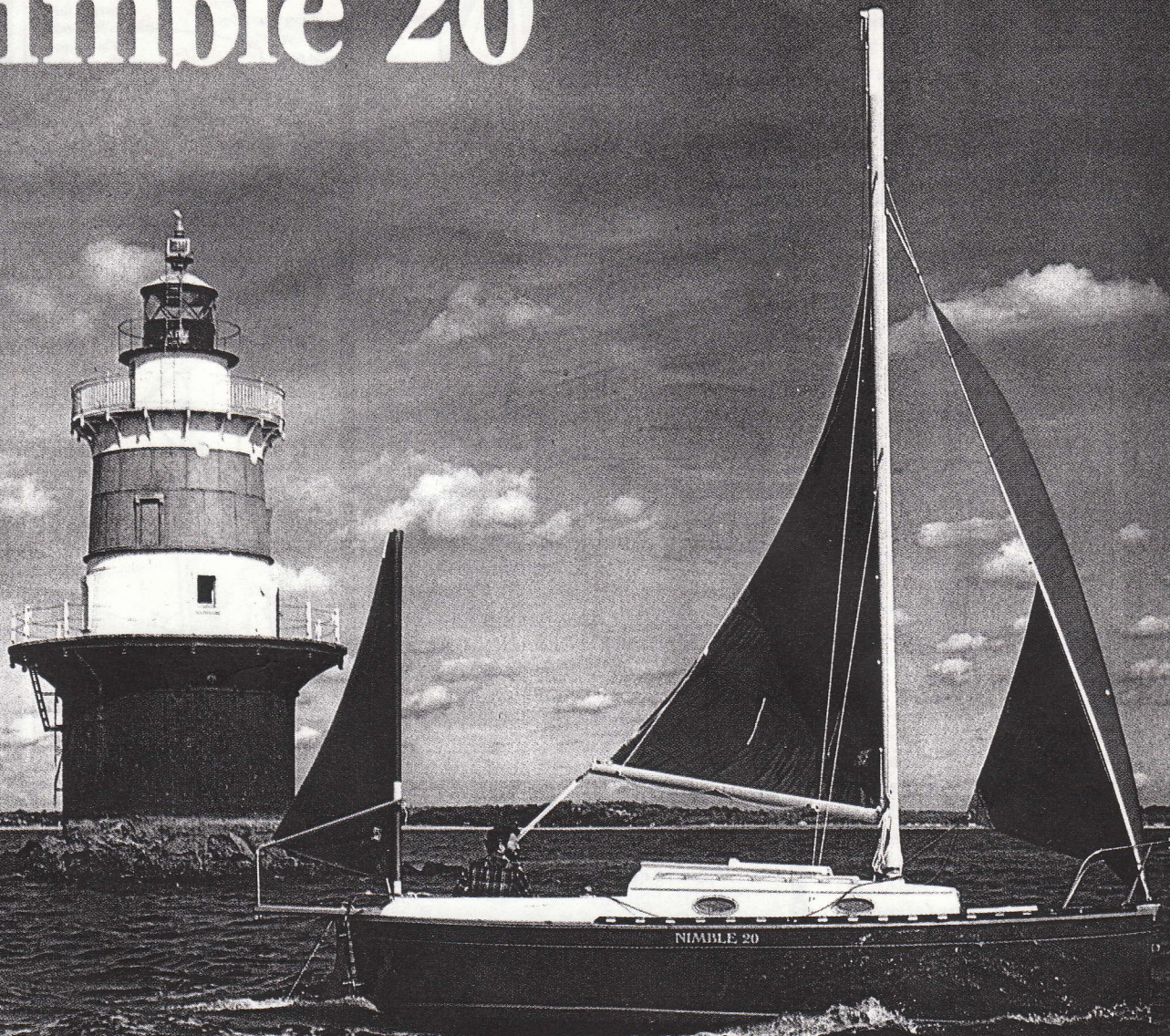


# Nimble 20



Most people's first impression of the Nimble 20 is that it's "cute." It's not. The Nimble 20 would more correctly be called charming. It is small, but not toy-like, and traditional without being a parody of some past era. In creating the Nimble, designer Ted Brewer and builder Jerry Koch of Nimble Boats wanted a boat that would meet modern demands for easy trailering and minimal maintenance. But they also wanted the design to stand out from the pack of "look-alike" boats, to have a classic appearance that would age gracefully, if at all. For inspiration, they went back to the source, to the boats that launched small boat cruising as we know it today — the canoe yawls of Victorian England's Humber Yawl Club (see sidebar "Canoe Yawl Origins"). As a result, everything on the Nimble is tanbark, buff, bottle green, and bronze. The cabin's shape is in proportion, without the excessive crown

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by David Seidman  
photographs by Mitch Carucci

---

some use to gain headroom. Even the shape of the cockpit is invitingly round and organic.

