

## **A brief look back at the Lipton Challenge's two trial years in the Cape 31**

Six years ago an exciting project was launched in South Africa, thanks to the vision and generosity of Lord Irvine Laidlaw. The mission was to develop a fleet of world-class all-South African-built high-performance one-design sportsboats, suitable for this country's coastal conditions and relatively affordable for a boat in the 30 foot range.

Dublin-based Mark Mills was commissioned to design the new boat, and Uwe Jaspersen was appointed as the licensed builder.



The Cape 31 was born, and immediately proved to be a stellar performer. It turned out to be a rocket downwind and yet surprisingly good upwind, challenging to sail but capable of being raced in 30 knots and more.

Within 18 months there was a fleet of 11 boats racing in Cape Town, and the hope was that the class would grow wherever else in SA there was a demand for high-performance one-design racing.



At that stage the trusty L26, having provided a wonderful platform for high-level one-design racing in SA during the eighties, nineties and early two-thousands was reaching the end of its life in this particular role.

Consequently the Lipton Trustees proposed two “trial years”, with two contests in the Cape 31 as one of the alternatives to continuing to hold the Lipton Challenge in the L26. This proposal was supported by the majority of the clubs that voted on the suggested change.

The first Lipton Challenge in the Cape 31, held in Table Bay in August 2019, lifted this historic inter-club event to an entirely new level. If one looks at the international track-records amongst the 75 sailors competing for the Cup in 2019 it is quite clear that there has never in the history of our sport been such a gathering of SA Sailing talent and experience in one fleet at one time.

This was a step change from the past decade of Lipton Challenges, where year after year a small group of very good sailors had dominated the fleet.

Fortunately the initial group of Cape 31 owners included some who had been members for many years of a range of non-Cape clubs, including the Royal Natal, Witbank, Walvis Bay and Aeolians, and who chose to represent those clubs. In addition, members of the newly-formed club Sailing PE were also able to secure a boat. This meant a reasonable spread of clubs beyond the Western Cape in the 2019 event.

The result was an exceptional week of sailing - one-design racing at its best. Races were won by Witbank, Royal Cape, Royal Natal and Aeolians, but in the end it was the Witbank team that wrested the Cup away from Royal Cape in the final minutes of the final race.

The following year the 2020 Lipton Challenge was initially postponed and then finally cancelled owing to the COVID situation, and it was during this period that the Cape 31 Class in SA suffered a double blow.

Firstly, Uwe Jaspersen, the ever-popular builder of the first 15 Cape 31s, passed away unexpectedly in July 2020. The Cape sailing community lost a good friend, and the Cape 31 Class lost the energy and commitment of a man with decades of boat building experience.

Secondly, the Cape 31 was “discovered” by sailors in the UK. In no time it was being described internationally as “the world’s best 30-foot sportsboat”. This was great news for the Cape 31 Class, and a tribute to our designer Mark Mills, but there was an unfortunate consequence - an immediate undermining of our domestic fleet. With the demand for new boats sky-rocketing and no builder in place, it was no surprise that existing owners were being offered more for their 2 to 3 year old boats than they initially paid. For a variety of reasons some of the owners agreed to part with their boats, reducing the local fleet to six Cape 31s.

Then some good news. Elian Perch, for many years an investor in and benefactor of sailing in SA, teamed up with Davey James and Stephen du Toit to form “Cape Performance Sailing” and to pick up the baton as the Cape 31 licensed builder. Currently geared up to produce two boats a month, Cape Performance Sailing have already completed their 13th boat. They have another 7 in production, and have confirmed orders for a further 6. The UK owners are expecting a fleet of 20 Cape 31s in Cowes Week this August.

In spite of the reduced number of available boats in SA and the challenges of COVID, the 2021 Lipton Challenge in Saldanha Bay delivered another cracking one-design contest. Races were won by Royal Cape, Royal Natal, Witbank and Aeolians. After twelve races, each at least 12 nautical miles, it went right down to the wire. Going into the final race it was effectively a 3-way tie between the defenders Witbank and two of the challengers Royal Cape and Royal Natal. Whichever of the three beat the other

two would take the Cup. This was a first in the Lipton Challenge - it had never happened before.

After two hours of racing Aeolians rounded the final windward mark in the lead, with RCYC in second place and Witbank right on their tail. Royal Cape had been top of the leaderboard from day 1, and had the Cup firmly in their sights. But it was not to be. The last run was an intense tactical tussle, and in the final 200m to the finish RNYC edged past both RCYC and Witbank into second place and the Cup was theirs. Heartbreak for the Royal Cape guys, elation for Royal Natal, and one of the most closely fought contests in the long history of the Lipton Challenge was done and dusted.

This also brought to an end the Lipton Challenge's two trial years in the Cape 31 Class. What did the trial tell us?

On the positive side, the move to the Cape 31 fundamentally changed the game, and ticked a number of important boxes.

1. It attracted a very large number of SA's top sailors back to the contest, and at the same time excited a raft of up-and-coming youngsters who had entered our sport in the foiling era and were looking for the kind of racing that the TP52s display.
2. It tested the sailors in a boat that is challenging to sail, and is a real handful in a breeze - good boat-handling is rewarded and mistakes punished severely.
3. It opened up the contest and produced the kind of down-to-the wire competition that we hadn't seen in the Lipton Challenge for a very long time.
4. It put an end to the concerns over "fairness of competition" - the Cape 31 is a very strict one-design.
5. It offered a "media-friendly" event - not only exceptionally close racing, but the Cape 31 also looks good and provides spectacular action when the wind is up.

However, on the downside, unless and until the Cape 31 Class takes root around the country, holding the Lipton Challenge in Cape 31s will continue to exclude many of the clubs that might otherwise have competed.

With the importance of inclusivity uppermost in our minds, the Lipton Trustees are now proposing a further two trial years, this time opening the Challenge up to all boats with a valid ORC International Certificate and with a CDL in the range 8.000 to 9.780. As required by the Lipton Deed of Gift, all recognized yacht clubs in SA are being invited to vote on this proposal. The outcome will be announced on April 1st.

David Hudson  
Chair - Lipton Trustees.

