



PDQU

Way cooler than freshmen orientation, Cat Handling 101 moves new Antares owners to the head of the class
BY ANDREW BURTON



A gang of PDQU students goes for a sail on the Antares 44i *Eyecatcher* (top). Sharon and Gary Woodward (left) raise a toast to their new cat, *Gabridash*. Kenny and Kathy Walker (above) take a break from all the PDQU activities aboard their newly commissioned *Mer Soleil*.



ON A WARM JULY EVENING IN ONTARIO, I walked into a party. School was in session at PDQ University, and it was time for a glass of wine and a shrimp or six while the curriculum was explained to the 20 attendees. Some there joked that the course costs \$700,000 and comes with a free catamaran.

At the marina near its manufacturing facility in Whitby, Ontario, PDQ Yachts puts on a three-day program to educate new owners about its Antares 44i sailing catamarans. It struck me as a really neat bit of marketing on the company's part and as a splendid additional value for the owners. For these three days, the owners would spend time in the classroom learning

about engines, generators, electrical systems, and electronics from the very factory technicians who installed them on the boats. Technicians would show them how those systems were installed in their boats and which switch did what. Others would explain preventative maintenance and troubleshooting. A pair of professional captains would guide them through the intricacies of handling a 44-foot catamaran. Captain Nanette Kruze flew up from her home in North Carolina to explain the systems of the boat from an operator's point of view and to do boathandling drills with the owners. She spent one of the afternoons on the lake with all the women, making sure that they got experience handling the boats under sail and docking without their men around to screw things up.

On the first day, after spending a full day in the classroom learning about the boats' systems, with a break for a nice, laid-on lunch, we broke up for the evening and discussed what we'd learned and got to know each other a little better. Three or four attendees arranged to rendezvous at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, in October, and several little cruises in company were arranged.

One serendipitous result of all this contact is that the



Bobby and Don Stephens, with their dog, Bella, hauled out their C&C 25 to move aboard *Eyecatcher*.

technicians and owners get to know each other as people rather than as faceless voices on the telephone. The very tight group employed at PDQ seems to take a lot of pride in the boats, and their frequent interaction with owners—who are encouraged to visit the factory often during the building process—means that employees don't go to work on hull number 18; they work on Bob and Lynne's boat. This can't help but generate good word of mouth, and it's probably part of the reason that production of the Antares 44i is sold out until 2008.

Company president Simon Slater started PDQ in 1987 and is a true believer in cruising on catamarans, as one would expect. His ambition is to build the best possible boat—to build the Rolls-Royce of catamarans. To that end, PDQ says it only produces seven to nine of this model a year because it can't find enough skilled workers to build more, and it refuses to compromise on quality. While I haven't sold my monohull and become a cat person—Hey, Simon! Maybe getting to take an Antares 44i on a cruise in Belize would win me over!—I'm impressed with the practical advantages of cruising on a cat instead of a monohull. They're fast, stable, and have very comfortable accommodations. And all the PDQ people, from Simon on down, seemed just plain—nice.

Most of the owners or future owners who attended PDQU are already accomplished sailors. But these new cats are the biggest boats most have skippered—and the 44i feels much bigger than 44 feet—making the boathandling instruction quite welcome. Most people there were buying their new boats with the intention of going cruising within the next couple of years. An interesting fact that came up in conversation with Rob Poirier, PDQ's marketing director, was that almost all of the owners of the 18 Antares 44i's that had been delivered (as of October 2006) were living aboard and cruising.

There were three brand-new boats at the marina for the program. One was still in the commissioning process, though owners Sharon and Gary Woodward had sold their car and were commuting to the marina from their hotel on folding bicycles every day while they waited, patiently, for technicians to put the finishing touches on their new home. They came to the PDQ cat from a 31-foot powerboat on which they cruised Chesapeake



Bob and Lynne Walsh purchased hull number 18 of the Antares 44i, and they're in the midst of planning an open-ended cruise.

Bay. Though sailors, they felt the powerboat was the right choice to get around the bay, given that they could only get on the boat for too-short weekends.

After PDQU ended, they spent the summer getting to know their new Antares 44i catamaran, *Gabridash*—it's derived from their names and the names of their sons, Brian and David—and had a 10-day cruise in the Thousand Islands of Lake Ontario before returning to the marina so PDQ could pull the mast and lay it on deck. On September 5, they left on the first leg of their cruise, across Lake Ontario, down the Oswego Canal to the Erie Canal, and to the Hudson River, where a team from PDQ arrived to restep the mast and give the boat a final check before turning them loose. When I spoke to Sharon and Gary in October, they'd cruised down the Hudson to New York City, then south along the New Jersey shore, had a perfect ride up Delaware Bay, and were sailing their old home waters and getting ready to head south to the Florida Keys and the Bahamas for the winter.

