

20/ The Ohlson 38

A Boat for All Reasons

Length overall: 36 feet 8 inches (conventional stern)
37 feet 3 inches (reverse transom)
Length on waterline: 26 feet 6 inches
Beam: 10 feet 3 inches
Draft: 5 feet 6 inches
Sail area: 560 square feet
Displacement: 15,000 pounds
Designer: Einar Ohlson
Year designed: 1967

During World War II, the GIs would have elections periodically to determine the favorite pinup girl with whom they would most like to be marooned on a desert island. The ruminations involved were a popular pastime, but the choice among the likes of Grable, Hayworth, and Turner were difficult to say the least. It would be equally difficult for most yachtsmen to pick an all-time favorite boat, because there are so many beauties abounding with desirable features. Such a choice would not be easy for me, but if I had to pick one boat to own and sail for the rest of my life, it would most probably be the boat I now own, an Ohlson 38.

By no means have I sailed them all, but of the boats I am familiar with (and there are more than a few), the O-38 is my favorite. Of course, there are some boats that are faster, a few that are prettier, others that are more comfortable, still others that are easier to handle and maintain, and some that are better built and more seaworthy; but there are none I'm familiar with that have such a favorable combination of all these features.

Perhaps the most attractive feature of the O-38 is her sailing ability. She is responsive, beautifully balanced, and fast, especially when beating to windward in a moderate to fresh breeze. She is also the kind of boat that is very forgiving. When beating you can crack sheets a bit and bear off and foot, or you can strap in tight and pinch a little without much affecting the speed made good. Even with the sails not perfectly trimmed, the O-38 is fast, and many a time when we have sailed past other boats, we have noticed their crews looking us over and then checking the trim of their own sails.

It is a real pleasure to take experienced sailors out for a first sail on our O-38, *Kelpie* (named after the Alden yawl in Chapter 1), for they are invariably impressed. For example, this past summer we took out sailmaker Jim Allsop, *America's* Cup 12-meter sailor and a former World's Champion in Star boats. Jim had been sailing on the hottest ton cup boats, and he was impressed with *Kelpie's* stability. "In a ton cupper," he said, "we would have to shift to a smaller jib." Then when I left the wheel

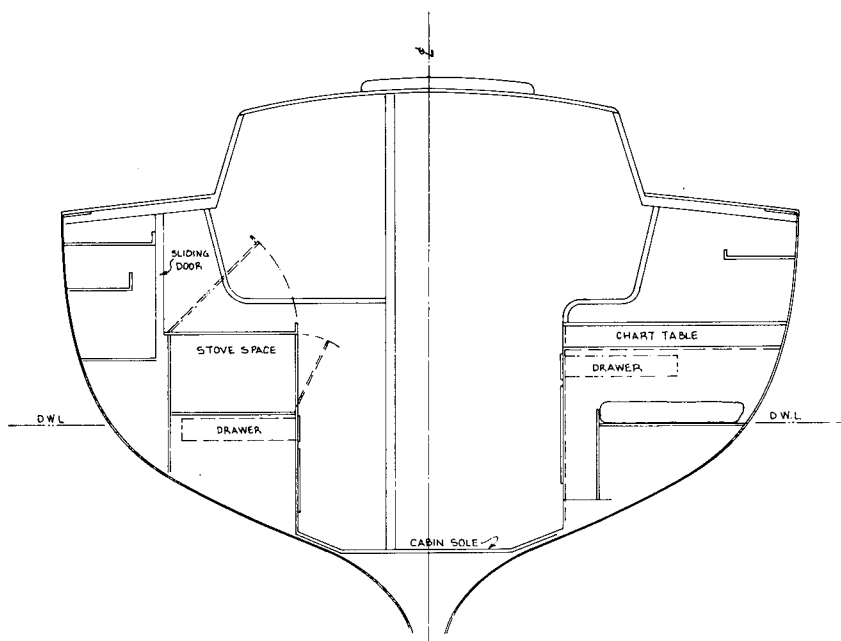


There are several rig options for the Ohlson 38, including a high-aspect-ratio racing rig with inboard shrouds, but the rig shown here is the one the author prefers for cruising, and it has even proven fast on the race course.

momentarily to go below and get a couple of beers, Jim was amazed at the way *Kelpie* steered herself with no one at the helm. He also admired her speed and lack of leeway. He carefully studied the wake and noted that it was dead aft, and there was not a trace of a slick to windward, indicative of leeway, which is sometimes noticeable on ton cuppers with extremely short keels. But I guess my cousin best summed up the O-38's performance when, after his first race aboard our boat, he wrote, "she is the sweetest boat I have ever sailed." About her only real weakness under sail is in very light airs. With moderate wetted surface and a sail-area-to-displacement ratio of about 15, she is no ghoster, but given two knots or so of breeze, she

