



Get zapped in a

ZAP





ZAPCAT!

Paul Glatzel

“Swap your trusty steed for a tiny little boat down on the Solent for a day. Those Zapcat thingies, for instance, now *they* sound fun!” the Editor suggested rather cryptically at the end of a brain-storming liquid lunch session one gloomy day back in May. I’d seen photos of Zapcats before so needed little more persuasion to give these mad little boats a go; ‘*a better power to weight ratio than a Ferrari Testarossa*’ screams the brochure, which pretty much says it all. Let me at them!

Zapcats were introduced to the UK in the late 90’s by Solent-based RIBs UK as a way to have a huge amount of fun for a small amount of cash.

Zapcat Racing had begun in South Africa in the early 80’s where the locals raced each other down treacherous rivers and along the raging surf of the coast, progressing to New Zealand, Australia and finally the UK. In 2001 the UK National Zapcat Racing Series was born, by 2002 the sport

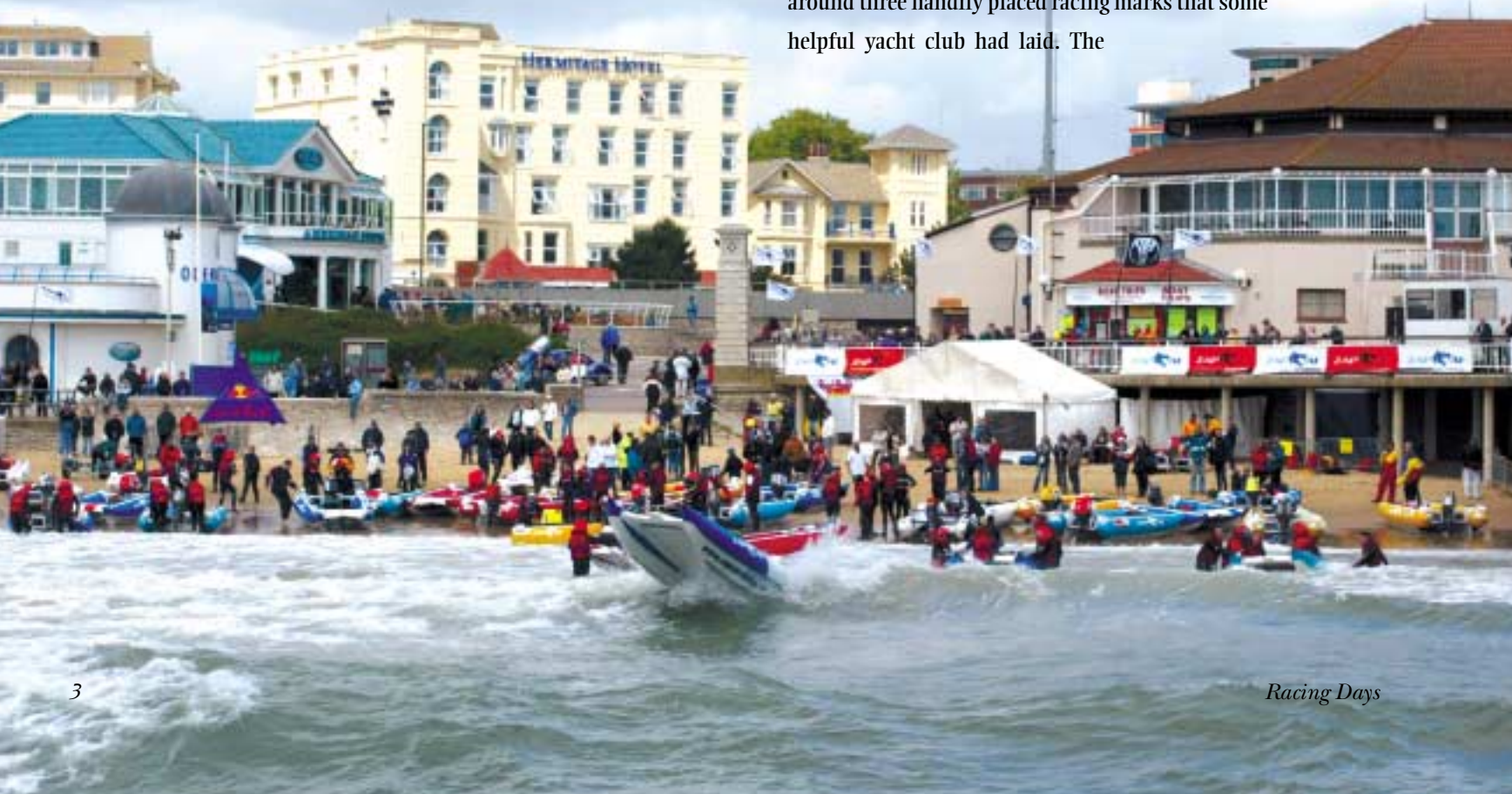
had grown rapidly to 12 events across 10 venues with Sky Sports broadcasting each and every race. So, what’s it all about? What is a Zapcat? and is it fun??





