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Why a spill in a 'cat' can mean disaster

by GERALD

BROWN

THE fate of transatlantic yachtsman Joan de Kat and his trimaran Yaksha will reopen the bitter controversy on multi-hulled boats. Are they sailing craft of the future or floating death-traps?

The enthusiastic developers of the double and triple hulled newcomers to the sailing world claim they are the revolutionary breakthrough which make traditional sleek yachts as obsolete as dug-out canoes.

But many experienced critics believe the catamaran and the trimaran will never prove to be any more than dangerous experimental vessels.

Mr. John Pyman, technical secretary of the Royal Yachting Association, said: "These new craft are pushing the knowledge and techniques of sailing to new limits.

"But many yachtsmen feel the departure from the traditional monohull design is unacceptable."

HE added: "Despite the advantages of better initial handling and speed far in excess of conventional vessels, these beasts are ultimately unstable if pushed to the extreme. "And when a catamaran or trimaran capsizes the consequences are inevitably more serious than a spill with a normal yacht.

"The traditional yacht may break its mast and rigging when it capsizes but it usually rights itself and leaves the crew with some shelter and control.

"But a 'cat' or a 'tri' in the same situation will probably stay upside down and may very well break up."

He added: "There are probably only a dozen people in Britain who have really mastered the technique of sailing multi-hulled vessels.

"Their experimental work with highly stressed, light craft operating at high speed provides valuable sailing research.

"They are pushing ahead all the time to prove their claims for their new concepts."

The pioneers who want to bring a new dimension to sailing are already paying a high price for their enterprise.

TWO years ago South African yacht designer Tom Corkhill was lost in the South Atlantic in a trimaran. Last year an Australian, Hedley Nicoll, vanished after steering his catamaran into a Pacific typhoon to see how it handled.

This year the American designer Arthur Piver was lost in the Pacific while sailing his trimaran on a qualifying voyage for the present transatlantic race.

But these accidents do not seem to have deterred the enthusiasts.

Thirteen of the 35 entrants for the transatlantic race are piloting multi-hulled yachts.

One leading yachting expert told me: "Some regard the present-day catamarans and trimarans as the prototypes for a new breed of sailing craft—just as string and canvas biplanes brought the development of modern aircraft.

"Others see them as potentially lethal boats with a very limited value and no future.

"Only time and experience will tell."