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GRP Classic Series: Swan 431

English translation by Christian Blum and Lars Ström

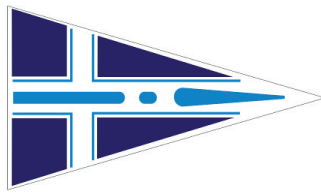
They are the veritable Rolls Royce on the water, the Swans of the Finnish luxury yard Nautor. Jan Kuffel sailed the Swan Baltics Sea Challenge on a Swan 431 and compares myth to reality.



The classic beautiful lines of the Swan 431 already fascinate at the pontoon. The proportions of the hull are accentuated by the dark-blue varnish

When in 1967¹ the Finns started to build GRP yachts in series close to the arctic circle, nobody thought that within a few years the arguably most famous and best series yachts of the world would be produced by that small yard. Already for the first Swan 36, the world-famous yacht designer Sparkman and Stephens (S&S) could be engaged. Their One-Tonner design was a resounding success and was built 90 times. Further S&S designs followed, and soon the products of the Nautor yard had an excellent reputation. Swans were seen as fast, perfectly built and sturdy. The boats were never cheap, but always the best money could buy. At the beginning of the seventies the style was created for which the yachts from Pietarsaari were known until the eighties. A low freeboard with the typical S&S decoration line, wedge-like coachroof with a blue stripe and the aluminum toe rail with round holes.

¹ Remark from the translator: the yard started in 1966



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The boats were always designed to suit the current version of the IOR rule, without however trying to run after short-lived trends; every new model could be recognized without doubt as a Swan. The construction methods were also always true to the yards principles. Every Swan had a single skin hull, because the yard did not trust the sandwich method². Following a debate on principles in the yard, a few Nautor employees left in the middle of the seventies and founded Baltic-Yachts.

The heavy single skin laminate was also the source of serious problems. The fully equipped yachts could not compete anymore in high-caliber regattas where empty boats with pipe berths were already common. Swan owners increasingly fell behind the light-weighted competition. Nautor reacted by engaging the New Zealander (and Irish by choice) Ron Holland for the designs in 1978. Holland was then, together with Doug Peterson, the most successful IOR designer of the world.



The deck has an overlay of teak battens and is dominated by a large number of winches



Because of mid-boom sheeting the operation of main sheet and traveller is tiring

The success of the Ron Holland Swans was modest, because the design philosophy of light and stiff did not get along with Nautor's massive way of construction. Only when the Argentinian German Frers could be engaged in the middle of the eighties did the designs again show the original Swan virtues – yachts of timeless elegance that set standards with respect to sailing characteristics and quality. But how does the myth Swan fare on the water? Who gets invited onto a Swan does not hesitate much. I therefore went to Glücksburg, in order to sail the Swan Baltic Sea Challenge with Jan-Holgar Borm and his crew on *BlueWitch*. This regatta is organized yearly on the Flensburg Förde.

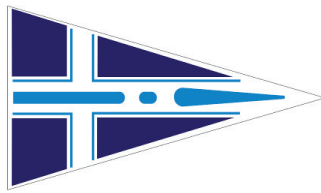
BlueWitch is a Swan 431 built in 1976, and therefore one of the last classic Swans from S&S.

On Deck

The way she lies in the Glücksburg harbor, peacefully next to many other Nautor creations, with her dark blue low freeboard, the cleanly laid teak deck and the high two-spreader rig, she radiates a classical elegance that many modern constructions are missing.

Wide side decks, a flat wedge-like coachroof and a rather small cockpit with high coamings characterize the deck layout. Just in front of the companionway there is a gigantic bridge deck. As it was common at the time, there is a dedicated winch for every line on deck, and all fittings seem overdimensioned.

² Remark from the translator: the yard trusted the sandwich method only for the deck.



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Above left: There is ample space to work on the foredeck, and good hold



Above right: The sheets are operated at the mast. The corresponding winches are on the deck.