From the gunwale downwards though, there is something about the boat that doesn't match the cabin and deck. Her profile is blunt, and she seems a little boxy aft. I was particularly surprised at her slab sides and flat bottom, especially given the shapely precedent of the canoe yawl. My curiosity got the best of me, and I asked Ted Brewer, "Why?"

Pointing to the boat's lines, Ted explained that the bottom and sides are not really flat. They are actually shallow arcs, similar to L. Francis Herreshoff's *Meadowlark*.

"The old canoe yawls were heavy, carrying almost as much ballast as the Nim-

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**Victorian Character.** *A Nimble 20 scoots along under full sail. With the Nimble, designer Ted Brewer sought to recreate the look of Victorian canoe yawls on a shoal-draft, easily trailerable hull.*

---

ble 20's total weight," he said. "So even with their relatively tender hull form, they were powerful boats: But they weren't trailering in the 1890s. So we had to cut weight and still keep stability by another method — by hull form."

How stable is she? "Well, one of our standard models took a knockdown so that her sails were in the water and it was coming through the cabin ports. She came back though. That extra 400 pounds of ballast in her keel helped.

"We've added an extra lead shoe to the keel of our offshore version that increases the draft to 13 inches and gives another 10 degrees of positive stability. That's a lot, but she won't get you across the Atlantic."

# Nimble 20

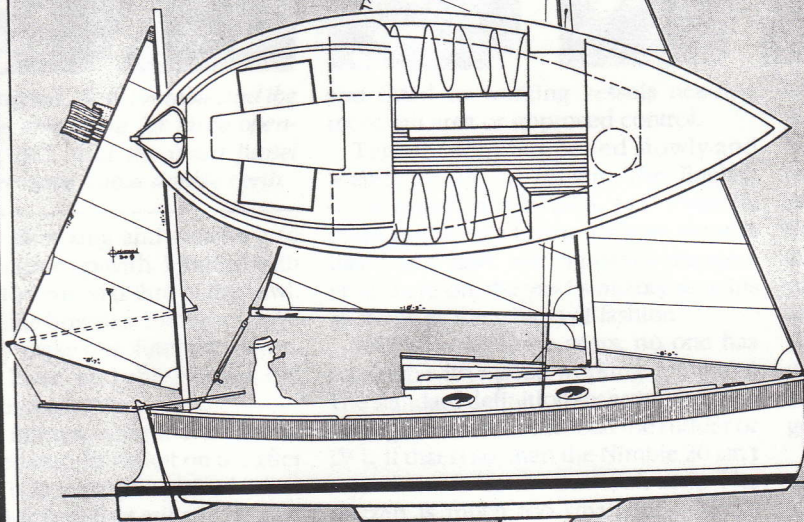
**Hull Layup—  
Above Waterline**  
Isophthalic  
gelcoat; .75-oz.  
mat; 1708 biaxial  
fabric; 3/8"  
Tremanto foam  
core; 1708 biaxial  
fabric

**Below Waterline**  
Isophthalic gelcoat; .75-oz. mat; 3408  
triaxial fabric; 3/8" foam core; 3408  
triaxial fabric

**Deck**  
Isophthalic gelcoat; .75-oz. mat;  
1708 biaxial fabric;  
1708 biaxial fabric

**Ballast  
Lead**

**Hull/Deck Joint**  
Inboard flange  
design; 3M 5200  
adhesive;  
1/4" s/s bolts  
on 5" centers



LOA ..... 20'10"  
LWL ..... 19'9"  
Beam ..... 7'9"  
Draft (up) ..... 11"  
(down) ..... 4'1"  
Weight ..... 1,850 lbs.  
Sail Area ..... 207 sq. ft.  
Designer ..... Ted Brewer

**Builder** ..... Nimble Boats  
6135 142nd Ave.  
Clearwater, FL 33520  
Phone: (813)539-6444  
**Base Price** ..... \$12,950 w/sails

"How about to Bermuda?"

"That's still a little much."

"Bahamas then?"

"Sure. That's already been done."

Pragmatically, it all makes sense, but I'd still like some form with the function.

## Going Aboard

Back in the 1890s, Club members became the designers and builders of the types of vessels they wanted. Today, because of a lack of time, money, knowledge, or even courage, we wait and hope that someone like Jerry Koch will produce what we need.

