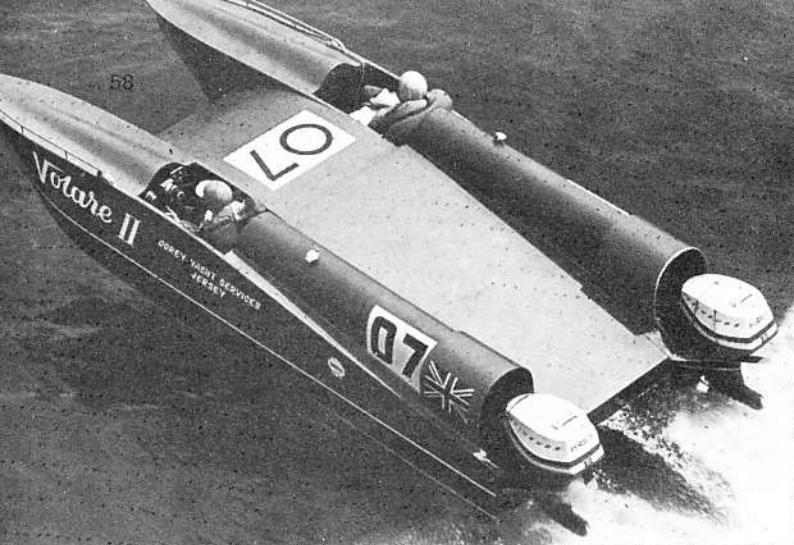


The Evinrude-powered Schulze (right) of May and Hill, U.S.A., who came third overall in the 1968 Paris 6-Hour.



Volare II was one of the most successful catamarans in Class III offshore racing last season, in the hands of James Beard and Clive Curtis.

Jim Merton from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, piloting his *Switzer Wing*, powered by two 125-h.p. Mercurys, to a record-setting win in the outboard division of the Arizona 9-Hour race.



THE SIXTIES — ERA OF THE CATAMARAN?

Ray Bulman looks at the potent new twin-hullers, now winging on to the racing scene.

WE HAVE reached the end of a decade which has seen many improvements and innovations in hull design, in both power and sail, but if the improvements can be measured in terms of speed they can certainly be measured in the enormous stride forward in powerboat racing. For in the past 10 years, the average speeds achieved have been far higher than any other period, and the sixties will go down in history as the era of the catamaran.

Although most people credit the Italians with this enormous breakthrough, and indeed they and the Austrians have perhaps had more international success than any other country, experiments in multi-hulled powerboats had been carried out in many countries well before 1960; few of these were pursued, however.

The Italian firm of Molinari now have the honour of leading catamaran builders, much like the Prout brothers with their sailing counterparts in the late fifties. Whether we will ever see Molinari branching into the sailing field is hard to say, but if we talk of the catamaran scene in this country over the past 10 years, we must turn to the Prout brothers, for it was they who branched into power, albeit as a short experiment, in 1960/61.

Approximately 14ft overall and powered by an 18h.p. Johnson, a top speed of 21m.p.h. in cooking form was claimed with one person aboard. A similar outfit to this became the first British finisher at the 1960 Paris 6-Hour, but by 1961 it had been joined by three others that ran in a special class at the Boatbuilders' Trials. Although fitted with a larger horsepower engine *Panther*, as this Prout cat was called, only managed a top lap speed of 25.714m.p.h. The three other catamarans competing, *Ellicat* built by Hemming and Morris and fitted with two Mercury outboards, averaged 31.359m.p.h. and *Merrycat*, built by John Merryfield—also powered by twin Mercurys—managed 35.857m.p.h. The Woodmet Co's American MkI cat, also with twin Mercurys (but of a larger size) achieved 39.387m.p.h. which was extremely good at that time and was only beaten on average speed by the Toby Marine-built *Capri GT Sprint* mono hull which put up 41.002m.p.h.

The Prout *Panther* was on her own in the 1962 Boatbuilders' Trials, averaging 34.123m.p.h. compared with 43.636m.p.h. of the

winning Shakespeare Avon mono. It should be remembered that thought behind cat design in those early days lay in achieving results from the lower wetted area, and the one thing a cat builder considered disastrous was the effects of kiting caused by air lift; little did they know that later designers would exploit this very air lift to gain speed.

After the 1962 trials, development of circuit catamarans was shelved, at least in this country, and *Panther*, which had shown so much initial promise, finally ended her days when damaged beyond repair in the first ever Putney/Calais race in 1962. The Prouts did in fact build another racing catamaran, but this time a cabin type, 25ft overall and powered by twin 75h.p. Johnson outboards. Called *Thunderbird*, it finished 15th in the *Daily Express* Cowes/Torquay race of that year. Purbeck Marine also produced an offshore catamaran called *Cheetah* which raced for two seasons in Class III; although reliable, she was just not fast enough. Neither of these cats incorporated any air-lift techniques in their design.

