

Building A Dream



An experienced sailor's quest to build his dream cruising catamaran

By Mark Thornburrow

I grew up in Hong Kong. I began sailing at the age of seven and have been a member of the Hebe Haven Yacht Club for as long as I can remember. Sailing is my life-long passion. I have been active in Asian and Australian sailboat racing circles for several decades. I have owned and raced Lasers, 505s, Etchells, Peterson 30s, a Farr 36 and a Taswell 49. I've competed at the World Championship level in both the 505 and Etchells Classes. When *Multihulls Quarterly* asked me to write this piece, I was in England competing in the Etchells National Championships.

So what, you may ask, has any of this monohull racing got to do with catamarans? You'd think I was some died-in-the-wool single-huller. I was, but at the Commodore's Cup, Cowes 2008, I was at the dock talking to Laurence Mead about fast cruising monohulls when he suggested a cat. He said he had chartered one and for cruising he liked it much better than monohulls. I took his advice and never looked back. When it comes to cruising, anyone who has a sherd of experience realizes very quickly that catamarans are far superior to monohulls—the guests are happier and less seasick, the sleeping at night is nicer, the spaces are

more open and fun for living. My wife Bolin and our girls would never consider cruising on anything but a catamaran, anyway, so there you have it.

My first big cruising cat was a Catana 471, which I bought in Tonga from Phil Berman and The Multihull Company many years ago. She was my introduction to catamaran voyaging and we enjoyed sailing on her in the waters of Tonga, Vanuatu, Australia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Bolin and I cruised her at least 10,000 miles and came to understand catamaran voyaging pretty well. We also came to understand what we liked and did not like about the 471, and what we liked and did not like about her systems and her living arrangements. When we finally sold the boat a few years ago, I promised Bolin two years ashore before we set out again. We decided to get a new cat for my retirement so I set about shopping all over the world to see which models or brands suited me best.

THE PARAMETERS

For starters, I ruled out all of the production charter cats, not because I didn't see the virtue in them for many, but simply because I actually happen to love to sail. I want a boat that brings me pleasure at the helm, that can turn good speeds, offer some excitement and that shorten long passages while increasing our safety when voyaging. That narrowed down the market very fast and left me with Catana, Outremer and Gunboat among production builders and a few other very small custom builders.

During this time Phil Berman began to design the Balance 526 with Anton Du Toit and had settled on working with Jonathan and Roger Paarman at Nexus



the design regardless of whether I bought one or not.

The design brief was impressive and ticked most of my boxes. It was clear that Berman and Dutoit had spent hundreds of hours to design what they felt was the ultimate blue-water performance cat.

THE BOAT

Yachts in St. Francis Bay, South Africa, to build them. Initially, like most people, I thought that as much as I like Phil and know him to be plain dealing, why risk it with a new design and hull number one of a new build? This was a lot of money to place at risk.

Phil, of course, is a passionate and persistent guy and insisted I examine the design brief for the 526. He said that regardless of whether I ordered a boat or not he was deeply interested in my take on what they were doing and he felt that my input would improve



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how good products come to life and, sadly, how bad ones come to life, too. One of the first lessons is that there must be a team leader who is relentless about quality and willing to get dirty in the process of securing it. Jonathan Paarman, a very soft spoken man, is on the shop floor all day long. He is not a micro manager, per se, but a passionate teacher, leader, and craftsman who communicates his pride quietly and carefully to his

I wanted something a good bit faster than my Catana 471 and more comfortable all around in terms of size and features. I also preferred an epoxy-carbon reinforced hull, but wasn't sure it was worth the extra expense. I suppose my greatest concern initially, from a design standpoint, was Phil's concept of the "Versahelm". This invention allows the steering wheel to pivot from its standard position upright at the usual helm to a horizontal position in the cockpit where the on watch is protected from the elements but can still see forward through the saloon windows.

As a warm water sailor, I never felt the need to pilot my boat with any sort of protection from the elements. I sail in hot sunny places and don't mind reefing in a warm tropical squall and actually enjoy being roughed up a bit from time to time. Phil insisted that I would benefit from this feature regardless and on long passages my wife could stand watch down below. If I ever did run into cold weather, he promised me that I'd come to thank him for it.

The other initial concern, of course, was the quality of the build. After a bit of research I came to learn that Jonathan Paarman, founder of Nexus Catamarans, was truly a master catamaran builder with a solid reputation and that ordering a new Balance 526 was not like ordering a boat from some upstart operation.

I had already visited the French yards and had a good idea of their quality, so the last step was for me to visit Nexus. Phil assured me that as soon as I met their team and saw one of their most recent 60's that I would instantly see that their quality for price was superior to anything else on the market. That, more or less, is what happened. I flew to St. Francis, met with Jonathan and Roger and the entire build team and saw that they were artisan boat builders, heavily focused on quality and driven by a level of pride that is uncommon today.

As a man who has been in manufacturing all of my life in China, both in sail making and a range of commercial products, I have learned a great deal about

workers. He commands respect and his workers are deeply loyal to him. He also lets them off a bit early when the surf is up, I've learned, since St. Francis Bay is one of the world's top surfing spots!

In the end, the thing that most influenced my decision to order a new Balance 526 was the willingness of the design and build team to work with me to build my dream boat. They respected my experience, my background and felt I was an asset to their team. If there was a good idea to be had, they were all ears. The Balance team in South Africa includes a lot of very experienced team members, all specialized in their own areas.

