Sailing

By John Kretschmer

Tartan 34

This classic earns enduring respect with its sailing qualities and S&S pedigree

Classic is a wonderfully subjective term when used to define sailboats, especially fiberglass boats. What separates a classic from just another successful production boat? Ask 20 sailors and you'll likely receive 20 different answers. Fearless correspondent that I am, let me roll up my pants, flip off my flip-flops and wade into this debate.

My version of a classic fiberglass sailboat includes a distinctive design that ages gracefully, one that can't be classified as typical of a certain period but instead helps define that period and somehow transcends it. A classic must be well engineered and solidly built, it should represent the best construction ethos of its day. As a fiberglass boat, it needs to have had a long and successful production run and a faithful ongoing following. Most importantly, it must be well proven within its design parameters. The Valiant 40 was designed to cross oceans, and it certainly has crossed oceans. The tough and fast J/35 still wins races, and the Ensign, an enduring, affordable daysailer, introduced thousands to the magic of sailing. These are very different boats yet all classics. What about the Tartan 34?

Designed by Sparkman & Stephens in 1967, the T34 went into production the next year and by the time the molds were pushed out into the parking lot 10 years later, 525 boats had been launched. The keel centerboard hull design capitalized on the quirks of the old CCA rule and also afforded shallow water sailors a high quality, big boat option that performed well in a variety of conditions. Douglas and McLeod Plastics, and later when the company evolved into Tartan Marine, did, for the most part, an excellent job building the 34. The majority of boats built are still sailing. And, as I gaze down the canal at a nearby 1970 Tartan 34, it is clear that the boat has aged very well indeed. The Tartan 34 has the earmarks of a classic, hence the C you'll often see after the 34. This not only differentiates between the updated 34 introduced in 1985, but also implies a certain, well-earned status.

First impressions

I just returned from a little jaunt in my kayak to register my first impression of the Tartan 34, for the umpteenth time. The boat has a springy sheer, a rakish entry and a jaunty stern. Yes, the result is a stubby LWL of 25 feet but it sure looks nice, the way those of us who discovered sailing in the 1960s and 1970s think a boat should look. The trunkhouse is a bit boxy, especially forward, yet it's somehow distinguished. There is no gimmickry in this design, and students of S&S's early fiberglass period will recognize the pedigree. Olin Stephens, in his design comments noted, "There is nothing outstanding or unusual about it; everything just seemed to work well." The coaming boards add a nice visual touch although they do hit you right in the small of the back when seated in the cockpit; ah, details.

Below the waterline the 34 features a long, shallow, swept-back fin keel with a centerboard. The story goes that the hull shape was inspired by the S&S America's Cup contender *Intrepid*. The rudder is fairly well aft and skeg hung. The board up draft is just 3 feet, 11 inches. Displacement is a moderate 11,200 pounds, slightly less than the Morgan 34 and Ericson 35, comparable boats of the day, and the 5,000 pounds of internal ballast corresponds to a 44-percent ballast-displacement ratio. The short waterline produces a displacement-length ratio of 320. Before you scoff, consider that the Tartan 34 was a class winner of the 1968 SORC and other early boats captured the Port Huron-Mackinac race and the Marblehead to Halifax race. The 34 was a thoroughbred in its day and even by way of comparison still performs adequately, especially off the wind. The PHRF rating is around 189.

Construction

The hull is solid fiberglass and the deck is balsa or plywood cored. Later Tartans, like the 37 and 41, also used cored hulls. The hull is sturdy, to say the least—a result of the fiberglass construction philosophy that insisted thickness does matter. The layup was not sophisticated and the hulls were resin rich, but there is no disputing that they have held up very well over the years. The hull and deck are joined on an inward flange, bedded and bolted through the teak toerail.

The lead ballast is internal, placed in the keel cavity and fiberglassed over. The rudder is fiberglass over foam. The teak-faced bulkheads and furniture facings are tabbed to the hull and few structural issues have been reported. The mast is keel stepped. There is a lot of teak on deck, and depending on the level of maintenance, this can greatly influence the appearance of an old 34.

What to look for

During the seven years I have been writing the Used Boat Notebook I have corresponded with many different owners and owners' associations. The Tartan 34 Association ranks near the top when it comes to providing honest information for prospective buyers and its new Web site, which can be accessed through **www.tartanowners.org**, is excellent. One of the articles that you can download is written by Jack Waddell, who sails hull No. 215 *Vixen Hull*. Waddell lists several common problem areas to be aware of when purchasing a 34.

