

DINGHIES

for kids



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

If you're looking for a dinghy for your brood is it best to follow the herd and choose an established class, like the Optimist, or try one of the cool-looking new dinghies on the market? **Jeremy Evans** takes a team of young sailors to try the Optimist and two newer designs...

Above (clockwise from left) The RS Tera, Optimist and O'pen Bic.

Who better to test our three youth-orientated dinghies – the O'pen Bic, RS Tera Pro and Optimists by Monsoon and Zieglmayer – than some pint-sized sailors?

Eleven-year-old Ben Stirrup has been sailing for four years, getting his RYA Level 4; and now sails and races Oppies and Mirrors at Bosham SC. Josh Sparks, also 11, is a seasoned Oppie racer based at

Mudford SC and Royal Lyngington YC – he's on a mission to beat the success of his brother! His brother Phil is 14 and a top Oppie racer, also based at Mudford SC and Royal Lyngington YC. He was twice UK national champion in 2005 and 2006 – beating 361 other Oppies.

The oldest of our testers was 16-year-old Frances Peters, who finished second in the Oppie world selection trials in 2004, won the RS Feva Europeans ▶



Above clockwise from top Bailing is an important skill for any Oppie sailor; the gaff rig may seem outdated and require technical skill to get right, but it is physically manageable by young sailors; the Optimist has a familiar helming position and rewards kinetic sailing.



and nationals in 2005, and helmed the third girls team at the 420 Junior Europeans last season.

Optimist

Do you want safety in numbers? You'll certainly find that with an Optimist, the original design with its quaint pram hull and sprit rig being 60 years old! The class gets huge entries at national and international events – capped by a record attendance of 361 boats at last year's national championship – it dominates junior club racing and is established as a feeder class for future Olympic champions.

The Optimist was designed by Clark Mills in the USA in 1947 as a very simple pram dinghy with the appearance and low cost of a wooden packing case. Sixty years later it is still recognisably the same packing case, but has been transformed into a surprisingly sophisticated and complex miniature racing machine – unsurprisingly it's no longer cheap if you want to be at the front of the fleet!

Optimists are recommended for the 8-15 year – old age range. Younger kids can sail them in

Right The Chinese-built Monsoon Optimist represents a good value package that would serve most club racers well.



lighter winds, but won't have the confidence or physical ability to be in full control of the boat. Age 15 is maximum for legal class racing, and it's surprising how many older sailors keep hanging on in for all the training they can get. 'Oppie mum' Jane Sparks told me that some of the smaller Mediterranean kids at European and World events look like mini-men, even with beards! So if the sailor is the right weight, it's fine to keep training up to age 15, enjoying the bonuses of foreign travel and European events.

The Oppie's formidable popularity ensures you're never likely to be alone. Training and racing is widely available at many clubs, and boats can easily be bought or sold second-hand. From a parent's perspective the Oppie hull is small and light (35kg) enough to carry on a roof rack or even inside the car; it also takes up minimal storage space. The sprit rig may look weird, but is actually really convenient since all the bits fit inside the boat. From a young sailor's perspective, there should be no physical problem assembling the lightweight rig, although putting the components together correctly requires some knowledge and skill.

Oppies are sailed and raced all around the world and there are almost 40 international builders. For this test, Optimist specialist IBI Sailing provided a 'Ziegelmayr Championship Package' with a German built hull as typical of the ultimate racing Oppie, and a mid-price 'Monsoon Racing Package' with hull made in China.

I must admit that I've never sailed an Oppie and wasn't going to change the habit of a lifetime, or make an oversized fool of myself in front of our illustrious team of guest testers. But a few things were clear. Firstly, it was physically easy for our smallest testers to rig and launch the Oppies, while they might struggle with the heavier rigs and hulls of the Bic and Tera. Second, rigging an Oppie to race perfection takes time and requires 'the knowledge'. Third, you don't sit still if you want to sail fast. Champion sailor Phil Sparks, in particular, appeared to be in perpetual motion as he matched his body to the rhythm of the boat and its rig. His 45-degree roll tacks and energetic offwind attitude were a joy to behold.

Fourth, there's comes a time when you grow out of this boat. Frances Peters was game enough to get back in an Oppie after being a top racer three years ago, but clearly much too big (and out of class at 16) for her old boat. Fifth, the Oppie has surprising acceleration downwind, when a full-on style of sailing can also make it quite unstable. It's also best not to capsize as, like any very old dinghy design, the hull fills with water and is kept afloat by its buoyancy bags. None of the team had problems getting the Oppies back upright, but all built up their arm muscles with loads of bailing.

Finally, you do get what you pay for. While the Ziegelmayr probably only provides a rarefied performance advantage over the copycat Monsoon, it certainly looked more stylish.