Roger Paarman has been fantastic to deal with as the point man for all communications, letting me know what is possible and what is not and working with



the team to solve issues and improve systems. Anton Du Toit has a lifetime of design and real world sailing experience and is both a very creative designer and a practical seaman who knows what works offshore. Jonathan Paarman has a lifetime of boat building and offshore sailing experience and has been building high tech composite boats for 20 years. Phil Berman has a combination of racing and voyaging experience and has all the insights he has gained from selling hundreds of catamarans. We all worked well together toward our common goal of building the best performance

cruising cat as possible. Jonathan will continue to give me hell for demanding the “aircraft carrier windlass” I picked out, a 90-pound anchor and too much chain, but he smiles and recognizes that this is what allows me to sleep soundly at night.

THE BUILD

Like so many people, I really did not want to get the first boat in this new 526 series, so I ordered the second. Berman and Nexus were building the first boat for themselves, at their cost, which was later sold half-way through her build process. I benefited greatly for being able to see her come together on the many visits I made to the factory. I was able to see my hulls and deck and boat come to life, while the number one was much further along. These visits proved to be enormously beneficial to me as it enabled me to tweak my boat to our exact taste. The amazing thing about number one is that the design process was so careful and Jonathan so painstaking that she came



out fabulously in nearly every respect. But give a guy like me a chance to tweak and refine and watch out!

As I watched hull number one come together on my visits, I took pictures, felt the spaces, and shared them with my wife. We had a chance to design the interior of our boat to our tastes and needs. My wife's input was vital as she knows exactly how she likes the seating, the galley, and the overall flow of the interior. Phil himself does not believe in a nav stations as he feels they are

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I have no issues with conventional reefing myself and much prefer it's simplicity and reliability, so my deck plan was laid out in the traditional way. I am told that the very experienced buyer for hull number three, who sails often in Maine and other cold places, has oriented himself at the down helm station! The fact is, on the 526 you can have the helm up only, down only

or up and down with the Versahelm design. This third option is, in fact, a very intriguing feature of the design and I confess that after my initial worries it turned out fantastically.

anachronistic in the age of the chartplotter or multi-function displays. He prefers a dedicated office space, instead. But, I am a bit more traditional so I turned my office back into a nav area. I discussed all this with Jonathan and Anton and we came up with tweaks to my boat's interior to satisfy both my wife and myself. Fortunately, at this stage, each and every piece of furniture in the boat is hand-made, custom, to taste, both in design and finish. By being able to walk through both number one and my own boat as she came together, I was able to get just exactly what we wanted.

One thing I loved on the number one was the gorgeous carbon fiber mast from Southern Spars, so I upgraded to that. I also ordered the finest performance cruising sails I could find from Ullman Sails in Cape Town.

The other big thing for me was my warm water orientation and desire to really sail the boat a lot, often shorthanded. I wanted to orient all of my halyards, sheets, and reefing lines to the up helm station. On hull number one, the customer had the boat designed to manage the mainsheet both up and down, and he wanted an electric in-boom furling system.

When you voyage a lot and live on your boat, you learn how you use the boat, what you love, and what drives you crazy. This experience gave us the ability to co-design our electrical system and to specify the equipment we wanted to a very deep level of detail. This is a massive benefit of building a semi-custom boat with a very experienced team. I like to sail to and cruise in remote places so I value simplicity, efficiency and being self sufficient.

I loaded my boat with solar panels and elected to have a lithium ion battery system. I also wanted to avoid the weight and complexity of a generator but we were determined to have air conditioning. So, I set up the air conditioning system so it could run for short periods at night when needed at anchor or cycle it briefly to remove humidity in cabins. Of course, we have unlimited cooling when plugged into shore power when dockside.

Being able to work hand in hand with Struan Butler, the electrician who designs and installs the wiring and systems for Balance, was a huge plus for a person like me. We discussed what I was trying to do and batted ideas back and forth until we agreed on the right



Photo courtesy Billy Black



Photo courtesy Billy Black

I suspect that most of the people who will order a Balance Cat are bit like me to the extent that they are not buying their first boat, but are probably on their third or fourth large boat. They are people who have real offshore experience and who are looking for a level of quality, performance and customization that can only be achieved by working with a small, boutique builder. I can certainly say that, for myself, it has been a privilege to work so

approach. This is critical, of course, because the wiring system and design have to be carefully coordinated in every respect to achieve the aims of the end user.

After you get the deck plan just as you want it, and the electronics as you want it, you enter the fun part—you and your wife get to pick out the color and type of flooring, the color and choice of wood and finish and the fabrics for the saloon seats. On one level, it is a bit daunting to have to make all of these choices, and Balance has plenty of planned interiors a person can pick from. But the privilege to make all of our own choices was really something Bolin and I wanted.

closely with Anton, Jonathan, Roger and Phil to build my dream boat. Within a few months my wife Bolin and I will be on the water in Cape Town, ready to begin a retirement of adventuring on the high seas. First stop, St. Helena, then the Caribbean, and then.....who knows. After so many years of living by a clock and obligations of some sort it is time to let the wind and weather drive our fate. ■

Mark Thornburrow is a lifetime sailboat racer, sail designer, and owns a manufacturing company in China that builds a range of products for export.



Photo courtesy Billy Black