

BYTE CII



PHOTO JEREMY EVANS

It might have missed out on selection for the 2008 Olympics, but the Byte's new CII mode is worth a closer look. **Jeremy Evans** and **Christina Bassadone** assessed how the Byte performs with its new 'automatic-response' rig.

When the news broke that ISAF wanted to replace the Europe with a 'boat-in-a-box' singlehander for women, Ian Bruce heard the call. His Byte became popular with lighter weight sailors when it was first introduced in 1990 and, while support for the class has declined in Britain, it remains strong in other parts of the world.

Ian recognised that, like many dinghies, the Byte rig was little more than the reworking of a 50-year-old concept. So he approached maestro Julian Bethwaite – designer of the 49er, 29er and many wonderful skiffs – to ask if a skiff-style, self-depowering rig could work with an unstayed mainsail. No problem, Julian replied and the result was the CII rig (shorthand for 'carbon two-piece mast'), jointly developed by Ian Bruce, Julian

Bethwaite and sailmaker Ian MacDiarmid (who produced the sails for the 49er).

Design and development

Having been approved by the Byte class, the CII rig was introduced this year as an upgrade that can be raced as an alternative to the original rig, with separate starts and finishes at major events. The first big international event was the Byte CII Eurocup held in Italy in June, where men and women from Singapore filled six of the top 10 places, split by France, Denmark, Italy and Croatia. Other racers came from Austria, Australia and Britain – demonstrating a good spread of international support.

Having introduced the original Byte to Britain, Topper International restarted production –

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Above The new Byte CII rapid-reaction rig worked well, successfully soaking up the gusts.

Above right With its super-light rig the Byte is easy to right after a capsize.

obviously hoping that the CII would go Olympic. But when it came to the crucial ISAF vote last month for the Olympic women's singlehander class, the Byte CII was passed over in favour of the Laser Radial. Losing the vote may not be such a bad thing. Olympic boats tend to become so elitist that they lose much of their attraction for recreational sailors. The Byte is now back where it belongs as a solo racer for lightweights, brought right up to date with an automatic-response rig.

Rig and sails

For this test I got together with Christina Bassadone, who helmed the women's Team GBR 470 into seventh place at the Athens Olympics. Christina claims she's 'never really sailed

singlehanders' since messing about in Toppers as a young girl, but was keen to try a boat for club racing while she finishes her last year at Southampton University.

On a cold, blustery November day, Christina rigged the Byte CII for the first time with no problems – even without the standard *CII Rig and Sail Manual* – and once you've got the hang of it it's really no more than a 10-minute job. The carbon and glass two-part mast make the complete rig with new Mylar sail and original aluminium boom very light at just 7.3kg – it will also fit in a sail bag of under three metres for easy transport.

Unlike a Laser or Topper, the Byte has a proper track for the mainsail boltrope, with the halyard locked off at the top of the mast. The extra piece of triangular Mylar that covers kicker, cunningham and assorted string at the front of the rig, called the 'cuff', is a completely separate piece of material, with no stitching or zipper attaching it to the mainsail. Instead, there are two pairs of elasticised clips that hold it back on either side of the sail, front set for lighter winds or rear set for stronger.

The Byte CII is a sweet-looking boat, and very stylishly presented by Topper with contrasting dark blue and light grey hull, showing off the see-through Mylar sail with scarlet trimmings to perfection.

Sailing

Christina settled into sailing the boat while I took a grandstand view of the rapid reaction of the rig. You could see it working all the time, with loads of bend in the mast as it soaked up gusts on this blustery day. For most people, mastering the CII rig will require careful study of the manual followed by plenty of practice to get used to its traits.

The most important sail control is the 8:1 cunningham which Ian Bruce describes as 'the CII

accelerator'. You can tighten it all the way to fully depower the rig, bending the mast and flattening the sail with the leech wide open to disperse excess power. Ian Bruce says this feature sets it apart from all normal singlehanders that rely on mainsheet or kicker tension to flatten the sail, pulling the leech taut and messing up the exhaust. Instead, the CII rig has six lightweight battens that act like loaded struts, always trying to straighten themselves out inside the highly loaded rig, acting on a bow-string principle.

It sounds almost like driving a car with an automatic gearbox: get comfortable, point the boat in the right direction, set the sheeting angle and go. Don't worry about gusts, because the rig will immediately adjust itself to every puff. Well, it's not quite so straightforward (or boring) as that, but Christina reckoned the self-depowering feature worked nicely, with the mainsail going so flat it was almost inverting at times, as she switched from mainsheet to traveller for a finer response when trimming sail angle. In lighter winds, the traveller could also be used to sheet the sail from the windward side, to avoid overloading the leech or over-bending the mast while pointing as high as possible.