Below: The companionway is very steep, and crossing the bridge deck may be dangerous at times



Under Sail

My expectations for the race had been calmed down by Jan-Holgar Borm in a previous phone conversation. "We participate mainly for socializing. Our sails are very old, and I prefer to sail cautiously, the yacht has to make some money during the season. If something breaks this not only means the cost of repair, but also less chartering". Clear words.

Correspondingly we stayed out of the tumult on the starting line, and quietly set the mainsail. Getting the 34 sq.m. up to the top brought out the sweat. This was not related to the sail area, but due to the fact that everything was very stiff. The gear was nearly 30 years old, and ball bearings were mostly unknown on yachts at that time. The main sheet car was clearly undersized, although renewed it required a winch in order to move. As the track is mounted on the coachroof forward of the companionway this frees up the bridgedeck, but the sheet attachment is very far forward. This increases the loads more than necessary.



Left: Under spinnaker the Swan is also easy to control, even in a fresh breeze her course is very stable

Right: Every line has its winch. Today, clutches result in more space on deck



In the early morning we are leaving the harbour for the first start. *Blue Witch* is equipped with 37HP Perkins 4.108 diesel, which works without problems despite its 30 years, and which according to the skipper never caused any issues in the past.

Build 1976-1978 in 32 units. Price new about 250.000 Euro.

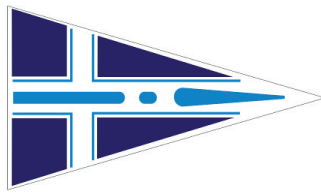
Used boats starting at 140.000 Euro. The boat belongs to a group of owners and is chartered out, bareboat or with skipper

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Just before the starting signal we set the Genua 2. The number 1 remained in its bag, because it is as old as the yacht, and hardly would survive the Force 3 to 4 blowing on the Förde. Big Lewmar 3-speed winches made the sheeting easy.

Thus we set off on the first



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The Skipper

Jan-Holgar Born (at right) leads the BLUE WITCH for a group of owners from Düsseldorf. For him the BLUE WITCH is a perfect seagoing yacht, which also shows no weaknesses in the hard charter business. He especially adores the design lines of the yacht.

transferred to the rudder with a Whitlock steering system³. The good-natured behavior did not change when the wind increased to Force 5. The beat back to Glückstadt required some effort. The wind had increased to Force 6 or 7, and we rigged the cutter stay, as well as the runners for aft support. With a high clew jib and staysail plus a reef in the mainsail the yacht does not bother about the steep chop. She takes some water on deck, but the crew enjoys the ride.

Also in these conditions the Swan 431 is easily controlled, and performs much better than in low wind speeds. The cockpit is, however, rather crowded with seven people. It is not easy to find a place to sit on the deck as there are many fittings and winches.

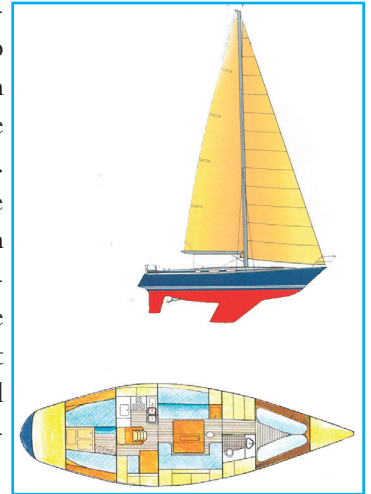
Below deck

In connection with the race I had finally the possibility to admire the perfect Finnish woodwork below deck. The Swan has a rather extravagant teak interior with beautifully curved framing giving the interior a special feel. In the stern there is a single berth to starboard for the navigator, and on port side an Owner's Cabin with double berth. The navigation area is located to starboard near the steep entrance, and is very big and well equipped with electronics as standard. Opposite is the U-shaped galley providing plenty of space for the cook, as well as worktop areas and stowage. A gas stove with three burners and oven enables even luxuriant cooking. Forward of the galley is a long settee, opposite a roomy U-shaped sofa with folding table. Each side outboard there are pilot berths with canvas leeboards. Forward of the table the mast comes through the deck, and stands on a mast step of galvanized steel located in the bilge. Unfortunately the mast step is very

