

April 1998

Blue Water Sailing

Solutions For Offshore Sailors

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Swan 38: A Paean to a masterpiece from the maestros

The brothers Stephens and Nautor Swan created a true sailor's sailboat

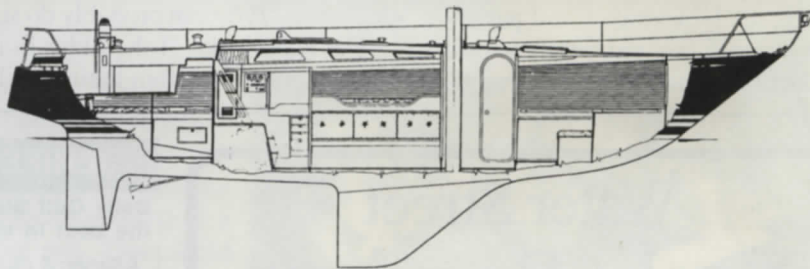
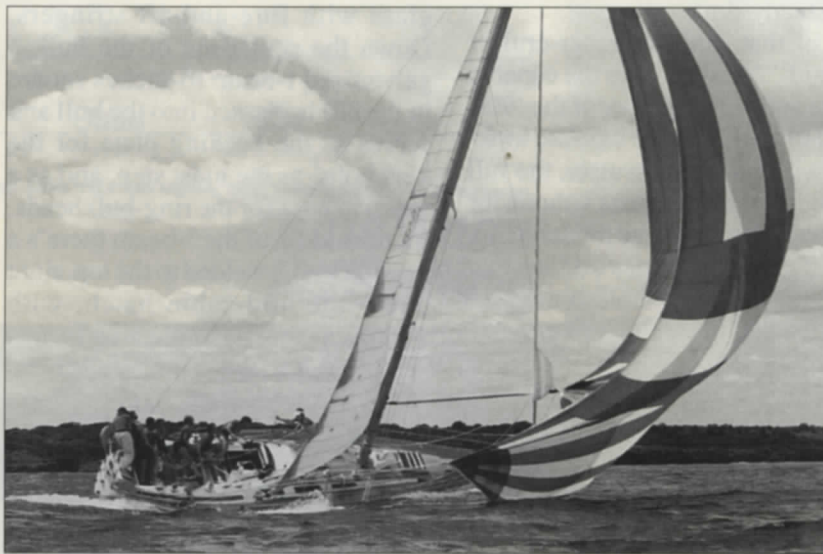
For sailors, the years following World War II have turned out to be a renaissance. It's a strange phenomenon, a renaissance based upon a three-thousand-year-old technology. But it's here nonetheless. And if there is a Leonardo in our midst, it could only be Olin Stephens, whose work spanned more than half the century and whose designs have conquered every trophy and crossed every ocean. Today he lives in Vermont, far enough from the sea to have had a farm boy ask him what it was he carried over his shoulder . . . but the designs go on sailing.

Next to Olin Stephens there stood another imposing figure whose forearms were like Popeye's and whose sense of what works out on the open sea and what does not was written in just about every design that S&S drew. That would be Rod Stephens, who sailed more hard miles and put more designs to the test than just about any sailor in the last 50 years.

A lot of what we know about boats and offshore sailing was invented by those two. In many ways, Olin and Rod forgot more about sailing in their lives than many of us will ever learn. So it is worthwhile to go back and take a look at one of their most successful production boats, from the 1970s, built by one of the world's premier builders. The Swan 38 will not be the boat for every offshore sailor or cruising crew, but the boats are offshore boats with a big "O" and have logged many circumnavigations and millions of sea miles.

The design

In 1973, when the Swan 38 was conceived, the offshore racing conventions had shifted from the whole-



A powerful sailing boat, the Swan 38 likes to carry sail and can carry it while lesser designs need to shorten down. Still a successful PHRF and offshore racer, the true role for the 38 today is as a couple's offshore passagemaker.

some but doughty designs of the CCA period to the more modern concepts of the IOR. Yet, the edges of performance that were to later mar IOR designs and make them less than comfortable or safe offshore cruising boats were yet to be reached. In the early part of the decade, the idea of designing a boat specifically around movable crew ballast had not yet affected offshore boats.