Actually, Koch is not a boatbuilder in the traditional sense. He is more like a director of assembly for ideas and material, something akin to a film producer, an apropos analogy considering Jerry's background in television. He has the hull, deck and cabin liner molded by a commercial operation using the latest in foam cores and fiberglass fabrics, then these

components are shipped to Clearwater where Koch's staff assembles and finishes the boat. Traditional it ain't. But it's a system that works. The result is a strong, rigid structure that is also light in weight. All up, with 400 pounds of glassed-in lead ballast and bedded-in cabin liner, the boat weighs almost 1,800 pounds. This gives a very light displacement/length ratio of 103.5 and a high sail area/displacement ratio of 21.95. These figures, coupled with a prismatic coefficient of .54, promise reasonable performance.

At this weight, she's just marginal for a Class I hitch. Because trailering is a big part of what the Nimble 20 is all about, it would be worth stepping up to the next class.

While the canoe yawls of the Humber Yawl Club were often loaded on steamers to get them to far-off cruising grounds, this updated version will do best via the interstate. The almost flat bottom helps by allowing the use of a very simple trailer

with no rollers. Owners tell me that for a cruiser she's easy to launch, retrieve, and rig. (Rigging time seems to average about 30 minutes). There's a neat tabernacle arrangement, mast lash-down eyes on the pulpit, and a crutch that fits into the mizzen's maststep.

Once rigged and in the water, she provides a steady working platform with no unexpected motions and great stability. Even with two on the gunwale, she still remained relatively level. In fact, with a PPI of 481 pounds (PPI, pounds per inch immersion, is the number of pounds needed to make a boat sit 1 inch lower in the water), it takes a lot to get her down at all.

Complementing the boat's reassuring initial stability is a deep cockpit you can really feel secure in. In fact, the Nimble 20's cockpit is probably her finest feature. You sit *in* the boat, an experience reminiscent of past days when we weren't obsessed with self-draining cockpits (although this one is). The coaming is nicely angled for comfort and wide enough to sit on for long tacks. Athwartships dimensions are properly proportioned for foot bracing while maintaining room for two on a long daysail, or four for a short jaunt.

Well thought out details are everywhere. There are two molded-in recesses in the bridge deck for glasses or cans. Drop boards have their own stowage brackets in the starboard cockpit locker. The optional winches are bronze Barlow #15s on teak bases. Cleats are all bronze, too. Especially nice are the large fore and aft deck cleats of the Herreshoff pattern (fastened with stainless steel bolts, strangely) and the heavy teak rubrail that has a drip groove cut in its underside to prevent streak marks on the hull (a nice touch). All fittings are properly back-plated, and hidden locker areas are painted and smooth.

The outboard sits in a well at the after end of the cockpit with its gas tank in the open-fronted port locker. The transom height and hull opening are set for an 8-horsepower Yamaha, but can be built to work with any motor.

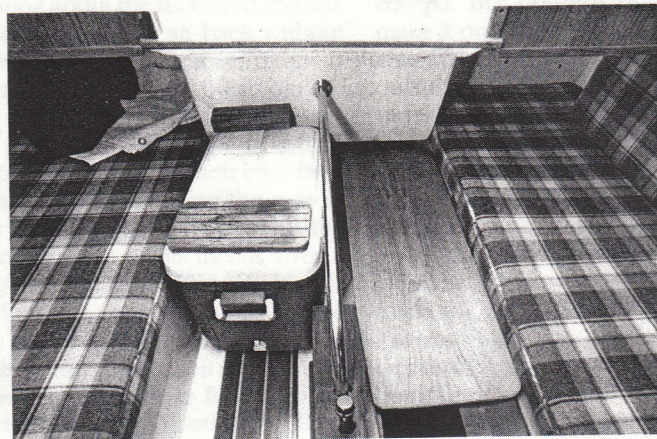
## Mizzen Musings

Getting underway for the test sail, I had to power out of the marina to get to open water. She backed well and with good rudder control, even with the drop blade up. Underway, she required only 1/3 throttle to get to cruising speed. With the engine wide open, her flat sections aft and light weight helped her achieve 7 knots with no squatting and a very low quarter wave, though these same flat sections also slapped against the wind chop and powerboat wakes.

Once out in the bay, I killed the engine and began playing with all those sails and



**Flexible Interior.** Both the table and the bulkhead are removable for more openness below (left), and the insert panel turns the port settee into a double berth.



strings; sort of mixing and matching to see what I'd come up with. I started with the mizzen, the *raison d'être* of the yawl.

Yawls are like bow ties. Either you love them or they make absolutely no sense. I'm a yawl lover, and the Nimble did nothing to dissuade me.