Kenny Walker's million-candlepower grin was a welcome sight on the sunny Ontario mornings. He and his wife, Kathy, gave every indication of being on top of the world as they walked down the dock. And it was easy to see the reason, as I admired their newly commissioned Antares 44i, *Mer Soleil*. They couldn't wait to soak up all the information presented at PDQU before leaving on their first cruise to check out their new, shiny cat. They waited for the Erie Canal to open on August 19 before quickly making their way to Annapolis for their daughter's birthday in September. Aside from getting stuck in New York City as Tropical Storm Ernesto blew through, they had a smooth, uneventful passage. Kenny says he found the instruction at PDQU very useful, as his last boat was a Catalina 28, which he and Kathy sailed on Lake Hefner, near their home in Oklahoma City. They'd chartered in the Caribbean, and even in Ontario and Texas, before deciding to go cruising full time and starting the boat search that culminated in the decision to buy the Antares 44i. They were still figuring out all the systems when they got to Annapolis, but they had a real head start over trying to figure it all out alone. *Mer Soleil* is a big boat for them and was a little intimidating to handle at first; again, the instruction helped a lot.

They're happy to have all the extra elbow room on their new boat, and Kenny noted that when his elderly in-laws visited for 10 days, they loved not having to hold on to something all the time, and they also appreciated the ease of getting on and off the boat via the transom steps.

Bobby and Don Stephens left their home in Pensacola, Florida, after hauling out their C&C 25 for the year. They headed up to Ontario to move aboard their new Antares 44i, the aptly named *Eyecatcher*. She stood out at the marina with her high, bright-yellow topsides and small, white watchdog, Bella. After the PDQU program was over, Bobby and Don left for a shakedown cruise on Lake Ontario, during which they met up with the Walkers on *Mer Soleil* and cruised in company for a few days.

Impatient to start their cruise rather than wait for the Erie Canal to reopen after the recent flood damage, they headed down the St. Lawrence River. Bobby says they stopped every 30 to 40 miles along the way, visiting the Thousand Islands, Montréal, and Québec. They also spent time cruising in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Maine.

Bobby said seeing all kinds of whales, from pilots to humpbacks, has been the highlight of the cruise for her so far. Don said his favorite memory is of Bobby flagging down Maine lobstermen as they motored by in their boats so she could get fresh lobsters for their dinner. They even motored 25 miles up the Penobscot River to Bangor, where Don charmed a bunch of the local politicians he'd befriended there while Bobby flew home to Florida for a week.

I called them in early October for an update on their travels. Over the noise of their wake, Don exulted in the fact that they were speeding across Peconic Bay, at the east end of Long Island, New York, doing 9.9 knots in 17 knots of true wind, at 70 degrees apparent, with the screecher set and the main furled.



A women-only crew gets ready to spend the day learning to handle the boat under sail and practicing docking techniques.



PDQ president Simon Slater (front, left) shares a laugh with boat owners Kathy Walker (rear, left) and Lynne Walsh (front, right) while sailing on Lake Ontario.

“We’re dead level and going fast,” he said. “That’s why I bought the catamaran.”

Lynne and Bob Walsh hail from the not-so-well-known sailing capital of Sandpoint, in northern Idaho. For several years, they’ve been sailing and racing their J/30 on Lake Pend Oreille, a 35-mile stretch of freshwater that provides scenic vistas and good breeze during their short sailing season.

At PDQU, they both quickly grasped the concept of handling the catamaran with the twin engines and delighted in how maneuverable the boat was. Their new Antares 44i is hull number 18, scheduled to be launched on October 24, 2006. They planned to have Captain Nanette deliver the boat to Norfolk, Virginia, in November. There they’d take over the boat and make their way down the Intracoastal Waterway to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. They plan to keep the boat at a marina there for the winter, and they’ll come down for short cruises in the Florida Keys and the Bahamas.

When I spoke to them in October, Lynne and Bob had their J/30 for sale and had already sold their house and construction business. Included in the sale of the business was the provision that they stick around until May 2007 to help the new owners with the transition. Meanwhile, they were organizing the registration and insurance for the new boat and voraciously reading navigation and safety-at-sea books.

By May 1, their goal is to have sold all their on-land possessions and be in Fort Lauderdale to move aboard full time. From there, they plan to slowly cruise north to explore New England and the Canadian Maritimes in the summer of 2007 before heading to the Caribbean for the winter. They have no schedule except to be in St. Martin and enter the Heineken Regatta in March 2008. Lynne says, “We love racing, and we’re going to miss it, but since PDQ stands for ‘pretty darn quick,’ we’re going to put the boat to the test.”

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