The Byte looked lively and very quick offwind. Christina flipped it over, but with that super-light rig the Byte is very easy to get back up and reasonably stable when you clamber back on board – certainly less of a challenge than a Laser. Low freeboard and a similar hull shape makes sailing the Byte look like a Laser-style experience, but the cockpit is proportionally much larger and the rig is clearly in a different sphere.

Overall

Our only complaints were cosmetic or straightforward. The CII rig has retained its old boom to make upgrading as cheap as possible (the CII rig upgrade is £750), but it's clearly too long for the job and looks mildly ridiculous. One assumes that in time the class will adopt the correct length. Christina would have preferred a single, central foot-strap to suit her legs and



Left The Byte was easily rigged first time with no problems and once practised could be done in under 10 minutes.

Above The sail 'cuff' is a completely separate piece of material and, although not as attractive as those on the 49er and 29er, did its job well.

would have also liked some elastics to hold the straps off the cockpit floor. When we queried this, Topper confirmed elastics should have been included and a single toe-strap fixed under the mainsheet ratchet block is possible. We were also unsure about the cut of the cuff, which you can see has a 'baggy trousers' kind of fit (on the rear elastics) in some of the photos. There was no indication it wasn't doing its job properly, but the wraparound on a 49er or 29er looks more convincing as an integral part of the sail.

Christina is looking forward to more Byte sailing. While the boat is steady and well-mannered for its size upwind, with a large and powerful CII rig, she rates it 'a load of fun offwind and brilliant for sailing waves or working chop.' She guesstimates its ideal racing weight at about ▶

Below left The CII rig has kept its old boom to keep costs down, but unfortunately this is clearly too long.



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ANSWER BACK

from Rick Reading

Firstly we would like to thank Christina Bassadone and Jeremy Evans for their impressive review of the Byte CII. This test shows, without question, how far the CII rig has advanced the Byte into the 21st Century with its skiff-derived self-depowering rig feature and its stunning good looks.

If you're looking for a boat that offers modern control features running from a traveller system centralised in front of the sailor and a singlehander that will give exhilarating performance for the lightweight sailors, the Byte CII is definitely worth a test sail.

The great thing about the Byte CII is that the boat only weighs 45 kilos and, as Christina pointed out, the optimum weight ratio for the Byte CII is between 48-68 kilos so lightweight sailors can race very effectively at their natural weight without having to bulk up to fit the boat's profile. Ian Bruce has proved beyond any doubt from his demographic data that most young boys and girls, as well as smaller adults, will not reach the weight demanded by the Laser Radial.

Jeremy also points out that, with this Automatic Response Rig, the Byte CII is years ahead of more traditional classes in its sail and rig design. Why not visit our stand at the Excel London Boat Show and check out the impressive rig development of the Byte CII?

45-60kg with herself at the top end of the range. That could provide the ideal squad sailor stepping-stone between the Optimist and Laser Radial, with 68-70 kg now reckoned to be necessary in the Radial if you're serious – some girls (and boys) will never get there. For people outside the youth squad scene the Byte CII just looks like a nice, uncomplicated, sophisticated race boat for all ages at a really good price at under £3,000 – despite the sophisticated rig, Olympic selection required keeping the price right down. ■

Above The Byte is an ideal solo racer for lightweights.

Thanks to Cobnor Activities centre (CAC) for providing facilities for this test. CAC runs a full programme of residential and non-residential sailing courses and activities in Chichester harbour, for details visit www.cact.co.uk

Specification BYTE CII

DESIGN:	Ian Bruce in 1990
LENGTH:	3.65m
BEAM:	1.3m
HULL WEIGHT:	45kg
SAIL AREA:	5.6sq m
LATEST PN:	1159
PRICE (inc trolley and top cover):	£2,995

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ALTERNATIVES...

The Byte was just one option for the women's singlehander spot...



• Europe

Losing the Olympic spot may be no bad thing. The Europe provides a highly refined sailing experience for solo sailors around 55-75kg. Expensive new, but great value second-hand with the era of cheque-book competition at an end.

LOA:	3.35m
BEAM:	1.38m
HULL WEIGHT:	45kg
SAIL AREA:	7sq m
LATEST PN:	1139
GUIDE PRICE:	£6,000*



• Laser Radial

Laser hull with a smaller, more forgiving rig. RYA-nominated youth class for racers in 54-70 kg weight range and the new women's Olympic singlehanded class for the 2008 Games.

LOA:	4.23m
BEAM:	1.37m
HULL WEIGHT:	60kg
SAIL AREA:	5.76sq m
LATEST PN:	1101
GUIDE PRICE:	£3,320*

*Guide prices are approximate and include sails