

WIND, WAVES - WONDERFUL!

by Colin Johanson

On Sunday, 2 November 2003, the Liberty's designer and builder (Chris Mitchell), the sail-maker (Frank Hammond), and I went out to test Liberty yachts in somewhat severe bay conditions. The day started off drizzling rain, but neither that nor the 30-35 knot southerly winds deterred us from taking three Liberty yachts out for a sail to see how they handled these conditions.

The Royal Victoria Yacht Club, Williamstown, where we sailed from, had already declared it a "non sailing day" for their students as anything over 25 knot winds makes it too dangerous for conventional dinghy sailors. The Liberty is no ordinary dinghy as we were to find out to our joy. With its weighted keel (65 kg), unique hull design, inside low-seated cockpit, and simple but functional sails, the Liberty revelled in conditions that would have been terrible for other dinghies.

Due to the wind strength, we reefed the sails by rolling three turns around the mainmast and one and a half turns around the novel fore mast. This decreased the area of sail of the foresail and mainsail, while not requiring different sails to be fitted. This novel feature of the Liberty, and the rest of the Access Dinghy range, is one of its features that enable it to be sailed in a range of conditions by a wide range of sailors with varying abilities and weights.



Once we got away from the shelter of the shore and rounded the point, exposing us to the waves and wind from the far end of our 60 km long bay, the waves became larger and larger as we sailed further out heading into the wind and waves. Our slight trepidation as to how the Liberty yachts would handle these conditions, soon changed to woops of joy as we found the wind and waves simply fun in dinghies that coped so well. The three of us drove our yachts into the waves, which were mostly about one and a half metres to two metres high. We sailed up the wave faces,



launched off the top and dove down into the next trough. That was great fun but way too wet to bring out the digital cameras, although there would have been some great shots at we erupted from the tops of the waves. At no time did we feel worried or unsafe but from my previous experience in sailing dinghies I would have headed back to shore way before getting into that wild a water - the Liberty was such a different yacht and amazingly dry except for the

spray whipping off the breaking waves and our hulls. Only once, when a wave actually broke over the bow, did a little water run into the cockpit.

The fun really began when we turned downwind to follow the waves and wind. Surfing down the face of those waves was great, as you'd feel the acceleration as the wave's power came into play. We were soon heading upwind a number of times to enjoy the thrill of surfing along, metres away from each other, in easy full control of the helm. Wow what a buzz! We couldn't stop smiling as the yachts had proven themselves as really fun machines that were so safe to sail.



Considering that Chris and Frank are both very experienced ocean and racing sailors and able bodied, I was the odd one out being a far less experienced sailor and certainly not used to those conditions. I'm also a C5-C6 quadriplegic who needs to use a wheelchair on land. However out there in the Liberty, my physical disability was much less as the yacht is so easy to sail by those with or without a disability that it was a different environment and we were just three sailors having fun sailing around. That is what an integrated sport is all about and why we call our sport "sailing for everyone"!



When I got home, I was still so hyped from the fun of sailing in those conditions, that my wife laughed at how I kept going on, and on, and on, about how great the Liberty handled the conditions and a smile stayed glued to my face all evening.

We wouldn't continue racing in the upcoming Liberty Worlds in January in such conditions, but it is great to know that, should a storm blow up as they can in Port Phillip Bay, the boats are still

safe to sail back to harbour. The yachts proved themselves to be the perfect mix of safety and controllability that Chris had aimed for, and then some - they are fantastic!

Colin is a quadriplegic sailor who will competed in the IFDS Liberty Worlds in Melbourne during January 2004. He has limited arm strength and very little grip in his hands due to a hang gliding accident over 26 years ago that broke his neck. In these photos he is in the orange yacht, which is fully manual but sailed a yacht with electric winches for both sails and steering in the Worlds in 2004.