

Outa Sight

The parent who has tried sailing in all its forms uncovers an exciting dimension.

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Looking good but a long way back at the 2000 nationals in Melbourne (Shane Barker picture).

Over the years I have been accused of being somewhat taciturn, perhaps even uncommunicative but I had nothing to say. Now I have something to say. I have seen the light. I have discovered something about sailing I had forgotten. It's exhilarating- Not challenging, or technical, or relaxing, or nice. It's in your face, over the top, extreme, or as I said - exhilarating.

This will come as no surprise to a few of you but I notice that those of you who really know don't say much about it. I have my suspicions about the reasons for that but I will move on. I should provide some background by saying that I am not a young person; at 55 some may even consider me an old fogie. Although I don't encourage such thinking, there have been times over the last year or two when I would have agreed. But I digress, back to the past.

I started sailing in Middle Harbour, Sydney, in an unspeakable homemade dinghy when I was about seven. After a series of small boats, including a couple of skiffs named because of their nominal length in feet, I went racing in big boats with heavy weights on the bottom. Since my first boat in 19 something I have always owned, or had an interest in, at least one sailing boat and have spent most of my

leisure time floating around in various small craft.

After a number of years of racing and trying to work out why there needed to be the old rule, "hat happens, or is said, on the water stays on the water" when everyone was supposed to be having fun, I discovered the joys of cruising. Believe me, there is a lot to be said for gentle passages and snug anchorages in a well found yacht, it's just that they are almost as hard to find as racing skippers who play by Racing Rules 2 and 3. They both exist and they add immeasurably to the pleasure of boating but too frequently other factors interfere.

As age brought a semblance of maturity and a young son, I settled for pottering around in my beautiful old half tonner and introducing my son, to the joys of sailing a dinghy. Now, Son, I'll call him Son to protect the once innocent, has been on board boats all his life. Before he was able to crawl he would be deposited, carefully, onto the top of a spinnaker bag, or cushions, in the cockpit of whatever boat was around and things progressed front there. When he could stand he stood on the seat to helm the boat and gradually turned into a useful addition.

However, I was moulded by my father who held an unshakeable view that if you didn't learn to sail in a dinghy, you couldn't really sail. Who am I to argue with a man not around to defend his views? In any event Son went into a dinghy. He had sailed a Sabot-type tender around a bit but had not otherwise been exposed to boats that filled up, or fell over, if you did something wrong. A Flying 11 seemed like a nice little boat so at age eight, he and a mate of the same age started to race around Pittwater.

If there is anyone left who doesn't already know it, dinghies breed and one Flying 11 turned into another and another and so on. They are nice boats and boast a great fleet but they need good gear, the right weight and dedication if you want to do reasonably in competition. Son is dedicated, to anything and everything but to no one thing and his Flying 11 days were destroyed completely at age 15 when I came home with a Cherub.

The Cherub in question belonged to Julian O'Mahoney and was the last and modified version of what was already a fast boat. My idea was that Son, who weighed about 35 kilos wet and his school mate who grew from 100 cm to 180cm overnight and suddenly weighed about 80 kilos and did not fit into the front of a Flying 11 even folded up, would fit into the Cherub nicely.

The school mate didn't want to play, or he did but it was cricket or girls or something similar and Son didn't want to go down the "find another crew" path so well known to all small boat sailors. He had school, played a winter sport at reasonable level, didn't have time to train.

"It's OK," says I, much to the amusement of those around the (who knew it's had been more than 25 years since I been near a trapeze wire), "I'll sail on the front end and we'll see how it goes-" Well mostly it goes into the water, it goes into the water sideways, front ways, back ways and every- other ways, at slow speed, at high speed and at every in between speed. Son and I weighed about 109 kilos and that was not really enough, particularly when the boat was set up for Julian who a) knows what he is doing, b) is young and fit and c) weighs a lot more than us, probably on his own.

It was fun

But guess what? It was fun. This Cherub is the most amazing boat. Even with an inexperienced skipper and a silly old goat up front, it's amazing. The first time we went around the top mark, pulled the kite up and stayed flat, we could not believe it. The thing accelerated out from underneath us, literally. Well out from underneath the older member of the crew anyway, and we discovered a new way of swimming.

Likewise, first time we actually got it cooking upwind in a



September 1999, our first day at Lane Cove 12ft Skiff SC. It took ages to rig (now 20 minutes) and trepidation was high.



The hull weighs only 51 kg: hardly a handful off the beach.

breeze (which was after some pretty drastic rig softening) it flew. We played around in this machine for a season, developed great capsizing techniques and gradually improved our handling.

Sailing became a mixture of panic and wetness, fatigue and wetness and excitement (and wetness). On hard days I almost needed to be lifted bodily onto the rigging area, on light days it was often difficult to extricate myself from the places the skipper demanded I burrowed myself. I confirmed an uncharitable view I had formed previously about trapeze harnesses, but always I was ready and raring to go by the next week's race.

New Season Mast

Winter came, Son went off and did whatever it is he does during winter and I hibernated. As usual, winter went away. Family meeting. Son says he does not want the responsibility of a regular crew in case he needs to apply himself to his studies on anything else that takes his fancy. Secretly, I think he is being nice to me and I agree to try again.

The good news is Son, now 16, has put on a number of centimetres and kilos. Between us, we now have about 117 kilos and at least have some idea of what we are in for.



By the 2000 nationals at Sail Melbourne. the buzz was certainly there if not the results (Baker picture).

What a blast. We don't do anything well but we do everything better. We cannot really sail the thing - nothing like the crews at the front of the fleet who are good and sadly, we don't do the boat justice. But we can stay up and get around the course most times and if we are not in survival mode (over 18-20 knots) we can fly. These things accelerate like no other boat I've been on and once on the plane, they don't reach planing speed and settle. If there's breeze enough, they just keep going faster and faster.

How is that I'm out there with me son, trying to stay on the trapeze while the boat skitters its way down wind, jamming myself in the most unlikely places to see if it will go faster, we are shouting and yahooing together like a couple of crazies? Note that, TOGETHER! Not at each other, well mostly not. We're sharing all the disasters and rides, disappointments and thrills and that is really something. All it takes is 12 foot of Cherub and a bit of attitude.

The point of all this? There's still hard core exhilaration to be had out there. Skiffs or dinghies, or toy boats as some people call them, are the thing. The Cherub is fantastic for thrills, probably because it's a bit short one end and there's a terrific, talented bunch of (mostly) young adults and no "ambitious parents" involved, but anything of the sort will do.

There are a lot of good boats around and you can get into some quite cheaply. The last time I looked at the second-hand boat list on the web you could buy a race-able Cherub for around \$2,000 and I am sure it would be similar in the other classes. If you're missing the buzz, from sailing and are not frightened of looking daft and getting a bit wet and sore, the rewards are still there to be experienced. For me, being lucky enough to be able to do it with someone I respect as a skipper (or crew) who is also my son is the icing. But the cake is getting out and ripping in a demanding boat that can make you scream and cry and laugh out loud.