The 38 has Rod Stephens' fingerprints all over it. No comfy bungalow of a cruiser, the 38 is more a cabin in the woods from which one can really enjoy the outdoor sport of sailing. Like most of the cruiser-racers that Olin Stephens designed during this period—and he drew many from the 38 to the Swan 431, 47 and 57, to the Tartan 37—the 38 is a moder-

ate-displacement sloop with a high ballast-to-displacement ratio and a massive rig.

Nautor Swan has traditionally specified tree-trunk aluminum sections for their masts and then rigged them with belt-and-suspenders standing rigs. Looking down the floats of a large marina, one can usually pick out the Swans from their masts—they're the ones that are taller and larger than the rest, and the one's not bobbing to and fro with every passing wake.

The underbody of the 38 is an "Intrepid" (12-meter) mix of a moderately high-aspect wing-shaped fin with a skeg-hung, barn-door rudder. The keel was state of the art when it was drawn and first built and gives the 38 significant lift when sailing to

weather. Fall in behind one of these boats while beating in a good breeze and, as you watch it claw away to windward, you see the whole rationale for the design. The rudder, on the other hand, still has one foot in the past, for it adds little lift, while the skeg creates a steady drag.

All of that said, the racer-cruiser of the mid-'70s, can make the capable offshore and world cruiser of the '90s, particularly for a couple who are looking for a classic. As a cruiser, the full underbody, which provides volume for comfort and stowage, the moderate fin and the protected rudder add up to a design that will be wholesome, seaworthy, and comfortable in a seaway.

Construction

Nautor Swan got into the boatbuilding business when custom-boatbuilder Palmer Johnson went hunting for a production yard to build a series of PJ 43s —also S&S designs. Nautor is really a lumber and paper-pulp business in Finland, but they took to production boatbuilding with enthu-

siasm. Under the tutelage of Mike Kelsey from Palmer Johnson (among others) and Rod Stephens, the Fins developed a building style that is now a benchmark of quality in the business.

The hull is solid, hand-laid fiberglass with fore-and-aft stringers. Down the centerline of the hull, a galvanized I-beam (6-inches square in the 38) is glassed into the hull and serves as the backing plate for the keel bolts, as the mast step, and as a massive base for the ring-bulkheads. In the middle of the I-beam there's a huge steel eye welded to the top, right under the mid-cabin hatch, with which you can hoist the boat from a single point with a crane. While most of the world now uses Travel-lifts to shift boats around, in the Third World, Travel-lifts are scarce while a 50-ton crane is more likely to be handy. Thus if you need to haul out to make sudden repairs in Sudan or Vladivostok, you can probably do so.

The teak decks of the older Finnish-built boats are often their Achil-

les heels. The decks themselves are well constructed of hand-laid laminate around a foam core, so even if water does get into the composite structure the core will not actually rot. But, it will be weakened. Water gets in around the bases of deck fittings and through the screw holes that hold-down the teak planks. Also, it should be noted that on many of the Scandinavian boats, the teak decking has often been kept to a minimum thickness, for both weight and cost savings. On 38s from the mid-'70s, look for boats that have had their decks replaced —or be prepared to spend \$25,000 or more to have a new deck laid on. Fiberglass decks on these boats do not need the same attention to maintenance.