Optimist verdict

Eleven-year-old Ben only sailed the Monsoon of the two Optimists, but voted it 'My favourite!' of the boats tested, saying, 'It felt light and fast compared to my own Oppie and I very much enjoyed sailing it. Of course I only capsized and turtled the

Monsoon so I could compare it to the Tera! But it was very easy to right and get back on board from the water, as I was able to just slide in over the smooth decks. The downside was having to bail out all the water before being able to sail on!

Josh Sparks also voted an Oppie as his favourite, but preferred the Ziegelmayr. 'The best boat out of them all! Very quick upwind. It felt very stiff, very light and is good for roll tacks. If I could choose anything, this is definitely one of my all-time favourite boats.'

Comparing the Monsoon, Josh said: 'This is a cheaper kind of Oppie. It has nice grip and is easy to handle, but I found the Ziegelmayr a little bit better to sail. The Monsoon is fantastic value though, making it a really good starter boat that could even win big regattas. Definitely a good all-rounder for sailors of my age.'

Phil Sparks gave his expert opinion on the class, saying: 'An Optimist feels nice to sail but takes longer to rig than many other boats due to its old fashioned sprit rig. Body movements taught in the Optimist are useful for all dinghy racing and the rig requires a lot of technical adjustment which teaches children about rig set-up, helping with issues like mast rake and luff tension that relate to all classes of boat.'

'The hull is very stable, but after a capsize it takes a long time to bail out! In my opinion, the Optimist is one of the best boats downwind with a hull shape and speed that's very good for wave catching.'

'I believe the Optimist has a good future and will take a while to lose its current massive fleet, which provides great fun and competition. Plus there's a lot of money being pumped into the Optimist class with numerous opportunities to join squads and get training. But I wouldn't really recommend an Optimist at all if you just want to pleasure sail – it is more delicate, more technical, requires more attention and can be capsized more easily than most modern beginner boats.'

'The Ziegelmayr is an Optimist with a very high quality finish. Differences compared to cheaper Oppies are notable since everything is top of the range. I would recommend the Ziegelmayr to someone who wants to take sailing really seriously and race every weekend.'

'The Monsoon is a great Optimist for the price and offers a cheap but respectable boat. In principle it is the same as a Ziegelmayr, but without the great finish and attention to detail. It still has all the technical settings and some of the top GBR Optimist sailors are racing Monsoons. The only problem I found with this boat related to the automatic ratchet block [the auto-ratchet is an optional extra – the Harken 57 mm non-auto ratchet is fitted as standard] – I prefer the mainsheet to run free for instant trimming. Other differences include minimal things like the toestraps and daggerboard handle. I would recommend the Monsoon to anyone wishing to start competitive Optimist sailing, or even just wanting to potter about in an Oppie. You could get to the top of the fleet on the Monsoon, but it just isn't quite up to par with the Ziegelmayr. It is about £1,000 cheaper though!'

Our oldest tester Frances Peters gave her verdict, saying, 'Stepping back into an Optimist after three years, I found it a very easy boat to



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

sail and very forgiving, but quite unexciting and not very lively – also very underpowered for my size and weight! But it is a nice boat, perhaps ideal for very small and young children to learn in, especially if they want to get into competitive fleet racing.'

O'pen Bic

All our guest testers acknowledged that the O'pen Bic is a completely different approach to sailing, but I was surprised by their conservative reaction. The O'pen Bic looks about a thousand times more stylishly cool and modern than an Oppie with its shallow dish of a hull (which Bic cheekily compare to an Open 60 racing machine) and fully battened, transparent, windsurfer-style rig.

There are clearly good and bad points about this unusual new boat. Its thermoformed hull appears bash-proof and almost indestructible, but it is slightly heavier than the Oppie. The rig is like a semi-rigid aerodynamic wing and very simple to rig, but you need two people to carry it on shore. The sexy Mylar laminate sail which we tested with the boat would require an extra dose of TLC – although a Dacron alternative is also available. Eleven-year-old Ben Stirrup tried dropping the rig into the O'Pen Bic mast base, but couldn't quite handle the weight

Above The top of the range Ziegelmayr Optimist is a light, stiff racing boat.



Left The Bic's windsurfer-influenced rig is obvious

Y&Y
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Above The O'pen Bic is fast and fun. Righting after a capsizing is easy.

without help from Phil.

The initial reaction of the sailors was they were not sure where or how to sit on the boat, but I would put that down to a very different style of sailing. Look at the O'Pen Bic website and there are clearly lots of young French sailors having fun and looking comfortable, in general they need to sit further back than they are used to. It also appears that the O'Pen Bic enjoys a good blow. We had Force 2-4 during our test session, but more breeze would surely have improved the dynamic performance of this boat – just like a windsurfer.

