

TOPAZ 14



Do you like the idea of sailing full bore, singlehanded on the wire with a kite? You don't have to do it on a dinghy – **Jeremy Evans** enjoys the challenge of a feisty new cat, the Topaz 14 Xtreme.

Rob White, who develops the Topper Sailboats range at White Formula in Brightlingsea, comes from an illustrious cat racing background, so it's no surprise that he's gone back to his roots and produced two new Topaz cats. Yves Loday, his design partner, has an equally illustrious cat sailing background. He also won an Olympic gold

medal in the Tornado and went on to collaborate with Rob's dad Reg White on boats including the Dart 16, Spitfire and Shadow.

With such a pedigree, expectations were high for the Topaz 16, which went into production last summer, followed by the Topaz 14 earlier this year. For this test we've focussed on the Xtreme – a souped-up, singlehanded variation on the Topaz 14.

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Right The Topaz 14 Xtreme is best sailed fast and free for upwind speed.



Rigs and rigging

Joined by Youth Worlds cat gold medallist Richard Glover for the day, before going afloat in the Xtreme we had a look at the options. All the other variations are designed to be sailed by one or two fairly light crew, although there's enough room for three on the trampoline if you're into gentle cruising. The 14C has a single trapeze and a jib, with lurid yellow, red and blue Dacron sails. The 14CX includes a gennaker (asymmetric spinnaker) to provide a more powered-up downwind ride, while the 14 School is a basic model for institutional use.

The Xtreme has exactly the same platform (hulls, beams and trampoline) with a taller mast supporting a very high aspect Mylar sail with lots of roach to maximise power. It also has a spinnaker and more sophisticated control systems, with the latest Ronstan ratchet blocks, a boom to provide foot tension in order to control mainsail camber and larger rudders (from the Topaz 16) to keep the Xtreme on line with bigger sails.

Unlike the other 14s, the Xtreme mainsail locks at the top of the mast to ensure you can maintain downhaul tension, which is used to depower the sail. Getting the halyard to 'lock' or 'unlock' on a cat can require a little practice, but on the Xtreme seemed predictable and easy. Full length battens can normally be left tensioned in the sail, with a simple strop connecting the top block of the multi-purchase mainsheet to the boom. The gennaker is

pulled back inside a soft sock attached to the spinnaker pole, suspended between bridle wires connecting the forestay to the bows of each hull. Rudders clip onto the transoms in normal dinghy style, linked by a tiller bar which can be adjusted to ensure both rudder blades are aligned.

Cats sail fast because their hulls have a small wetted surface area and the wide platform gives the crew more leverage than a dinghy. The rig provides a high power to weight ratio, but that only works if the cat is reasonably light. In addition, hulls and platform must be stiff, since flexibility slows the boat down. Rotomoulded plastic is great for producing cheap hulls, but has been associated with too much weight and too little stiffness for high performance sailing, partly because it's impossible to insert bulkheads, which are used to stiffen glassfibre laminate hulls.

Topper has more than a decade's experience of 'Trilam' construction, combining inner and outer layers of polyethylene and a foam core; Laser and RS use similar rotomoulded construction techniques. All rotomoulded hulls tend to follow a law of diminishing returns – they become proportionally much heavier as their volume increases and more plastic is required. In other words, smaller hulls like those on the Topaz 14 can produce better returns. The Xtreme certainly felt light enough for one person to push down to the beach or pull back up on its trolley, but the proof of its performance would be decided on the water.

Below Neat details include labelled tail bags to keep the trampoline tidy and uncluttered.

Below right The 14 is super-quick offwind, but balanced on one slim hull it is a little twitchy and will reward experienced sailors.



On the water

Topaz cats use the same rudder system as the Spitfire, with a neat little lever to lock down each blade. I found this system failsafe and simple, although Brian Phipps is not convinced it's ideal for novices. Unlike a recreational Hobie or Dart, you have to slow the cat to a virtual standstill to push the blades down and you can't steer at the same time.

Having watched Richard Glover in action, I knew the Xtreme was going to be a bit special. The fathead mainsail looked superb and the cat was clearly very quick upwind, while offwind with the

kite it flew in a Force 4 breeze. But it's also a fairly easy boat to sail. The trampoline is uncluttered with a lot of space to move around. When you want to go out on the trapeze, it's easy to hook on and push away from the side – the 'bumpy' non-slip is weird looking, but works pretty well.