leg behind the others. Already after a few minutes it became clear that, except for one or two, we could not keep up with the other Swans. Most of them had new hi-tech sails, and danced much lighter over the waves than we did. It appears that *Blue Witch* did not come up to speed. This is partly due to the sails, with the number 2 we are clearly undercanvassed, and the mainsail of budget Polish origin has a shape very far from optimal. It is unbelievably full, with the maximum draft near the leech despite all attempts to trim it. Referring to trimming - the mast has a circumference similar to an advertising column, and stubbornly refuses to bend in order to flatten the mainsail.

Additionally the Swan 431 at 12.5 tons is not a lightweight. *Blue Witch* has some additional equipment and according to the captain weighs in at 13 tons, perhaps even more.

The slow behavior changes when we round the windward mark and go off the wind. The 180 sq.m. spinnaker brings some life into the yacht. It appears the Swan likes this course best. She can be kept well under control with the moderately sized steering wheel, the movements are



Technical Details:

Loa: 13.2 m

Lwl: 10.2 m

Beam : 4.1 m

Draft : 2.3 m

Ballast: 5,400 kg

Displacement: 12,000 kg

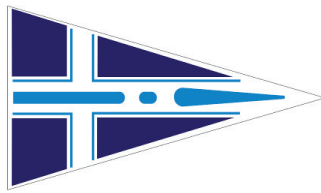
Engine: 37 hp Perkins Diesel

Main sail: 34 m²

Genua: 74 m²

Spinnaker: 177 m²

³ Remark from the translator: The photos show a standard Nautor steering system.



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prone to corrosion, and also on *BlueWitch* this has occurred, and is likely to be a problem on all older Swans.

Further forward there is a comfortable head with shower, with spacious stowage lockers opposite. The fo'c'sle is basically intended for sail stowage, but two pipe berths enable sleeping.

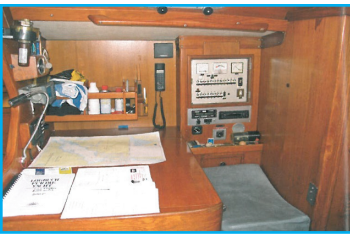
Conclusions

The number of berths cannot compete with the newer dormitory boats, but with seven on board the boat never felt crowded. Abundant stowage is provided, and the entire interior is seagoing and extremely well built. The yacht is very strongly built, this becomes obvious when the pipe berths are folded up. The hull has closely spaced longitudinal stiffeners, and the bulkheads are properly matted in to hull and deck. The thickness of the woodwork is about twice that of current series produced yachts. The strength has its price. Swan-yachts always indicated the upper range of pricing in series built yachts.

The second hand value is therefore high, with a touch of exclusivity added.

Safe, tolerant, and somewhat sedate the Swan 431 is better suited for cruising than for racing. Depending on condition about 140 000 euro is asked. Prospective buyers should consider the following points: the teak deck is glued and screwed, here a lack of maintenance could cause leaks. For yachts of nearly 30 years age the deck needs to be replaced at least once, and the quality of the work affects the market price strongly. The mast step needs to be thoroughly inspected, the connection to the laminate may be affected by corrosion. A repair is complicated and costly. In addition to this, part of the deck gear needs updating.

And finally Swans are not immune to osmosis, a certified treatment or prevention would be a requirement for a well maintained yacht.



Courtesy of PLASTEK

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From Top:

- Genuine Swan quality: well planned arrangement, seagoing and practical
- The navigation area provides abundant space for the navigator and electronics
- The fo'c'sle is intended for sail stowage, but also provides two pipe berths
- A less flattering detail. The galvanized steel mast step is prone to corrosion
- Basically a very strong construction. The hull is stiffened by closely spaced stringers and bulkheads

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