



ILLUSTRATION: GUY VENABLES

## The racing riddle

Nigel Sharp debates the RYA's new cruising handicap system

The RYA is in the process of introducing the National Handicap for Cruisers (NHC) as a consequence of the diminishing amount of data, essential for the continuation of the traditional Portsmouth Yardstick scheme, being returned to the Association by the clubs.

Wherever the new scheme is operated, each boat will initially be allocated a measurement-based handicap number from the RYA's "Base List", but that number will then be adjusted according to the boat's subsequent racing performance. If the boat then moves to another club it will return to the base number and the adjustments will start again.

I'm sure we all wish the RYA well with its new scheme but it could be that the instigators are not aware of the comments made on the subject in the yachting press over the past century or more, starting in the second ever issue of *The Yachtsman* in May 1891. They said: "Probably nothing connected with yacht racing has puzzled the brains of yachtsmen more than the problem of how to deal with cruising yachts when racing." "Many theories have been suggested, and numerous schemes have been tried, but so far none has given



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satisfaction, nor does it seem probable that this much-to-be-desired end will ever be attained... when a handicap has turned out good it has generally been more down to luck than anything else." In August 1904 the same magazine's editor commented that "handicapping at its best is far from satisfactory and it is seldom that one does not find a grumbler".

*Yachting Monthly* didn't waste any time in getting on the bandwagon. In the very first issue, in May 1906, the correspondent known as M.I.N.A. wrote that "the question of rating yachts for racing purposes is probably one of the most perplexing problems ever encountered in the history of any sport. It would appear to be incapable of solution, and certainly an ideal state has not yet been reached. Theoretically the problem has been solved times without number, but a solution capable of practical application has not so far been devised. As a matter of fact, handicap racing is irksome and impossible to the keen sportsman. The very nature of it leaves the impression that there must be unfairness somewhere."

Three years later Percy Cotton wrote in the same magazine that the definitions of a handicap allowance was the "half bottle of whisky, which should be allowed to each member of the handicap committee", and that a handicapper was "a cloven-hoofed mammal, distinguished for the thickness of his skin... a being without friends". In the September 1920 issue, in a letter entitled "Futile Handicapping", Douglas Harrison asked "can your readers assist me? I am looking for the limit in futility. Barring the war, the best I can manage at present is the system of handicapping."

A perfect handicapping system would, of course, deal with all the differences between competing boats so that the best crew wins on corrected time. The NHC performance-based system is not attempting to do that and, of course, there can never be a perfect system. "We must realise that no system of handicapping can be infallible," Douglas H C Birt wrote in the Winter 1950 issue of *The Yachtsman*. "The best to be hoped for is that a fair chance will be given to all boats over the period of a season."

Those of us who take part in handicap racing have to accept all the drawbacks but if we can't, there are plenty of opportunities for one-design racing everywhere.