



Mike Lyons testing a prototype Halo rig on Lake Garda

Mike Lyons has been in around the Blaze Class almost since its inception and despite a two year defection to the RS300, he eventually returned to the Blaze with a mission to 'sort out the rig'. As part of the Blaze Association he worked with Jeremy Robinson at Sobstad to do just that and the resulting improvements saw a surge of popularity, with more than a hundred new boats sold before Topper opted out of the glass fibre boat market. Mike saw an opportunity to move the class forward even further and under the banner of Cirrus Sailboats, took on the manufacturing and marketing rights. More recently he has also negotiated the design rights and launched a new epoxy Mark III Blaze hull manufactured now by Rondar. After taking on board feedback from the heavier members of the Blaze fraternity, he is in the process of launching the new Halo Class, based on the existing Blaze hull but sporting a supercharged rig.

I joined Mike at Burghfield Sailing Club to take a look at his new boat and to try out the new Halo rig for myself. I asked first of all about the concept of producing a boat specifically targeted at the heavyweight market. The well established

classes, such as the Finn and Phantom, clearly serve this type of sailor pretty well, but in both cases there has been an influx of successful lighter sailors over the last few years, who have pushed down the perceived optimum weight. So can the Halo hope to address the big boy market simply by putting a larger rig on an existing hull shape? Mike believes that the original Blaze hull can easily cope with the extra sail area. 'The Blaze hull is actually derived from an International 14 design so there is plenty of buoyancy to cope with the bigger sailor. Flat with very little rocker, it's a well proven and easy hull that is very fast indeed in anything over 8-9mph. The problem has been that guys who are 100kg plus have just not been competitive in the light to medium conditions. With an extra 1.25 square metres of sail, the Halo rig is a chance for them to enjoy sailing their existing hulls in any conditions and we hope it will be the antidote to the lightweights stealing all the chocolates. We need to work out the fine detail on the weight rules but essentially the helm plus the hull and any corrector weights, will need to exceed a minimum weight. So you can join in if you are light but the big guys are never at a disadvantage and are often at a considerable advantage as their body weight is mobile rather than the static weight of the corrector the light guys will have to carry.' The expected boost in performance is perhaps best illustrated by the provisional PY rating, which positions the Halo some twenty five points below the existing Blaze and the Phantom.

We had both an original (thirteen year old) Blaze hull, sporting the new Halo rig, as well as a brand new Mark III to compare and contrast. Mike was quick to point out that although the mast and boom combination has more or less been finalised, the sail design itself was still a work in progress. In fact the sail had just arrived from North that day and was the first time Mike had seen it rigged. 'We have been experimenting with a few different top shapes to the sail and this iteration has a less pronounced square top than the previous version which we had the chance to test at Garda a few weeks ago. Mike Lennon from North will be sailing the boat in the next few days to help us try to get the sailplan absolutely right.' The new rig certainly looks the part and appears nicely proportioned in relation to the size of the boat. Mike explains that early versions of the rig featured an alloy wing mast, which had performed beautifully, but hadn't produced the necessary stiffness. 'It was a pity but to get the stiffness from a wing mast we wanted, we would have had to go to carbon, which was much more expensive. We didn't believe that our market would be willing to pay A-Class Cat wind mast prices. So the alternative was to go for the smallest diameter conventional spar we could find. The tapered 6.7m 50mm section that we have chosen gives us the performance and cost balance we wanted even without the rotation.'

So where did Mike see the Halo sailors coming from? Wasn't there a chance that the existing Blaze fleet would be cannibalised? 'When you are using an existing hull there will always be that possibility. What we were hoping for was interchangeability of parts. I believe there will be plenty of Blaze sailors who will want a larger rig inland. They have no problem on the sea in a real breeze, but they feel a little bit under powered inland and would consider having two rigs. Looking at the other classes, generally most boat builders don't target the larger guys because the market isn't big enough. We can justify it because we already have a hull which carries the weight rather well. Our tooling is already paid for and that is the real barrier to other manufacturers trying to address this sector. We have had a good deal of interest from people wanting to try the rig and we expect to sell around twenty Halo rigs this year with about a third of them going on new boats and the rest being used on existing hulls. It's no bad thing that this initiative could mean that old Blaze hulls will get dragged out of dinghy parks and given a new lease of life'. With two hundred and eighty plus Blazes sold and around fifty of them turning out each year for the UK National Championship there is potentially a large pool of hulls available for a Halo makeover and it seems likely that second hand prices could be set to rise. Mike envisages that the Halo Class will be run in parallel with the existing Blaze association until it becomes of a size to justify its own independent administration and believes that as early as next year we could see the first UK Halo National Championship. How does Mike believe the Halo will differentiate itself from both the existing and more recent heavyweight singlehanders? 'The Halo will deliver great performance all round the course but the real differentiator is the opportunity to get bigger guys planing upwind. There aren't many singlehanders which can do that currently.'

A new Mark III hull complete with Halo rig will set you back around £7500 and existing users looking to reinvigorate their Blazes with a new Halo rig should expect to pay a list price of £1700 - £1800. Outside the UK there is interest in the Halo both from the US (where the original demand for heavyweight singlehander came from) and Chile.

Halo Singlehander Test Session

Sailing the Halo....

Ashore, the Halo's 2.5m width and towering rig certainly make it look unmistakably like a big guy's boat. Afloat, the enormous slab of cockpit floor provides a reassuring working platform, with control lines for kicker, cunningham and plate up/down, all easily accessible from the wings. The outhaul control is on the boom but like the Blaze it seems an over-loose foot is the way to go. Conditions for the test were a fitful eight to ten knots so I had low expectations speedwise, but reaching away from the shore I was pleasantly surprised by the rate of acceleration. Even perched on the inside of the windward wing the boat immediately began to plane without any real encouragement from me. Bearing away on to a dead run produced a pretty dramatic drop in speed and required the adoption of a kneeling position in the

centre of the boat making reducing the opportunity to 'work' the boat. Reach to reach gybing around the club marks was pretty stress free, once I realised how much time I needed to give myself to get from rack to rack and remembered to allow for the width of the wings.

Upwind the boat felt powered up but never over overstretched making me wonder if perhaps an even bigger sail plan could be considered. The size and elevation of the racks certainly appeared to give fantastic leverage and the sensation was not dissimilar to sailing a trapeze boat. It wasn't windy or steady enough to entertain thoughts of upwind planing but in the stronger puffs it was easy to believe that a little more pressure would get her up and going.

My brief test in the Halo left me impressed overall and yearning for another go in fresher more open conditions where I think the true character of the boat would emerge. For sure big boy Blaze owners will love it but moreover it stands a realistic chance of luring a new contingent of heavyweights from classes like the Solo and Laser.