Basic technique for sailing upwind is to crank the mainsheet in hard and sail free and fast, with the windward hull skimming the surface, pulling on downhaul (easy to tweak from the wire) to flatten and depower the mainsail. When the breeze was up it felt easy to drive the Xtreme at full bore, but in lulls it became trickier to 'read' the mainsail, without the benefit of a jib to indicate airflow.

Many dinghy sailors believe the Achilles' heel of a cat is inability to tack. For instance, despite being one of the world's most popular boats the old Hobie 14 was a sod to tack! You can forget all those preconceptions with Topaz cats. Yves Loday has moved the skegs – rather like small keels – right under the mainsail where they act like centreboards and let the cat spin round. Even without a jib to help pull the bows, the 14 Xtreme was a joy to flick from tack to tack. On the one occasion, when operator error should have stalled the tack and sent the Xtreme into reverse, it was so easy to save the situation and sail out of the tack. I was impressed! We did not sail through waves which could make things more difficult, but there's absolutely no doubt the Xtreme is a really sweet machine to drive upwind – taut and responsive feedback confirmed the notion that a high performance rotomoulded cat really has come of age.

We had watched Richard lose it with the kite, so had some idea what to expect from the Xtreme offwind. When the breeze is up, Brain advised it's a good idea to throw off the downhaul to depower the mainsail before you go for the hoist. Despite the fact that you've only got one pair of hands, pulling the kite up seems quite easy. It only took a few pulls on the halyard, during which the Xtreme could be relied on to keep tracking straight. Next thing to remember is to pull the mainsheet in tight on the centreline. That becomes your backstay when the kite powers up. Without it, there's a risk of breaking the mast.

The Xtreme is a very short cat with a very tall rig. At first it felt distinctly skittish with the kite and I was tending to bear away much too far downwind, losing power and slowing down instead of driving downhill at consistent speed. With a little practice it became easier, sitting well inboard, holding the tiller bar with the extension trailing behind, just doing very small course corrections to ensure the windward hull never dropped down.

Gybing this small cat is very straightforward – a doddle for anyone accustomed to gybes in dinghies. You pivot facing aft, steer through the turn, grab the falls of the mainsheet to flick the boom across, then concentrate on keeping the arc of the gybe small before sheeting in the kite on the new side.

Sailing on the wire with the kite was more of a challenge. For sure, the Xtreme is much easier to hold flat than a singlehanded dinghy, but all the boat's power is concentrated on a single low volume, super-slim, 14ft long hull which can make the ride pretty twitchy. It certainly requires a learning curve which will be rewarding in the



long-term.

Despite being a double youth gold medallist, Richard Glover managed to flip the Xtreme twice while driving at full bore with the kite. One important test of a singlehanded cat is that you must be able to pull it upright. The laws of gravity dictate that the heavier you are, the easier this operation will be. Despite weighing a mere 67kg, Richard was able to flip the Xtreme back up effortlessly in little more than a minute, helped by the fact that the Xtreme showed no signs of inverting thanks to its fully sealed mast. You don't have to reach high above your head to grab a daggerboard. Instead, you pop yourself up onto the lower hull, take a breather, pull the kite back into its chute, flick the righting line over the top hull, lean back and catch the front beam as the cat comes upright. Getting back on board is easiest if you float alongside and pull up on a trapeze handle.

Dropping the kite is as simple as the hoist, although we had a problem with the sheet lassoing the leeward bow, because the clew is so far forward. Brian suggested a simple remedy used by cat racers, which is to link the sheets with an elastic runner to tension any slack. Another modification he suggested was mast rotation control. The boom pushes the elliptical mast at a diagonal angle, which allows it to bend sideways. This is fine for depowering the mainsail, but not so fine if you want to keep maximum power in lighter winds. A simple control, which prevents maximum mast rotation, would tweak the overall performance of the boat. Incidentally, the Xtreme appeared to creep along very nicely in light breeze close to the shore, without requiring a huge shift of crew weight onto the bows.