The rudder installation and engineering on the 38, as on all Swans, is robust and logical. The electrical system, although somewhat limited by today's standard, has been assembled with care, attention to clean soldered connections, and logical schematics. One drawback to the aft-cabin inte-

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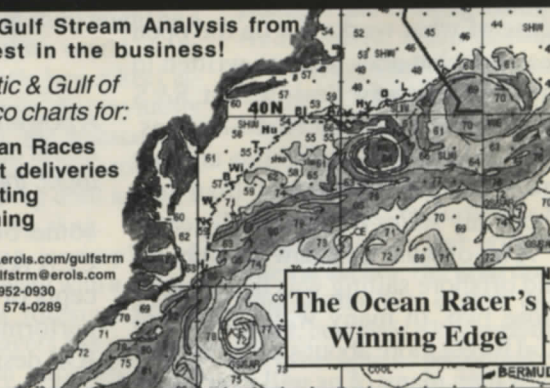
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rior layout in the 38 is access to the quadrant and steering cables, which are essentially at the far end of the aft double berth. On the flip side, engine access is as good as you will find on a 38-footer.

Sailing qualities

The Swan 38 is a sailor's sailboat. Designed with only a 20-horsepower Buhk diesel for auxiliary power, the designers and builders never imagined her skipper might motorsail when there was wind enough for sailing. Such dedication to the act of sailing—those Rod Stephens touches—can be seen all over the deck. The cockpit has room for four to sit and work comfortably forward of the wheel, so trimming and lunch can go on simultaneously.

The boat carries a high-aspect main with a full IOR overlapping genoa, although we doubt many cruising crews will choose to fly the big sail very often. The foretriangle is large enough, so a well cut Number Two (about 125%) genoa on a roller will suffice for most North American sailing conditions and a Number Three (about 110%) will work well in the Caribbean or other heavy trade wind areas.

As we noted above, the 38 wants

to go to windward and will reliably tack through less than 90 degree true. The boat makes very little leeway and will balance out upwind like a thoroughbred at a fast trot. One could actually look forward to making windward passages in this boat, which is a concept hard to grasp when thinking of most cruising boats.

Off the wind, the full hull and pinched stern tend to dig a hole in the water as the boat accelerates, so at hull speed of about 7.5 knots, the stern wave will begin to mount the stern and speed will peak. That said, even under a tri-radial chute, the hullform, ballast ratio and rudder form all make the boat directionally stable and less likely to broach than her lighter sisters.

Gale sailing is where the 38 really comes into her own, despite her tendency to dash spray into the cockpit and down the crew's neck. With sweet elliptical hull sections forward, the hull will surge in heavy seas instead of crashing, giving the off-watch



The 150-percent genoa, top, will be a handful for a couple, but makes the 38 go in light airs. The cockpit has a high bridgedeck and a better-than-usual Swan companionway.

the ability to sleep when things get bumpy. The boat is spec'd with an inner forestay as well as a baby stay, so a storm jib can be rigged inboard, where it will balance well with the trysail. We don't go looking for gales, but we occasionally find them anyway. When we do, it's good to know the boat under you can continue sailing as long as you can—or longer.

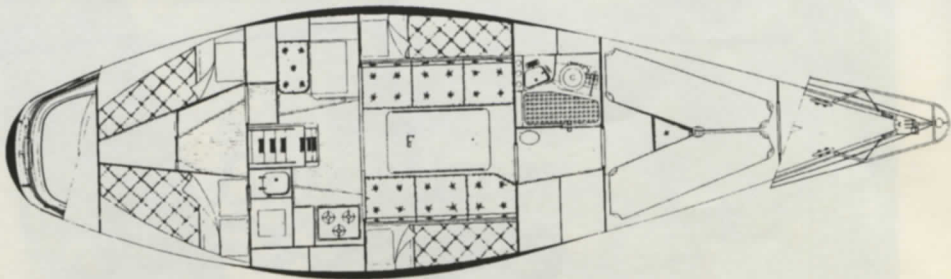
Light-air performance is another question, although with a spinnaker

or a larger genoa, the boat will ghost along fine in wind under 8 knots or so. A cruising chute would be a good addition, although a narrow-shoulder tri-radial will work well, too.

