

"She felt right, so I bought her. Fortunately, my instincts didn't let me down"

Michael Juer bought his Tomahawk almost on impulse - and reckons it's one of the best decisions he's ever made, as David Harding reports.

For many people, buying a second-hand boat involves reading articles, studying brochures, visiting boat yards, talking to owners and making endless comparisons. But not for Michael Juer. "Tell him I'll buy it", was the message he sent via a mutual friend to the owner of a fin-keeled Tomahawk, on hearing that it was up for sale.

These things really aren't expensive

"As soon as I could I went for a sail, gave him the money, and walked off with his boat", said Michael, "I hadn't planned to buy one quite so soon, but everything just dropped into place - and these things really aren't expensive".

Stories like this should help to reassure anyone who's daunted by the prospect of owning a first cruiser - especially since the Juers have become so attached to Warpath. One of the first Tomahawks to leave her builder's Southampton yard in the early '70s, she was owned by two generations of a naval family in Cowes who raced her successfully for many years. Michael hasn't raced for a long time now, but still appreciates the Tomahawk's performance.

The only problem, he told me, was a problem with the set of the genoa, which I promised to look at when we were sailing. But first the rig needed a little tuning, so we disconnected both the backstay and forestay, rethreaded and tightened the bottle screws, adjusted the furling drum's height, and re-set the cap shrouds and both sets of lowers before leaving the mooring.

Fast and low

For all our efforts, on setting sail we soon found that Warpath suffered the same problem as many boats designed before the days of roller genoas, even with the cars at the after end of the tracks, the leech was too tight in relation to the foot. What's more, the genoa was several inches too long on the luff. So we took it off the drum and tacked it down to the stemhead - a move which instantly increased our speed from 4 to 4.5 knots in around 14 knots of breeze and flat water.

A 46% ballast ratio

In these conditions she was remarkably well mannered, carrying a modest amount of weather helm in the stronger gusts. As you'd expect from her moderate beam and 46% ballast ratio, she heeled progressively before stiffening up, never once threatening to dip her gunwale. And, though directionally stable and pleasantly forgiving, she responded to sail trim like a thoroughbred; with the traveller dropped to leeward and the helm unattended, she continues to sail upwind, luffing slightly in the gusts and easing away in the lulls.

Bringing the traveller back up restored just enough pull on the tiller for a positive feel. Having made our way a few miles down the Solent, tracking through around 85%, we turned for home and decided it was time to give Michael's spinnaker its first airing under his ownership. With 500 sq ft of half-ounce nylon flying from the masthead, Warpath bowled along at between 5.5 and 5.7 knots, hitting 6.1 when we hardened up slightly to bring the apparent wind towards the beam.

Coming alive downwind

Even on a shy reach with the pole close to the forestay, she remained light on the helm and totally controllable, the rudder only losing grip briefly in a gust which pounced on us from behind Gillkicker Point. And she still made it clear that getting her leeward rail wet was not something she was prepared to contemplate. There's no doubt that boats like the Tomahawk, with their masthead rigs and relatively small mainsails, come alive downwind with the help of a spinnaker. But even when goose-winging our way down the harbour in the morning, we'd maintained a respectable 4.8 - 5 knots. That was when I first noticed the vibration in the rudder caused by the propeller's turbulence; a folding prop would probably make a big difference.

Hard to pick holes

In every other respect, it's hard to pick holes in the Tomahawk's handling or sailing performance. She heaves to nicely, gybes round with the sails pinned in, and doesn't seem the sort of boat, which would give her owner too many anxious moments.

Though not dramatically fast or close-winded by modern standards, she combines reasonable efficiency and good balance, easy handling and a thoroughly reassuring feel. All I found myself questioning was how she might behave in a seaway - she seemed slightly bouncy when crossing the occasional wash, and I wondered whether her relatively narrow stern and high transom might make her more prone to pitching than newer designs. From all accounts, though, she's a capable sea boat, having brought her previous owner safely across the channel in Force 7s and 8s on several occasions.

Awkward under power

The only time she proved slightly awkward was under power, pulling strongly to starboard in ahead and refusing to turn to port in astern unless we built up plenty of speed before knocking the engine out of gear. Otherwise, the fin keel and the siting of the prop immediately ahead of the skeg-hung rudder combined to provide good manoeuvrability. Warpath now has an 18hp Volvo 2002, which replaced the original 8hp Yanmar. Its position well forward in the boat keeps the weight in the right place and allows easy access, albeit at the expense of increased noise in the saloon. A smaller engine could be tucked away under the cockpit sole.