Verdict

I really enjoy sailing singlehanded on a boat with a trapeze, so the Xtreme is definitely my kind of boat. Upwind it is a tremendous performer, with a rig that looks and acts like a scaled-down A-Class cat (the world's quickest small boat to windward). Offwind it provides a challenge and a blast, whether you decide to sit in or go out on the wire with the kite. Above all, it's a beautifully behaved little boat that would make a great racing class for lighter weight sailors up to about 80kg. It's also a great price –



Above The 14 Xtreme has plenty of power to make sailing for two fun...

Above (inset) ...but expect to capsize a few times. Getting back upright is easy, with a sealed mast and righting lines.

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half the cost of a Shadow, also designed by Yves Loday and built in Kevlar laminate.

Richard Glover summed up the performance of the Xtreme: 'When you jump on you immediately know you are going to have a good sail. Being only 67kg I thought I might be over-powered with the big fathead sail, but I just went fast instead with the Xtreme feeling like a light fast dinghy.

Downwind it really flew – a bit tricky until you get the hang of it, but once you respond at the right time, trapezing downwind with the gennaker and riding the gusts is really good fun. Now I want some more Xtremes to race against!'

Pedigree is what counts. Rob White and Yves Loday have put decades of experience into two new cats and the Topaz 14 Xtreme is the icing on the cake. ■

Above The 14 keeps its momentum through tacks thanks to skegs under each hull, whilst it is also easier to gybe than many dinghies.

ANSWER BACK

from Rick Reading

We would like to thank Brian Phipps for the use of his inspiring facility at Windsport, Falmouth – a truly great place to sail. We'd also like to thank Jeremy Evans and Richard Glover for their thorough, illuminating and inspiring report on a very special milestone in Topaz development – the Topaz 14 Xtreme.

One of the world's greatest catamaran experts Rob White has been concentrating exclusively on Topaz dinghies in recent years. It was a natural step to give Rob, along with Yves Loday, the brief to develop a range of Topaz catamarans. We wanted catamarans that were affordable but also gave a pedigree performance sail. This was clearly appreciated in the test as being a 'a bit special'.

Jeremy's comparison of the Topaz 14 to an A class is indeed a compliment and an affirmation of the knowledge and skills of the Loday-White design combination. Top sailors recognise class and Richard Glover's instant excitement and wholehearted approval speak volumes for the quality of the Xtreme. As soon as you step onto the Topaz 14, novices through to professional sailors immediately become hooked and want more and more.

The final words of the test sum up perfectly the character of the 14 as 'the icing on the cake'. The Topaz 14 cake also includes a two-man version for club racing and sailing, as well as a school version for teaching. The new Topaz range of catamarans can be experienced at Datchet, London and Falmouth Cornwall. Sunsail also feature Topaz catamarans at selected centres. Please phone 01233 629181 to book your test sail.

TOPAZ 14 Xtreme specifications

DESIGN:	Loday-White in 2007	
LENGTH:	4.25m	
BEAM:	2.05m	
WEIGHT:	110kg	
SAIL AREA:	MAIN	10.32sq m
	GENNAKER	9.9sq m
PRICE:	£4,395	

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*Thanks to Windsport International for providing facilities for this test.
www.windsport.co.uk*

COMPARISONS... Where does the Topaz 14 Xtreme fit in? Here are some alternatives...



■ SHADOW

Yves Loday designed this singlehanded cat in 2001, with superlight 95kg sailing weight, Kevlar construction and ultra simple spinnaker system.

LOA:	4.8m	
BEAM:	2.4m	
SAIL AREA:	Mainsail	13sq m
	Gennaker	10sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£8,500*	



■ HOBIE 15 CLUB

Great all-rounder from Hobicat which can be sailed singlehanded or two-up. Easy to handle, but if the wind is up this cat can provide a fun ride.

LOA:	4.95m	
BEAM:	2.26m	
SAIL AREA:	Upwind	15sq m
	Asymmetric	15sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£7,500*	



■ WETA 4.4

Singlehanded lightweight trimaran with mainsail, jib and furling screecher which can also be sailed with a crew. Good fun and surprisingly quick.

LOA:	4.4m	
BEAM:	3.5m	
SAIL AREA:	Upwind	11.5sq m
	Screecher	8sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£6,950*	