

Boat Test ^{J/88}

Hitting the sweet spot

The latest midsized racer-cruiser from J/Boats offers exhilarating performance in a family-friendly package



I have been fortunate to sail most models in the J/Boat family and I confess, I like them all. The new J/88 is an ideal blend of what makes the J/Boat brand so enduring.

Falling neatly between the J/70 and J/111, the 88 might be labeled midsize if it were an automobile, but no matter what you call it, the J/Boat design and build team found the sweet spot with this 29-foot family daysailer and racer. It's a J, so it's fast and fun to sail in a variety of conditions. Its success is well documented in an auspicious debut in 2014, including second in class in the Chicago-Mackinac race. While it is small enough to be single-point lifted for easy storage and trailering, it is big enough to have an interior that's surprisingly comfortable, with enough elbowroom to extend sailing through the weekend.

We tested the J/88 after the United States Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, and the blustery conditions were perfect for pushing the boat hard. By the time we corralled David Malkin of North Point Yacht Sails, the sky was overcast and the winds were steady at 20 knots. David, who has campaigned a J/70 for a few years, didn't need much persuading to take us out on his brand-new J/88, hull No. 57.

A big part of the J/88's allure is the simplicity of the systems designed into the boat. The high-aspect, double-spreader carbon rig, which is deck-stepped for easy stepping and tuning, features a nonoverlapping sailplan. No genoas are needed, and the retractable sprit, a J trademark,

makes for easy spinnaker launching. Within minutes of leaving the slip, the 14-horsepower inboard Yanmar was silenced and we were tacking out of Back Creek. Once on the Chesapeake Bay, we cracked off on a tight reach and zoomed toward the far shore. This promised to be an exciting boat test.

On deck

The cockpit is the heart of the J/88. The T-shaped, open-transom layout provided plenty of room for our crew of three to handle the boat with ease. All sail controls are led aft to clutches and winches on either side of the companionway. The traveler is on the cockpit sole and the mainsheet, which includes gross and fine controls, is placed for the helmsperson to trim. The primary winches are also within easy reach, allowing the boat to be singlehanded, ideal for a sweet daysail after work. The transom-hung rudder provides dinghylike control and it took me a bit of practice to avoid over steering.

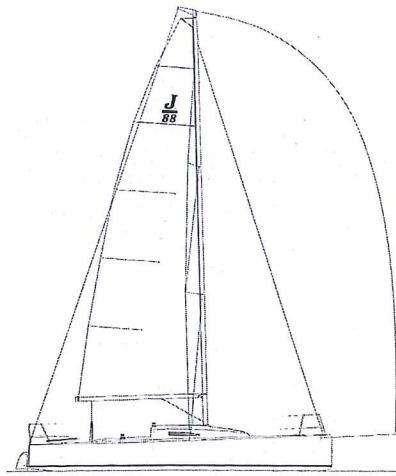
Unlike the carbon mast, the boom is aluminum. I like that the gooseneck is high enough to make it easy to stay clear of the boom when tacking, a small thing maybe, but just the type of thinking that makes Js unique, family friendly and highly competitive. The Harken headsail furler is mounted below deck, and the vang can be fixed to either side. In-haulers foster tight sheeting angles. Like all Js, the nonskid works well—it's not too aggressive but you feel secure moving about the deck underway.



- 1 The J/88 comes standard with a carbon mast and aluminum boom. The mast is deck stepped for easy rigging.
- 2 The trademark J/Boats retractable carbon bowsprit makes flying the asymmetrical spinnaker easy and efficient.
- 3 The Harken traveler is located on the cockpit sole and is located within easy reach of the helmsman.
- 4 All controls are lead aft to the cockpit, making shorthanded sailing easy.
- 5 The transom-hung rudder provides dinghylike control. There is plenty of room in the open cockpit for racing action.

J/88

LOA 29'2"
LWL 26'10"
Beam 9'6"
Draft 6'6"
Ballast 1,840 lbs.
Displacement 4,990 lbs.
Sail area 439 sq. ft.



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Base Boat Price

\$125,500



Sailing across the bay, we executed a series of quick tacks to avoid shoal water. The acceleration was impressive, and we quickly sped past 7 knots sailing very close to the wind. Well placed foot supports made it easy to cope with a fair bit of heel on both tacks. I was impressed by how solid the boat felt in the water. While the J/88 handles like a small boat, it definitely has a big boat ride.

The hull shape has long ends with a near plumb stem and stern, and yet the boat doesn't pound in a chop. The fin keel, with a very low VCG, provides a smooth foil and keeps the boat on its feet. The draft is 6 feet 6 inches. The hull and deck are cored, and joined on an inward flange. The overall quality of finish is superb but the effect is purposefully not showy.

Under sail

I was a bit surprised when David suggested we fly the kite, being shorthanded in a big breeze, but I was delighted to oblige. He went forward, deployed the sprit, and my friend Jose cranked the halyard. I steered off a bit and soon we were flying at double digit speeds. J/Boats specified a 95-square-meter asymmetrical sail for the spinnaker—an easy-to-handle size that still provides plenty of horsepower. And horsepower we had. Despite being overcanvassed, the steering was quite manageable. When it became obvious that we were leaving the photo boat behind, we jibed over and headed south. We carried the A-sail up to 70 degrees, feathering the main occasionally



The clean and simple interior boasts enough comfort for a weekend cruise or overnight race, above. The V-berth is optional, above middle, and the cooler is located underneath the companionway steps, top. The well-balanced sailplan keeps the J/88 on its feet with winds gusting into the 20s, facing page, even without crew weight on the rail.



but overall we had no trouble keeping the boat on its feet. The level of boat control in winds that were gusting at times well above 20 knots was impressive.

Down below

With the spinnaker back in the bag, we tacked toward the harbor. I finally relinquished the helm and went below. The interior is cozy with a V-berth forward and two facing settees. There is not a lot of headroom but there is a full-size head and a small sink to port. Opposite is a mini chart table. The engine is tucked behind the companionway steps with easy access to all sides. While it would be a stretch to claim that the interior is ready for long-term cruising, it's ideal for an overnight in a quiet cove after a day of vigorous sailing.

We sailed up the channel and furled the jib and dropped the main at the last moment. It was an exhilarating boat test and one that epitomized the versatility of the J/88. On a day when most daysailors would have been hunkered down, we were blasting back and forth across the Chesapeake Bay. And while most bigger boats would have doused sail in the broader reaches outside the channel, we eased right up to the slip under sail.

The J/88 really is the sweet spot for modern sailing. A family-friendly boat that offers performance that seasoned sailors appreciate, this quality design from one of America's premier builders fits neatly into the life of today's busy sailors. It's no surprise that the J/88 is becoming one of J/Boat's most popular models.