Accommodation

The 38's interior is small by today's standards. Headroom at the companionway is just over 6 feet, and from there it decreases as you move forward until it is about 5 feet, 10 inches in the head. The main saloon has two pilot berths that will make wonderful sea berths, two settee benches that will also be good sea berths and a table with folding leaves on the centerline. The aft cabin does not have standing headroom as it is under the cockpit and bridgedeck. But, once you are in and horizontal, the after cabin will be snug and secure and a good place to find some peace and quiet during a patch of bad weather.

The galley layout is functional but



The accommodation plan of the 38 shows how much can be wedged into a hull that is quite narrow on the waterline and at the ends. The forward cabin was designed to be the sail locker, but has been converted by most owners into a double cabin. The pilot berths in the main saloon will be great sea berths. The galley is small but functional. The chart table is useful and well positioned.

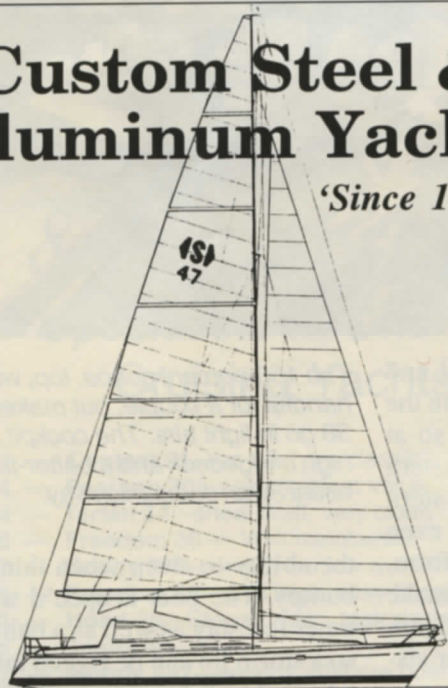
small. The sink is near the centerline so it will drain on both tacks. The three-burner stove is serviceable, although the top is too small for real three-pot meals. Counter space is limited, but a fold-up counter on the bulkhead can add to it. Across from the galley, the chart table is standard issue, facing forward, with plenty of room above for electronics. If radar is mounted belowdecks, it may have

to intrude on the port pilot berth. But radars these days are so compact and weatherproof, a cockpit installation makes sense.

The forward cabin was originally conceived of as a sail locker—there being no sail lockers in the cockpit—but has been converted to a double cabin by most owners. A double berth can be rigged, or a neat V-berth. The boat carries only 55 gallons of wa-

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ter and 30 gallons of diesel, so tankage is limited for long-term sailing.

The interior of the 38 is compact and will be excellent at sea, for there are lots of handholds, great sea berths and a tight serviceable galley. For living aboard at a marina, the boat does not compare well with more commodious designs. But, for a couple wanting a fast, capable world cruiser, the 38 will do well.

The BWS conclusion

There are many commendable aspects to the Swan 38. It's a pleasure to look at and an even greater pleasure to sail. With a windvane bolted on the stern, a flexible water tank added in the bow, a solar panel or two and a bit of wanderlust, the 38 will take you anywhere in the world you want to go, especially if some of that is to windward.

There were 116 of the 38s built between 1974 and 1979. Most had



Traditional teak joinery gives the 38 a 'woody' feel below. But the interior is not terribly dark, due to the bright headliner and the many ports and hatches.

the tall rig, although there were a few built with either the short or the extra-tall rig options. There are always several on the market at any given time, and their prices range from \$65,000 for a boat that needs new decks and TLC to about \$120,000 for a boat that has been thoroughly upgraded and well maintained.

The Swan 38 will not be the boat for every couple. But for sailors who love to sail, who thrill to solid windward performance, and enjoy a boat that stand up to a blow, the 38 is a good choice. It's the type of boat that can be kept for a lifetime of sailing, without losing value or paling in a sailor's eye.

Not the grandest, fastest or most beautiful boat every designed by the maestros Stephens, the Swann 38 is still a great little masterpiece of an ocean-sailing yacht.



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