He noted the centerboard pivot and lever should be checked carefully when the boat is on the hard, there is an access plate on the side of the keel. Over the years these parts wear, making it difficult to raise and lower the board. The 34 centerboard is unique in that it can be locked in position at whatever depth you desire; a great trim feature, although some argue that the board should either be completely up or down only. A locking board also eliminates the kick up action during a grounding, and can result in board or keel damage.

The second issue Waddell notes is subdeck delamination. This certainly is not a problem unique to Tartan, many early glass boats with balsa and plywood cores have the same problem. Be sure to sound the decks carefully. Severe delamination will be apparent just from walking around, the decks will feel spongy and creaky. Typical problem areas are around the chainplates, stanchion bases, grab rails, etc. Waddell points out that the spot where the forward edge of the coachroof meets the deck is particularly prone to gelcoat crazing and delamination. What's the cure for deck delamination? If it is minor, it's

probably best not worry about it, just make sure any suspect deck fittings are well bedded to prevent any further water penetration. If it is major, it's a big job to tear out the core from below and replace it. Look at other 34s first before tackling this job.

Water intrusion in the foam rudder is a common problem as is excessive wear on the lower rudder bearing, so both items should be checked. On the earliest boats the original through-hull fittings were gate valves. These boats also incorporated brass pipes with nipple valves as well. The cockpit scuppers are solid pipes that exit just above the waterline, a bad arrangement. Almost all boats now have seacocks, but if this upgrade hasn't been done, do it immediately. Leaks in the aluminum fuel and fiberglass water tanks are also potential problems. Fortunately the tanks are easy to get to under the port and starboard settees, making repairs or replacement possible without major surgery to the interior.

On deck

While in many ways the 34 is a small boat, certainly by modern standards, the 9-foot, 3-inch-long cockpit is quite spacious and arguably the boat's best feature. Tiller steering was standard and is still common although many boats also came from the factory with wheel steering or have been converted. Tillers leave the cockpit less cluttered and feel good under sail. If the boat has a pedestal and wheel, it is quite far forward, which allows the helmsman to tuck under the dodger.

Winch islands to port and starboard are well placed for shorthanded sailing, making the 34 easily handled alone or by a couple. A substantial bridgedeck keeps green water from sloshing below and there is a lazarette seat inside the aft coaming. Early boats led the mainsheet aft, an inefficient and cumbersome arrangement that also served to crowd the helmsman. Most 34s have refitted a traveler just aft of the bridgedeck. This became a standard arrangement when the boom was shortened slightly in the early 1970s to make the boat rate better under the emerging IOR rule. Ironically, while the loss of a small amount of sail area doesn't help the 34's light-air performance, shortening the boom did relieve the excessive weather helm. A roller-reefing boom was also standard, although you'll likely find most 34s with some version of slab reefing.

The side decks are wide and easy to navigate. Grabrails along the coachroof are well placed. The single spreader mast has an air draft of just under 45 feet. The narrow 10-foot, 2-inch beam allows for tight sheeting angles when beating. Deck fittings were typical of the period, with some being chrome. However, most have been replaced with stainless.

Down below

Typical of 1960s era boats, there is not a lot of elbow room down below. Still, not everybody wants a boat with two double cabins and a stall shower. The Tartan 34 interior is functional and includes good sea berths and well-placed handholds. It also has a very classy aura with its teak finish. While the Tartan plaid cushions are like rings on a tree stump, accurately dating a boat, they're easy to change. The original cabin sole is cork, which provides good nonskid but also holds dirt. The small space is offset by a full 6 feet, 2 inches of headroom that is carried all the way into the forward cabin.

The interior plan includes a V-berth forward with a hanging locker to starboard and the head opposite. The saloon features opposing settees, each with a built-in lee board and a bulkhead mounted table. The starboard settee stretches under the bureau and the raised back support is not particularly comfortable. Although on some early boats the fuel tank was located under the cockpit sole, most 34s have a 26-gallon aluminum tank under the port settee. A 36-gallon fiberglass water tank is under the starboard settee. The port side settee is L-shaped and encloses the engine, which is positioned on the centerline. This added settee seems a bit misplaced but you can't beat the engine access.