Eleven-year-old Josh looked a perfect match for the boat in our test session, but with the wind up his 14-year-old brother Phil would surely surge ahead with just a bit more power and weight. At 16 Frances clearly looked too big for the boat, but could also have some fun in a blow. Frances is still a lot, lot lighter and smaller than either Ben Murray-Brown or Tom Dynes, two Senior Instructors at Cobnor Activities who gave the same O'Pen Bic some unofficial 'Force 6 trials' a few days earlier – they, the boat and its rig survived, and they came back with big grins.

Phil Sparks made the point that the O'Pen Bic could be a lot of fun in waves – once again providing a cross-over between dinghy and windsurfer. He was dubious about its potential as a racing class, but it's worth remembering that the Optimist has a 60-year head start and Bic Sport have a lot of money and a lot of marketing clout in countries around the world. Over the summer they were due to run the first O'Pen Bic European Cup over three days at Quiberon, following training camps and promotional events in Holland, Italy, the USA and Chile where the South American O'Pen Bic Championship will be staged in 2008, with a UK O'Pen Cup. Only time will tell if the O'Pen Bic catches on as a kids' racing machine, it certainly has the potential to offer more fun, as many of our sailors commented.

O'pen verdict

Eleven-year-old Ben reported, 'I found it difficult to find a comfortable position, because I didn't like having my legs out straight or tucked up. I was able to sail it okay upwind, but sometimes



struggled to hold the sail in without a cleat. I liked the way the boat didn't fill with water, which makes things easier after a capsizing. I also liked the idea that you could sail the O'Pen Bic with an Oppie rig if you wanted.'

Josh added, 'The O'Pen Bic is like a weird looking windsurfer! It wasn't very stable which gave me a bit of an adrenaline rush when the wind picked up downwind. I wouldn't want to race this boat, but it was the most fun sailing I've had in some time!'

Phil Sparks also felt it was like a windsurfer, saying: 'This is a very different kind of boat – more similar to a windsurfer and unlike anything I've sailed before. The O'Pen Bic we sailed had no kicking strap which made it unstable downwind with the leech too wide open – I'm glad to hear that Bic have now made the kicker a standard fitting rather than an extra! On a broad reach the boat felt fine. The centre mainsheet system was interesting and felt light and easy to handle, which is just right for young sailors. However when tacking the power comes back into the fully battened sail quite suddenly, which makes the tack slightly harder to control.

'The O'Pen Bic hull is so flat that it's not too obvious where to put your legs, which can feel awkward. When I capsized, the underside of the gunwales felt rather rough and sharp compared to the smooth finish on my Oppie, but the boat was easy to pull back upright.

'Sailing in waves pushed up by wind against tide, the O'Pen Bic was real fun. It didn't seem to take any notice of the waves – just sailed straight through to the other side with all the water disappearing over the back of the hull! I'm sure the Bic would be a great laugh for anyone wanting to have a good time on the water with friends. It's durable, pacy and quite unstable which is fun.'

Our final tester also commented on the helming position, Frances saying, 'I struggled to sail this boat, finding it hard to know how to handle it or where to sit! It could be quite an exciting and definitely challenging boat for lighter sailors when they are perhaps a little more experienced.'

RS Tera Pro

Paul Handley designed the doublehanded RS Feva

Thanks to Cobnor Activities Centre (CAC) for providing facilities for this test. CAC runs a full programme of sailing courses and activities in Chichester Harbour – for details visit www.cobnor.com



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

in 2002 which has become super-successful as the newest RYA junior racing class. Curiously, he had already designed and put the smaller singlehanded Tera into production before RS decided to adopt it as the smallest boat in their low cost, rotomoulded 'all purpose' range alongside the Feva and Vision.

The Tera is clearly a bigger boat than an Oppie and will carry taller sailors and more weight. Sixteen-year-old Frances Peters looked a good fit for the Tera with its 4.8sq m transparent Mylar Tera Pro rig and could clearly race this boat very competitively in a blow. But we suspect she is on the upper limit of size and weight for top performance, particularly taking on 14-year-old Phil Sparks who looked equally in control of the big Tera rig. Perhaps the Tera could become a singlehanded racer for young teenagers which provides progression to the RS Feva, RS500 and other boats in the RS range, but that would make for a head-on confrontation with the Topper which is well established as a junior racing class.

Frances Peters flies the RS flag, hardly surprising when her dad is a director, but her point that the Tera provides multi-purpose sailing is absolutely correct. Unlike the Oppie or O'pen Bic, you can sail the Tera with three different sail sizes. Young teenagers can race with the Pro rig shown in the photos; younger sailors can learn to sail or race with the mid-size Sport or Mini rig; an adult can sail with the Pro rig and have fun – I have done and enjoyed the experience. You can just about fit two smallish people on board; you can also take off the rig and go rowing – which is fun as well.