I arrived at Zapcat's Southampton headquarters feeling excited but a little concerned for my ageing frame, especially given the 'bucking bronco' type photos I have seen of the Zapcats at play. Firstly we were introduced to the craft themselves. Zapcats are mean little beasts, two PVC tubes are connected to a very solid deck in a catamaran style with a 50Hp tiller- controlled outboard bolted onto the transom at the back. All up this weighs in at only 275Kg, which is nothing when you think it is powered by a whopping 50Hp engine ~ hence the Testarossa comparison. RIBs (Rigid Inflatable Boats) are inherently hugely seaworthy and this Zapcat was no exception: fully kitted up we headed out with two other Zapcats into a blustery Solent day, Force 5-6 winds provided a challenge to these amazing little boats but nothing they were not capable of dealing with. Sitting at the stern of the boat with my Co-Driver slightly forward to keep the nose down, I slowly increased the speed through the waves, every other couple of waves we would leave the top of the wave with the prop chewing fresh air screaming for mercy at us from behind.

By reducing the power as we landed we quickly regained control, being able to throttle back on to get the boat moving at speed again. And so it continued; careful (or was it skilful!) use of the throttle kept the speed up while throttling off at the appropriate moments kept the prop in contact with the water thus materially increasing our speed across the water (those great photos you see of race boats fully airborne actually show poor driving insofar as whenever the prop leaves the water the boat loses momentum and thus falls behind other better controlled craft). One of the reasons that Zapcats have appealed to Sky Sports is no doubt the ease with which it can be filmed as the course the boats run is so compact that boats are constantly jockeying for position around the course, lapping other craft and so on. (Compare this with the visual appeal of some of the big boat racing which can be a straight race between two points 60 miles apart.) Enough playing though, RIBs UK had arranged for us to have some serious action! . It seemed only reasonable to see at first hand what appealed to Sky so we set up a short course around three handily placed racing marks that some helpful yacht club had laid. The





three Zapcats lined up and we were off, the first mark was 250 yards from the start so it was a mad dash to the turn, we spent a good percentage of that 250 yards airborne but amazingly managed to make the turn ahead of the others, a furious three laps later with some scary moments and often airborne (almost vertical at times) and we finished in second place, as the winners were a regular crew we claimed a moral victory! A leisurely cruise back to the marina gave me a chance to reflect on what had made these craft special and to rub some sore bits better!

I've done plenty of boating in my time, much of it in RIBs in rough weather, but it's safe to say the Zapcats were an unique experience. There simply cannot be a comparable thrill combining such an injection of adrenaline with the exhilaration of close quarter combat with other craft ~ an occasional dose of fear also helps!

You're probably thinking "what a lucky journalist but I can't do that, can I?". And therein lies the real secret ~ anyone can. Want to race Zapcats? Then turn up in the Solent



(or at any of the Zapcat agents around the country) with ú6000 and a RYA Level 2 Powerboat certificate (see inset) and you've got your racing machine. Enter the race series, get a few items of safety kit and YOU are a Zapcat racer - how much more open to anyone could it be? And it's not a youngster's sport either, a brief glance at the team profiles on the Zapcats website (visit www.zapcat-racing.com) shows racers in their 50s giving it their all

So did I enjoy myself? You bet I did, the Zapcats are wild but they are manageable, and if you respect their power then they are safe. They can be packed into a space of 2m³ - I took their word for that - and therefore are easily stowed in a boot or towed on a trailer with aplomb as they weigh so little. You can tow a skier and even carry up to 5 people on board and so the list goes on. As a cheap entry to the fast and furious world of powerboat racing they cannot be beaten; the fact they can do so much more too is simply a bonus. Go on - you know it makes sense!???. now where did I leave that £6000?



Courses

If you would like to learn more about powerboating then a great way to start is by taking a RYA (Royal Yachting Association) Powerboat or Motor Cruising course. Powerboat courses come under the 'National Powerboat Scheme' and typically are for people who want to gain a qualification in a high speed craft up to about 27ft.

The scheme comprises of 4 courses the most relevant for most people being the 'National Powerboat Certificate' (also known as 'Level 2'). Acquiring this qualification allows the holder to get the International Certificate of Competence ('ICC') which in effect is the boating driving licence and is essential if you intend boating abroad.

For larger craft (typically those including overnight accommodation) the RYA have the Motor Cruising Courses. The equivalent of level 2 is the Motor Cruising Helmsmans Certificate which is also a 2 day course.

The courses require no prior boating knowledge so are a great entry point for anyone who either wants/needs the qualification or just wants to try their hand at powerboats.

Rough water handling in a powerboat

To a large extent how you drive a boat in tough conditions is determined by the type of boat it is. With a planing powerboat (one that goes fast on top of the water rather than slow pushing the water out of the way (a displacement boat)), like a RIB, using the power of the boat is key to how you drive the waves.

As you approach a wave the key, usually, is to drive directly towards it, powering on as the wave approaches to lift the nose of the boat. As the boat reaches the top of the wave, power off to get the to nose to drop, then as you reach the trough you power on again, and so on. Different techniques are used in different conditions, these techniques being learnt as a product of experience and training.



Contacts

Zapcats (RIBs UK) are on 023 80 222262, email info@zapcat-racing.com or visit www.zapcat-racing.com

The Royal Yachting Association can be found at www.rya.org.uk or can be called on 0845 345 0400

In addition to his Journalistic activities, **Paul Glatzel** runs a RYA powerboat school in Poole ~ **Powerboat Training UK** and can be reached at paul@powerboat-training.co.uk or on 01707 322789 www.powerboat-training.co.uk