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New faster, lighter sailboats also prove to be unsinkable

NEWPORT, R.I. (AP) — Bore a hole in the hull of John Newton's sailboat. Fill it with water and tilt it to one side until the sails skirt the waves. Go ahead, it won't sink.

Newton builds 100 percent self-righting vessels out of lighter-than-water, space-age materials.

The Cat Ketch Yachts he builds in his Port Arthur factory are the latest products in a rich three decades of boat building that began in Hong Kong, 1957, where he produced the successful Grand Banks Trawlers.

Now he is setting new standards in sailboat safety.

His 36- to 52-foot sailing yachts are designed by well-known marine architects and have been gathering attention on the boat show circuit this year as sailors look to combine safe, convenient travel with speed.

And while the yachts are built to be safe and easily sailed, they also feature a comfortable and attractive design, handle well in gusts and a recent sail through Newport Harbor showed they can move ahead despite light winds.

Newton recently sought outside confirmation of the vessels' capabilities from Underwriters Laboratories Inc.

The exam was a breeze compared to the rigorous tests Newton and his employees had already put their design to, but the UL seal of approval should pay off at the boat shows where boating enthusiasts once refused to even stop at Newton's slip after they saw a sign proclaiming the yachts were unsinkable.

"On the face of it, no one would believe it," Newton said.

"We were getting all sorts of weird, rude comments," said his wife, Deidre, who works with her husband to sell the crafts. "Like: 'Yeah, that's what they said about the Titanic.' Or worse."

Positive flotation is common in dinghies and lifeboats, but only a handful of large boatmakers, such as Hunter yachts in Canada and the European Etap boats, offer it in larger craft.

It's a standard feature on the more than 100 sporty Sparhawk and

more traditional Herreshoff yachts Newton has sold in the past five years. The boats are built with lighter-than water materials below the water line.

Neal Mahan, a supervisor at UL, only tested Newton's boats for level flotation. And while the yachts far surpassed the minimum requirements, they also impressed their examiner.

"You can flood it, you can take a hit, you can probably cut it in half and it will still float," Mahan said.

The hull of Newton's vessels are created out of Airex, a foam used to form the shells of fighter planes. The bulkheads and other spaces below the hull are filled with another Coast Guard-approved foam that also floats.

The materials do not make the boats more susceptible to break up in a collision. Airex is somewhat flexible, and if one of the crafts strikes an object head-on it must break through three feet of hull before the vessel takes on water.

"If the boats hit a container and get a hole, (they) will sink between four and eight inches and no more. So you can always sail home," Newton said.

But the most unique feature to Newton's yachts is an exclusive mast design that, along with the boat's careful engineering, eliminates the danger of having a sailboat knocked down by a strong gust of wind.

The design by marine architect Richard Black employs a sealed, hollow, carbon-fiber mast that increase the boat's righting momentum to 180 degrees, more than double the accepted norm. In fact if the spars ever submerge, the righting momentum actually doubles.

"It would be like tying a bottle full of air to the end of a long pole and trying to push it into the water," Newton said.

The yachts are easy to sail, and Newton has sold them to handicapped individuals who wanted to be able to travel alone.

Spanish prince visits UT, Austin sites today

HOUSTON (AP) — The crown prince of Spain, Felipe de Borbon, will tour the University of Texas Tuesday before joining Spanish dignitaries and Gov. Bill Clements at the governor's mansion for dinner.

Felipe, 21, visited New Mexico Monday and will travel to Houston Wednesday. He is scheduled to meet with President George Bush in Washington Friday, said Luiz Abiega of the Spanish consulate office in Houston.

The prince will visit the Balcones Laboratory and the Lyndon Baines Johnson Center at the University of Texas before a luncheon there with about 100 invited guests, Abiega said.

Felipe also will visit the Bentsen Latin American Collection and the

Harry Ransom Center, which include collections of Spanish documents and books from colonial times.

Clements will be host to a dinner at the mansion for the prince, his entourage and 150 invited guests.

Felipe travels to Houston Wednesday to meet with Mayor Kathy Whitmire and tour NASA. A trained pilot, the prince has said he is interested in seeing a mock-up of the planned space station, Freedom.

The prince will conduct a cocktail party for members of the Spanish community, then a dinner for the mayor and other Houston leaders at River Oaks Country Club. Spain's ambassador to the United States, Julian Santamaria, also will attend the dinner.

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