Meanwhile on the circuits, the two years up to 1964 saw further development of mono-hulled craft, particularly the large Chestnut hulls from Bennett Boats and later, the deep vee Merryfield/Melly Levis—the first of which, *Thunderbolt*, will be remembered for her overall win in the 1964 Paris 6-Hour.

Then came a complete change in multi-hull thinking. Earlier kiting troubles had been experienced because the wide deck joining the two hulls produced lift similar to that of an aircraft wing, as achieving a lower wetted area had always been the target of the high speed designer. With careful planning this very lift could be used to advantage to lift the hull as much as possible so that it might run on top of, rather than below, the surface. While others were developing monos, the Italian Torriggia Co entered two catamaran craft in the French Aix-Le-Bains 24-Hour race near Dijon. One of these was driven by the then unknown Italian Rasini brothers. Both these outfits left the rest of the field and finished miles ahead of their nearest rival—Bill Shakespeare in one of his Avons—but as they could only compete in the experimental class the top prize went to Shakespeare.



The pundits shook their heads, they said their success was a fluke and to some extent wrote them off as contraptions that would never catch on. But they were in for a shock. Within 12 months, the now famous Italian firm of Molinari had joined in, and in the hands of Roda and Capalletti, one of their 100h.p. Mercury-powered prototypes finished fourth in the 1965 Paris 6-Hour. Another driven by Dominis and De Vecchi came ninth, while a Torriggia of Corazza and Citterio came seventh. Still the British kept their faith in the mono hulls, stating that the cats did not suit our particular venues. Once again we were being left behind.

In the Paris 6-Hour of 1966 Renato Molinari and Cesare Scotti took the honours and many cats, all overseas-owned (including one powered by an experimental Mercury gas-turbine inboard) showed a clean pair of heels to the monos. Meanwhile, Tommy Sopwith had introduced an air-lift type cat to the offshore scene in the form of the Walters/Wynne designed and built *Flyover*—and fly she did. But different problems exist in the more severe offshore environment, and although she left everyone standing, she was literally pounded to pieces.

Because of the conservatism of British designers, Jackie Wilson could wait no longer and in 1967 imported a Torriggia catamaran. However, when tuned for top speed on the straights it was not so good on the corners, and when tuned for cornering it was slower on the straights, hence he was still beaten by the top monos in Britain with an "I told you so" attitude. Undaunted, he disposed of *Hell Cat*, as she was called, and imported an Austrian Schulze—very close to a Molinari in development—and with this he had more success.

Another offshore cat competed in 1967, designed by Sonny Levi on the air lift principle. *Fat Cat*, owned and driven by Lady Violet Aitken, was stronger than Tommy Sopwith's *Flyover*, but because of this had a poor power/weight ratio in class III and was generally uncompetitive.

Eleven Molinaris and one Schulze turned up at the 1967 Paris 6-Hour. This time Carlo and Enrico Rasini came first overall using

a 125h.p. BP Mercury-powered Molinari, finally proving the cat was no myth. More British drivers began to take notice and during the next 12 months a few were imported—mainly Schulzes, for by now the world wide demand on Molinari was so great his order books were full.

By the 1968 Paris 6-Hour the majority of the prominent builders were producing catamarans including Charlie Sheppard (Bristol Boats) with the first of his *Soggy Moggy*'s taking top honours in class 0I. The overall award was taken by a Molinari driven once again by Renato Molinari himself.

Last season virtually everyone was experimenting with cats, including Bill Shakespeare who introduced a stepped version of the outfit he used in 1968. This, however, was not continued with and he reverted to his proven design which is almost unique inasmuch that the driver's forward sitting position tends to keep the bow down in strong headwinds.

Clive Curtis and James Beard came back from America in the latter part of '68 with stories of a very fast catamaran called a Switzer Wing that was being driven at breakneck speeds by Kenny Kitson. The interesting feature of this design was its stepped hull—which was proving its worth—and putting their heads together they came up with an offshore boat called *Volare II* built by J. Osborne of Jersey. *Volare II* at last proved that cats could successfully compete offshore in varying weather conditions and she gained many prizes.

At the last Paris 6-Hour race one lost count of the number of catamarans competing, and it was obvious that the days of the racing mono hull in the larger classes, at least in their present form, are numbered. But this is by no means the end of the story, even faster creations are being produced in the States, one of which is called the Jones Tunnel Hull. And Beard and Curtis have developed a flying machine called *Cougar* (it really has wings) reported to be so hair-raising in its speed potential that it has never been seriously driven since its trials in Belgium where it reached the 90m.p.h. mark before taking off—with a single 1,500c.c. engine. Phew! □