The Tera design looks simple – another well formed blob of rotomoulded, bash-proof plastic – but there are some clever details. All our test sailors knew where to sit and how to hike the Tera, which has side decks that force the skipper to keep weight forward. The rig is also well enough forward of the centre of lateral resistance (daggerboard) to ensure that learners get automatically blown out of irons, providing a learning experience which should be quick, forgiving and low on frustration.

RS Tera Pro verdict

Ben's initial impressions were positive, saying: 'I liked the look of this boat very much and it was very comfortable, except my feet slipped because there wasn't much grip. It was fine sailing upwind and exciting on a reach, but I struggled to control it downwind and when gybing, so had a good opportunity to find out what it was like to capsize and get back upright! It wasn't too difficult for me to pull the Tera up from the turtle position, and when righted there wasn't too much water left in the cockpit. Just as well as the self-bailer didn't seem very effective.'

Josh Sparks said it was 'very, very quick to windward when you have lots of control over the boat and its rig,' Adding, 'not so quick downwind though. Overall it seemed more of a fun beach boat – not too serious but lots of fun.'

His older brother Phil enjoyed the Tera, commenting: 'One of my personal favourites as it felt nice to sail upwind with a comfortable deck. The Tera Pro has quite a large and powerful

Above left to right The Tera has various rig options – we tested it with the 4.8sq m transparent Mylar Tera Pro rig which proved the right size for older sailors, the Tera can also be rowed, the testers found it easy to right after a capsize.

Left The Tera doesn't flip around in roll tacks like an Oppie, but didn't get stuck in irons and the layout encourages good fore and aft trim.



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mainsail, but the boat handles very easily. For beginners, the boat should be easy to set up and the rig does not seem to require a lot of technical attention. The tiller extension seemed quite short when I was sitting out which could be easily changed, and the ratchet block felt too small with a lot of load in the mainsheet. Toestraps were not adjustable – being able to change their length could make sailing the Tera more comfortable. Also, the Tera is quite a heavy boat which I noticed in tacks – it doesn't flip round like an Oppie!

'Overall, I think the Tera would be great as a boat to be shared between children as it is easy to sail, fun, durable and could be used for racing – but for that I'd like a Tera with a lighter hull! It sails well upwind, is easy to gybe and just feels like a nice boat.'

Overall verdict

As tester Phil Sparks pointed out, 'all of the boats were good in their own right.'

The Optimist is unbeatable for learning to race, which also teaches kids the best boat handling skills. The Ziegemayer Oppie package provides 'the best of everything', the Monsoon Oppie package comes close with a considerable saving.

The RS Tera is a great multi-purpose choice with different rig options (or rowlocks) for all ages. It could be fun as a racing class, but will need time to get established.

While the O'pen Bic is something totally different with loads of Gallic design style, we found that a huge range of sailors found the boat was a lot of fun, and Bic clearly have great plans to build a class racing for their baby. ■

■ OPTIMIST



■ O'PEN BIC



■ RS TERA



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DESIGN: Clark Mills in 1947
HULL: Glassfibre
LENGTH: 2.3m
BEAM: 1.3m
SAIL AREA: MAIN 3.59sqm

PRICE (Ziegemayer Championship): £2,395
PRICE (Monsoon Racing Package): £1,575

DESIGN: Vital Design in 2006
HULL: Rotomoulded polyethylene
LENGTH: 2.75m
BEAM: 1.14m
SAIL AREA: MAIN 4.5sq m

PRICE: £1,559

DESIGN: Paul Handley in 2005
HULL: Rotomoulded polyethylene
LENGTH: 2.87m
BEAM: 1.23m
SAIL AREA: PRO 4.8sq m
Sport 3.7sq m
Mini 2.7sq m

PRICE (PRO): £1,495
PRICE (SPORT): £1,295

From Charles Ainsworth at IBI

The two Optimists are championship-winning boats for different budgets. The Ziegemayer is the flagship of the premium Optimists with superb build quality and speed. It is poised to sweep through the fleet as the Ziegemayer 420 has done (over 75 per cent of boats in the top 40 at the recent 420 nationals were Ziegemayers). The Monsoon is a competitive boat and fantastic value for money; it has won races in light and breezy conditions at 2007 major events.

From Gordon Way at Ultrasport

Thanks for your test. The O'Pen Bic is a different approach to kids' sailing and the clear objective here was to bring some excitement to the sport. Our experience with the kids this summer has been an overwhelming thumbs up – they love the look and feel of the boat and whilst it may be 'different' to sail this is no bad thing. Once OD racing takes off with the O'Pen Bic we are sure that your 'elite' testers will be only too pleased to get their hands on one.

From Martin Wadhams at LDC

The test reflects the great response the Tera has received from young sailors, clubs and instructors. Numbers have grown fast in many countries and we have applied for ISAF Recognised Status. At 33kg the Tera is about the lightest rotomoulded sailboat around and has the performance to introduce youngsters to sailing and keep them hooked.