High and Dry

Despite her narrow stern, the Tomahawk's cockpit is generously proportioned - and far more comfortable than those on many of her contemporaries. The bridge deck is a sensible height, too, with a moulded sill raising the companionway even further and giving any "green ones" fetching up in the cockpit little chance of finding their way below. A trickle of fresh water, on the other hand, does collect in the bilge after heavy rain.

The odd leak apart, Warpath seemed in generally good condition for her age. I could find no signs of stress cracks in the gel coat, though the coach roof was covered in cosmetic crazing from UV degradation. Michael pointed out that, after the work he's already put in, there's a limit to the amount it's worth spending on a boat of this size and value. "I could easily spend more on refurbishment than I paid in the first place," he said, "and I'm not sure I'd really get that much more from her".

Overbuilt in ignorance

"At least I know she's tough," he continued. "It strikes me that these boats were built using the same principles the Victorians applied to bridges - because people didn't know that much about glassfibre in the early '70s, they over-built them. I heard of a Tomahawk being driven

into a concrete pontoon and just bouncing off."

A relationship with my boat

As for the future, he says, one thing's certain. "I wouldn't buy another Tomahawk, because I've become completely attached to this boat and it's the only Tomahawk I'd want. I've suddenly realised that I've gone from just owning a piece of plastic to having a relationship with my boat, which is a very dangerous thing to do!"

Having met up with Michael, his wife Mel and two young children some weeks later for the photo session, I got the impression that thoughts of a bigger boat were beginning to loom large. But whether or not Warpath is soon looking for a new home, the Juers have proved that she makes an excellent family cruiser.

Bouncing off a pontoon

"These boats were built using the same principle the Victorians applied to bridges - they over-built them. I heard of a Tomahawk being driven into a concrete pontoon and just bouncing off"

A new baby for Marine Construction

First shown at the 1971 Earls Court Boat Show, the Tomahawk wasn't an instant success. As Eric White, the founder of Marine Construction, recalled, "We only sold one at the first show, and thought it might have been because people found her lines a bit modern. But after that, she really took off".

About 275 were built over the next nine years or so - the majority with twin keels which, unlike the bolt-on iron fin, were an integral part of the hull moulding. Many were also home completed. "Like the rest of the range, they were designed as working man's boats, for people who didn't have a lot of money," said Eric. It's a philosophy that probably explains why the Tomahawk was never expensive compared with her competitors.

Alan Hill, the designer, had one of the early boats, winning Burhnam Week and bringing his family up on board. "I was very happy with the design", he said. "There are certain aspects I would modify today, but the hull was sound and very fast".

Designed initially as a fin-keeler, the Tomahawk came after Marine Construction's Trident, Cutlass and Sabre. Eric also developed the Halberdiers which Moody fitted out, and moulded the Rival 32 and 34 along with various Nicholsons and Faireys. Fred Parker's 30ft Javelin, and the Marcon 22 (another Alan Hill design) followed later

Warpath herself was used as a demonstrator before being bought by Wing Commander Reg Chartres in Cowes. His son Peter - now secretary of JOB - sold her to Lawrence Killick, brokerage manager at Dehler Yachts UK. "We had endless fun with Warpath," said Lawrence. "She's such a good boat, and so fast and close-winded that we consistently beat newer 25- footers".

DOWN BELOW

Warpath has the original layout with the galley to port and a dinette to starboard. The builders used every inch of her beam - but, in so doing, sited the starboard seating so far outboard that the backrest is under the side deck. To sit up without bending your head forward, you need to be in either the forward or after corner. At least this width gives you a

good-size double (by the standards of a 25-footer) once the infill I dropped into place.

Ostensibly the Tomahawk is a six-berth - including the starboard quarter berth on Warpath - but five would be a realistic maximum for most crews.

Up in the bow, the forepeak is rather dark, largely thanks to what Alan Hill describes as the "car bonnet" style of glass fibre forehatch - which, under the boat's previous ownership, was ripped open and pulled off its hinges during a mid-channel gale.

Perhaps the weakest point on an otherwise well-designed boat, it was changed on later models.

Another modification was to the interior layout, newer boats having seating both sides in the saloon and the galley moved aft by the companionway to starboard.

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