The little mizzen is light and can be easily stepped into its socket on the after deck. Then it is a simple procedure to unroll the 30-square-foot sail and tension the sprit boom with its permanently attached snotter. This type of rig is ideal for a yawl's mizzen. It is easy to handle, efficient and, most importantly, can be made to set very flat.

Once the mizzen was up, she weathered and sat bow to the wind. I could now get the other sails up at my leisure.

I started with the jib. By sheeting it in and easing the mizzen, the boat fell off and began slowly sailing to windward. I was surprised at this, not expecting anything at all in the 10-knot breeze. In a real blow, this would probably be a good tactic, although tacking would not always be a sure thing.

Next, I got the main up and started to play with the boat's balance. To windward she was very sensitive to the mizzen's trim. Sheeted in too hard there was noticeable weather helm. Eased off too much and she slowed down. Once I found the slot, she moved along nicely. I then fooled with the centerboard trying to get her to self steer. In the prevailing light air, I never got her to hold course, but it seems like it should be possible.

The term yawl (from the Dutch *jol*) as defined by Admiral Smyth in 1867 was "a man-of-war's boat resembling the pinnacle, but rather smaller; it is carvel-built, and generally rowed with twelve oars." The earliest boats rigged with a small mizzen had no generic name, but the sail was called a *dandie* (or in French *dun-dis*). The sail was often an afterthought

and fitted to working vessels needing more sail area or improved control.

Terminology happened slowly and seemingly for no reason. The English yacht *Irene*, built in 1874, was originally listed as a *dandy*. Five years later, she was listed as a yawl. Her rig never changed. From here on, the yawl's history remains as stable as the whims of fashion.

Still, after all these years, no one has come up with a good working definition. The standard definition for a yawl is a boat having its mizzenmast abaft the rudder or LWL. If that is so, then the Nimble 20 isn't a yawl: It's a ketch. But look at it. The mizzen is much too small for a ketch. Philip Bolger's definition — if the mizzen provides drive it's a ketch; if it's just for

balancing or maneuvering, it's a yawl — doesn't work for the Nimble either, because its mizzen does both. So let me propose a definition that's not too precise and leaves plenty of room for interpretation. To whit: As long as the mizzen is noticeably smaller than the jib, you've got a yawl. If it's the same size as the jib or bigger, you've got a ketch. And if the sail is *really* big, you've probably got a schooner. Now that we've settled that, I can comfortably call the Nimble 20 a yawl and get on with the sailing.

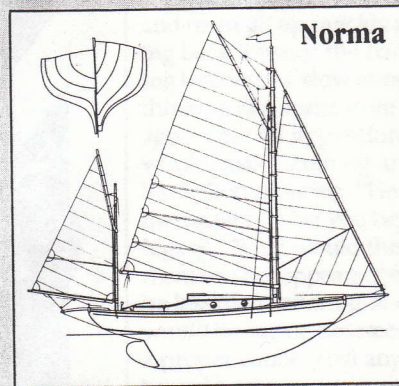
Off the wind and on to a reach, she drifted sedately on the light breeze. She's a relaxing boat to sail and not sensitive to which side of the cockpit you prefer to steer from. Just be careful about the motor

## CANOE YAWL ORIGINS

When they made their debut in the 1890s, the original canoe yawls enabled a whole new segment of middle-class yachtsmen to realize their cruising dreams. These sailors didn't have the wherewithal to finance a large vessel (and the paid crew which inevitably accompanied it). And they were not inclined to follow the example of John MacGregor and the rugged gentlemen of the Royal Canoe Club who proclaimed the virtues of getting one's tail wet during the day and spending nights in the bottom of a cramped sailing canoe. So a few members of the Royal Canoe Club jumped ship to start the new Humber Yawl Club (see "The Roots of Small Boating," *SBJ* #41).

These men broke new ground. There on the Humber River, with its fast tides, shoals, and North Sea winds, they needed a type of boat that a man could sail by himself (or with an occasional friend), hop along the coast, live aboard in relative comfort, and be able to take the ground on a falling tide. For this purpose, they took the sleek double-ended form of the canoe, made it beamier and heavier, and added a centerboard and trunk cabin. Cockpits were small and deep; cabins low and open down below with a bunk or two, nothing more.

