

The Heart Still Thumps

The 28-year-old Cherub class still wins a lot of affection from the teenage yachtsmen who pass through its ranks.

By Robert Keeley

As published in Australian Sailing magazine, April 1981

At a Victorian One-of-a-Kind Regatta in 1972 I saw a Hobie cat sail 20 yards up the beach and catapult its crew another ten yards onto the sand. It was gusting to 60 knots at the time and the big cat was one of several boats careening out of control around the Bay. Minutes later a Kitty Cat nosedived into a sea, snapped in two, and surfaced as two monohulls. But for spectator value nothing beat the Cherub; it took to the air. As it entered Mornington Harbour, where the yardstick regatta was being decimated by the weather, the Cherub took a freak gust under the bow. On a broad reach, with its crew full out on trapeze, the entire boat was lifted out of the water, with only a few inches of its rudder and centreboard still in contact. It flew for about a boatlength, crashed back into the water - unbelievably, still upright - and disappeared in a cloud of spray towards the beach.

The spectators who witnessed the incident from the nearby clubhouse didn't have a camera between them, a pity as a picture taken at that instant would have sold more Cherubs than years of work by publicity officers. The incident sold me; I bought a Cherub the next season and have sailed them since.

The Cherub is an excellent training boat for intermediates (sailors like Iain Murray have passed through its ranks) but it's also exciting to sail. With a high aspect ratio rig



Phil Smith (left) and Vicki Weeks, Australian champion crew, with their simply planned boat.



Australian champion Wop on Georges River home waters.

and 110 sq ft of sail, it's one of the fastest 12ft dinghies around. While a lot of bigger boats are faster than the Cherub, few give the same sensation of speed. In the era of one designs, it gives young sailors a chance to learn about all facets of sailing, from hull design and rig setup to good boat handling, all at reasonable cost.

In 1951 New Zealander John

Spencer was a teenager studying architecture in Auckland and sailed in a local development class called the Pennant. After winning the 1950/51 class championship in a 10ft 6in planked hard-chine dinghy, he decided to modify the design and built a 12ft plywood boat. When he put the boat on the water the following season he cleaned up. A story about the dinghy appeared in New Zealand's Sea Spray magazine, and the editor asked permission to sell the plans. Spencer redrew them to make them suitable for amateur construction, named his prototype Cherub and made the plans available.

The first New Zealand national championship was held in 1955 and the class spread to England in 1960, before its Australian debut in Perth in 1961. An International Association was formed in 1968 and the first world titles were held in Perth two years later. Appropriately the series was won by Russell Bowler, a New Zealander living in Perth.

World championships have been held every two years since and Australians have had their share of success. In 1974 Mandy Wilmot of Sydney won and in 1976 her rival Nicky Bethwaite took it out. Both have now moved on from Cherubs but they left behind a healthy respect for female Cherub sailors. The last Worlds were in England, and the next are scheduled for Australia in 1983.

Australian designs have gained great popularity. When the boat first came out and for years after most people relied on Spencer designs. West Australians were the first to experiment with their hulls because they wanted something more suitable for the flat, wind-blown waters of the Swan River. Sydney designers soon branched out on their own and the development era began.



Starting line scramble in a national title heat.

In the early Seventies a Queensland design known as *Vitamin C* became popular. It had straight lines, a small amount of vee and a fairly full bow. Then from 1973 Frank Bethwaite designs (sailed very successfully by his daughter) dominated the class. In 1976 15-year old Greg Hyde sailed a boat designed by former class champion Iain

Murray at the national titles in Brisbane. He won well, and most boats today are Murray hulls, or derivatives of them. But there's still room for individuals to try their hand, *Wop*, the current national champion sailed by Phil Smith and Vicki Weeks, is loosely based on the Bethwaite design.