The small galley is to starboard. A two-burner alcohol stove was standard, although many boats will have been upgraded to either a nonpressurized alcohol system or propane, and there is enough room to retrofit a small stove and oven. The icebox tucks up under the bridgedeck and has a handy access hatch in the cockpit. A small sink faces aft. The quarterberth to port is good sized and makes another sea berth as well. A fold-up countertop serves as the chart table, and the seat is the head of the quarterberth. A simple electrical panel is located nearby.

Engine

The original engine was the ever popular Atomic 4. Late in the production run a 25-horsepower Farymann diesel became an option but not a popular one. However, many boats have retrofitted diesels, which are safer, more fuel efficient and usually provide more punch. The Westerbeke 30 and Universal 25s are common replacements. Engine access beneath the L-shaped settee in the saloon is terrific.

Under way

The primary reason the Tartan 34 is considered a classic is because of the way it sails—the boat handles well in a variety of conditions. Although many of Olin Stephens' designs are known as demons to weather, the 34 also shines off the wind, a typical feature of centerboarders. The 34 is efficient downwind, with an optimum jib angle of 173 degrees, which is deeper than many modern fin keeled boats. The 34 is initially tender, especially when carrying an overlapping genoa, but as the wind pipes up she stiffens up. Like almost all boats, but especially of centerboarders, the 34 likes to sail on its feet.

Jim and Joanne Matthews sail their 1973 Tartan 34 *Heather* out of Pensacola on the Gulf Coast. Although they're in the market for a larger, liveaboard cruiser, they just can't part with their beloved 34.

"This boat has just been a joy to own," Joanne said. "And Jim has finally repaired or replaced everything." The Matthews casually race *Heather* but really enjoy the boat for cruises that can last up to a couple weeks. "We are very comfortable aboard, although I would like a little more room in the galley."

Jim said that he usually ties in the first reef in the main at around 15 knots while carrying on with full 135-percent furling genoa. When the wind tops 22 knots, the second reef balances the boat nicely and a large headsail can still be carried. He also said that keeping the centerboard down reduces weather helm. "Power reaching in 15 knots, we'll easily do 6.5 knots," said Joanne, who helms when racing. "And we have occasionally topped 7."

Conclusion

With prices ranging from $20,000 to $35,000, the Tartan 34 is an excellent value on the used boat market. And the boat does hold its value. The original owner of *Heather* bought the boat new in 1973 at the New York Boat Show for $23,000. The Matthews bought the boat in 1993, 20 years later, for $23,000. And if they sold her today, they'd likely get somewhere around $23,000. Besides, at any price, how often can you own a classic?

Techline

SAILING Magazine's Value Guide

Tartan 34

(5-sailboat rating system)

PRICE: The Tartan 34, like many quality boats of this era, has become very affordable. Compare what $25,000 buys in a newer boat.

DESIGN QUALITY: A venerable and versatile S&S design, the 34 sails well off the wind and is a proven overall performer. The centerboard opens up thin water areas off limits to deeper draft boats.

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY: Tartan did a good job building the 34, however, certain features have not aged well. Balsa cored decks are a potential problem and in some cases materials used were not the best.

USER-FRIENDLINESS: An easy boat to handle under sail, good for singlehanding. Best when sailed flat. The interior is not overly comfortable and unless extensively updated, some of the systems can be very old.

SAFETY: There are handholds above and below, wide side decks and good sea berths. The boat does however, heel early and as a shoal-draft centerboarder, it has a relatively high center of gravity. With that said, 34s have been all over the world.

TYPICAL CONDITION: For the most part, 34s have aged well, and seem to have been well cared for. However, some boats on the used market are now more than 35 years old, and that's an old boat no matter how you slice it.

REFITTING: Although tight quarters make some retrofit projects difficult, there is great engine and tank access, two of the most onerous tasks to deal with during a retrofit.

SUPPORT: The 34 has a devoted following and active owners' association. Track them down at **www.tartanowners.org**. Ideas and advice for repairs and upgrades are posted and class President Deane Holt will direct your query to a knowledgeable source.

AVAILABILITY: With more than 500 built there is always a good selection of 34s on the market. Best areas seem to be the Chesapeake and Great Lakes. A quick search on **www.yachtworld.com** turned up 13 boats for sail.

INVESTMENT AND RESALE: Owning an older boat can be costly, especially if you maintain it in good condition. Low initial cost softens the blow of spending money to keep the boat in top condition.

OVERALL 'SVG' RATING