.50 racer.
in a French boatyard, later saying: ‘It is this race that gave me the taste for offshore racing. I will never forget it.’ Then in the 2001 edition Sam Davies came 11th, saying: ‘This is a very difficult race, but it is awesome. The atmosphere and the spirit of this race really made a deep impression on me. Even if you’re a foreigner, everyone helps you and everyone supports everyone. We all share the same wish and the same motivation.’

In the 2015 race, two more British women joined the fray. Nikki Curwen, 27, is a ‘chip off the old block’ Mini sailor: her father Simon finished second overall in the 2001 race. She entered her Go Ape! Live Life Adventurously 10-year-old Pogo 2, Hudson Wight and lived in her van (and the boat) to train with Lorient Grand Large and the Artemis Offshore Academy really to hone her solo sailing skills in France. ‘I love Mini racing because it’s so pure. We have the bare basics for communication and navigation – just a radio and a GPS, with no cartography allowed. This means you have to plan well for the offshore races, creating quick reference cards and lots of waypoints to minimise the amount of chartwork during the race. ‘The solitude is a challenge at first, but I’m now accustomed to spending 10 days or more at sea without making any contact with land or other boats. Heavily over-canvassed, Minis surf like skiffs and require constant attention to stay upright! Less adventurous sailors who like speed should try a Mini – you don’t need to cross the Atlantic solo to enjoy one. They are easily manoeuvrable with an outboard engine, the sails are light and can be carried around on board and ashore by one person, the boat can be towed… I can’t really think of any boat more fun than a Mini for a weekend blast on the water.’

**Massive changes**

To get an idea of what goes into a modern Mini, I spoke to designer Simon Rogers. He has made a name for himself on the Mini, Class 40 and fast superyacht circuits. ‘Proto Minis,’ he said, ‘are like rally cars. Fast, rugged yet light. On the top Protos, scantlings can be so light that only tightly-weave carbon fibre keeps the water out. Designers have free rein with Protos and can try just about anything: canting keels, daggerboards, foils, square-topped mainsails et al. Minis have also brought massive changes to power generating with improved solar panels and batteries. This is essential for autopilots that become ever more sophisticated and effective.’

French makers NKE and British B&G seem to lead the field at this level of high-speed sailing. Sophisticated modern autopilots have revolutionised solo racing. 2015 Mini Transat winner Frederic Dennis described night sailing in heavy winds: ‘I went upstream of the fleet, which was a lot of work for the autopilot (NKE). At that time, the autopilot was better at the helm than me, handling the power and acceleration of the boat. I really increased the gap in the race.’ And that’s how you win. Simon Rogers is also impressed by the latest ‘scow bows’ and fuller forward sections, saying: ‘Short fat hulls tend to stand on their diagonal and bury the bow.'
Fuller and “scow bows” put volume forward and move the bow waterplane further outboard, making the boat more stable and level fore and aft. They are also good upwind because the waterplane moves out and the bow doesn’t bury. Off the wind they generate extra lift and earlier planing. They also add greatly to interior volume.’

David Raison’s ‘scow-bowed’ Magnum set the cat amongst the pigeons on the 2011 Mini Transat. His logic was that width added to the stern gives more power; so why not at the bow as well? When heeled, the hull retains the same immersed profile, the bow doesn’t dig in and wetted area is reduced. His computer models showed that the concept worked better than traditional lines on all points of sailing. The proof of the pudding?

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