Wop sails from Sydney's George's River Club on Botany Bay. It was designed by Phil Smith's brother, and incorporated a lot of Phil's ideas. Smith started in Cherubs in 1977 after buying *Nix*, the boat with which Nicky Bethwaite won the Worlds and the nationals. His first season started disastrously. Sailing with his brother he finished well back in the nationals. They split up and he teamed with Vicki Weeks for the rest of the season. At Burraneer Bay Club Vicki had been club champion in Manly Juniors and VJs. They finished eighth in the 1978 state titles. Smith took *Nix* to Tasmania for the 78/79 nationals and went into the last heat with a chance of winning the series, but they capsized badly in heavy seas, finishing 19th in the last heat and fifth overall. They won the NSW titles, then sold *Nix*.

Phil continues. "Next season was the 79/80 Olympic year and Vicki and I sailed my 470 through to the Australian titles and Olympic Trials. We came 14th and 18th respectively. We were mainly there for experience and it was well worth it, because we learnt a hell of a lot.

"That season we borrowed a friend's Cherub and went down to Melbourne for the nationals. The transom fell off the boat halfway through the series and we managed sixth place."

Smith and Weeks decided then to go to the Worlds in England in August 1980. "Since I had sold *Nix* we asked my brother to design us a new boat, which we managed to complete just before the state titles in Easter 1980. "They were screwing fittings on half an hour before the first heat. Helped by a postponement due to light weather they made it to the starting line and won the first heat, beating the current national champion in the process. They went on to take out their second consecutive state title.



Smith believes that crew work is more important than hull design.

However they were headed for further frustration at the Worlds. They won two heats and never finished worse than third in any other heat except heat one, where they capsized badly and finished 18th. In heat four they were protested by the English national champion and had to drop a third, forcing them to carry their 18th. They finished fourth overall. When they returned to Sydney they decided to go to Perth for

the nationals. Disaster almost struck again when two WA boats protested that a race *Wop* won should be scrubbed. However the race committee rejected the protest and Smith and Weeks' overdue win was popular among their competitors. They're now moving into a fully sponsored 16ft skiff but plan to return to Cherubs in two seasons. The next Worlds will be in Australia, and they'd like to try their luck again.

Phil Smith's comments on Cherubs are worth noting: "I enjoy all aspects of sailing the Cherub. It has great speed and competition and leaves you with a good enough knowledge and boat handling skills to let you advance into Olympic or other classes with confidence. I feel you really need a good, quick-thinking crew on a Cherub if you're hoping to win.

"Hull design plays a small part in Cherub racing today. Most boats are Murray, Ferguson, Pearson or Bethwaite, or something very similar, and all perform fairly equally. Your crew work has to be spot on. So many races are lost by bad crew work. You must be able to tack, gybe, get spinnakers up and down or do any other manoeuvre easily and smoothly".

An example of the Cherub's appeal as an intermediate trainer comes from the latest club to take on Cherubs in Sydney, Pittwater's Bayview Yacht Racing Association. Two seasons ago the intermediate membership was looking for another class, a two-man dinghy which would give them a fast ride, plenty of room, and a tolerance for varying crew weights. According to club member Jeanette Shimeld, no pressure was applied by club authorities. Comparisons were made between Flying Elevens, VJs, 420s, 470s, Laser Its, Tasars, NS14s, and Cherubs. "They compared and contrasted the various class features, which is not often done when choices are being made," says Mrs. Shimeld. She claims that too many young sailors make their choice of class based on "hero worship, pot hunting or sentiment, and far too many are victims of high-pressure sales techniques and people with vested interests." The intermediate membership finally chose the Cherub. Mrs. Shimeld makes another point: "A major criticism of Cherubs from many people concerns obsolescence, because they're a development class. There are still very strict limitations on what can be done, the rules regarding safety are very strict, and the minor adjustments that can be made are useful devices for teaching young people what makes their boats tick."

Reproduced with the kind permission of *Australian Sailing* magazine
www.yaffa.com.au/mags/aslmag.htm