These boats became known as canoe yawls, a name that had nothing to do with their rigs. The name was a way of classifying a boat with a sharp stern that was larger than the usual sailing canoe, and about the



**Norma.** Albert Strange's 25-foot-long by 7-foot-wide cruiser has the graceful overhangs and deep underbody of the original canoe yawls.

same size as a ship's yawl boat. In them, the newly emerging weekend yachtsman could roam reasonably far, develop skills of seamanship, become intimate with the shore and sea, and not have to sell the family jewels to do it. In 1895, the canoe yawl represented a new freedom on the water. And although times have changed, there's still a lot of regular folks anxious to get down to the sea without spending an arm and a leg. For them, the practical little boats created by the members of the Humber Yawl Club will always be an inspiration. □

— David Seidman

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well. It's big, and the mizzen and main sheets seem naturally to fall there. The manufacturer offers an optional motor-cover/table. I'd consider it.

The paradox of most shoal-draft boats is that they usually can't sail in shallow water. The Nimble 20 draws 11 inches with the board up so she can float up to almost any beach, but sailing this way, she makes almost as much progress to leeward as along her course. Her board has to be down about 2 feet for her leeway to be acceptable.

Having the board set like this, I tacked up to a beach. Jumping ashore, I set the anchor on shore, and pulled down the sails (mizzen left up to prevent veering and because I'm lazy), and retired to the cabin.

### Through the Main Saloon

In my lifetime, I don't expect that anyone will come up with a cure for baldness or a way of making a 20-footer's cabin really comfortable. But you can't fault the Nimble 20 for not trying.

There are no steps leading below. This job is done by the end of a portable ice chest. Whichever side of the centerboard trunk it's stowed on is the side you enter the cabin on. And once you're in, you sit with your toes against the trunk and your back straight up. There's not much that

can be done about the footroom, but optional bolsters let you sit back without hitting your head on the cabin's side.

Koch and Brewer have worked hard to turn the trunk in their favor. To this end, they've produced a number of neatly made boards that stow in their own little compartment and mount on the case as tables or bunk extensions. With them, the port bunk widens to 35 inches over a length of 5 feet 8 inches. If your partner is longer than that, you will have to share legroom in the quarter berth's foot-long "footwell" under the cockpit seat — once again showing how close friends make the best crews on small boats. Not willing to share? No problem. You'll find the starboard berth is also a comfortable 6 feet 8 inches.

To make the most of a small situation, Koch and Brewer also worked hard on the details. The cabin's finish is good grade production level. There are nice touches of oiled teak (varnish is an attractive extra), beautiful bronze opening ports, a solar-powered ventilator, removable privacy panels for the forward area, some fine little cabinets with secret compartments, and a cedar-lined locker.

If properly planned, a long cruise of about two weeks would be quite enjoyable on a Nimble 20. Cooking and washing are all designed to be done in the

cockpit, but optional pump and basin make it possible below. The boat comes with no head, leaving you to choose your own throne. All types are available from the builder, but most opt for the 5-gallon bucket with seat.

Up forward with the head is a berth flat. Cushions are available for it, but even with the filler in place, it is only usable for a small child. The area under the flat is filled in with flotation (as are the after-deck and coamings), leaving only the spaces under the port and starboard berths for stowage of large items. This berth flat might be best utilized by fitting it with sea rails and partitions for stowage of anchor line, sails, spares, and the like.

On the practical side, all fastenings and hardware are readily accessible, insides of lockers are smoothly finished, wiring and plumbing is first rate, and there is a deck plate in the sole that opens to a 5-inch-deep keel sump. This sump is ideal for collecting bilge water when the boat is level. When the boat heels, the bunk lockers may collect the water, an unfortunate reality with flatish bottomed boats. No bilge pumps are fitted, but a good portable pump and a bucket would do the job.

It takes careful planning on any 20-foot boat to make a long cruise an enjoyable experience. Given that, the Nimble 20 will meet you more than half way.

### Some Conclusions

Back on deck, it's getting late. The jib and main go up quickly and I begin tacking back towards the harbor. As the tacking becomes a slow tempo, I find myself thinking of a scene from a hundred years ago. What an apparition the Nimble 20 would make coming up to a Humber Yawl Club mooring. "Here, my friends, is the result of what you began. This is your legacy." What would they say? The comments on her appearance probably would be less than flattering, and no doubt there would be strong statements that she's not a proper canoe-yawl anyway. And they'd be right.

But the Nimble 20 is not lost in the past. Things have changed in a hundred years, although what has not changed is the need for a good small cruising boat at a reasonable price. For this purpose, the Nimble 20 provides the same answer as those first canoe yawls, only now in a very different form. In that way, she's definitely a boat for our times. □

*DAVID SEIDMAN is a former charter and delivery captain and trans-Atlantic sailor. His background includes studies in physical oceanography and industrial and small boat design. He is currently creative director at a Long Island advertising agency.*

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