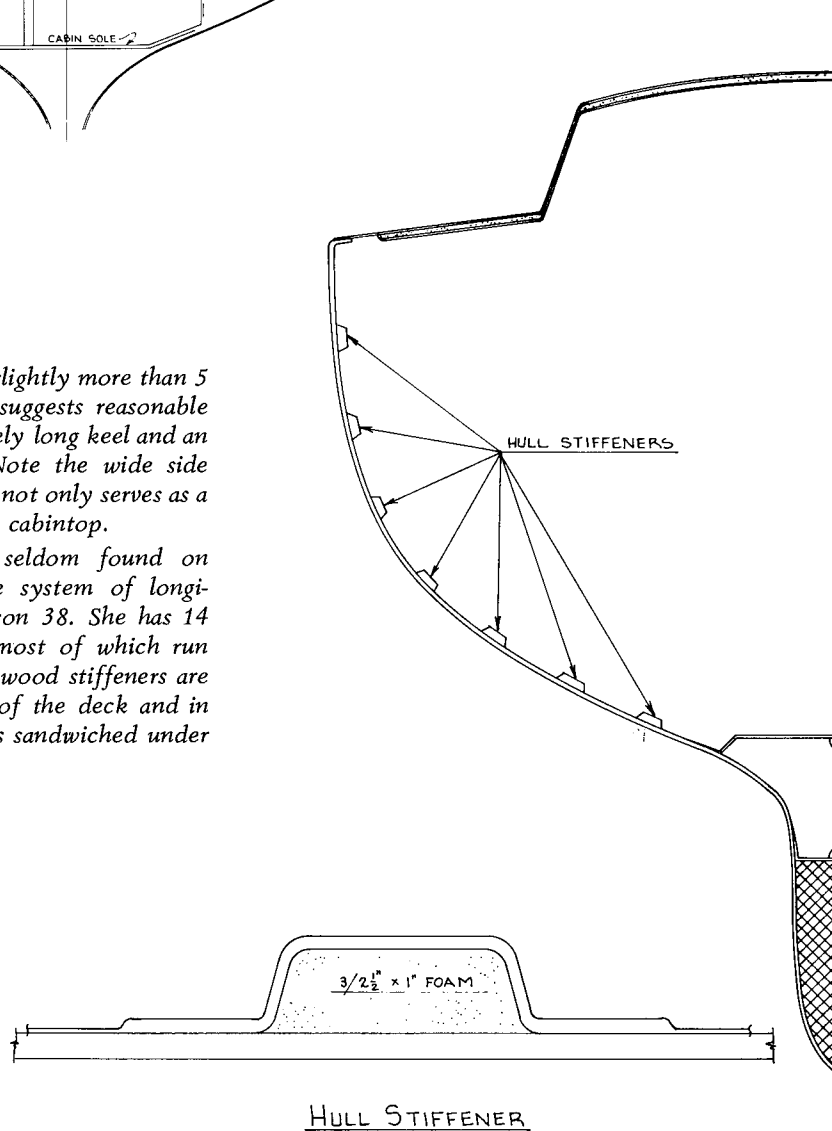
comes to life in the most delightful way. Furthermore, her reasonable sail area and moderate displacement make her easy for one or two people to handle but without undue sacrifice to performance.

Designed in 1967 by the Swedish naval architect Einar Ohlson, the O-38 gives a hint of meter boat influence. Of course, Ohlson was a leading designer of 5.5-meter boats in the 1950s and early 60s, and the O-38 bears some superficial resemblance not only to his own meter boats but also to the famous Stephens-designed 12-meter *Intrepid*. Whether Mr. Ohlson was influenced by *Intrepid* or whether he anticipated that kind of configuration I cannot say, but the underwater profiles are not too dissimilar, with



Above: This section at station 3 (slightly more than 5 feet abaft the midship section) suggests reasonable wetted surface despite a moderately long keel and an easy motion in rough waters. Note the wide side decks and the vertical post, which not only serves as a hand grab but lends support to the cabintop.

Right: A construction feature seldom found on American fiberglass boats is the system of longitudinal framing seen on the Ohlson 38. She has 14 foam-filled fiberglass stiffeners, most of which run the entire length of the boat. Plywood stiffeners are used under certain flat portions of the deck and in the bow and stern, while foam is sandwiched under the well-crowned cabintop.





A windward-side view of Kelpie in calm waters slipping along under her number one genoa. Her speed is deceptive because of her smooth wake. (Rip Henderson)

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each having a swept forefoot, shark fin type of keel, kicker skeg abaft the keel, and small rudder. Each design also has a bustle, although the O-38's is less prominent. The analogy between the two boats cannot be carried too far, however, because the O-38 is obviously a relatively beamy cruising boat.

For about 10 years we owned a handsome Ohlson 35 (Mark I). This was Einar Ohlson's first ultra-popular cruising design, and it brought him wide recognition among U.S. cruising yachtsmen primarily because of the boat's outstanding racing successes. A further development of this hull was the Ohlson 36, which also had a great racing record in the early and middle 1960s. The only trouble with these boats was that they were built of wood and therefore were more expensive to maintain than fiberglass over a long period of time. A number of Ohlson enthusiasts requested fiberglass versions, and finally, in late 1967, the fiberglass 38-footer was introduced. An advertising brochure explained it this way: "For years now we have been asked why we have not brought out the well known and highly successful Ohlson 36 in fiberglass. If we did, we knew we would be backlogged with orders, because this lovely vessel proved itself a top racing winner and also a wonderful cruising boat. However, Mr. Ohlson, its designer in Sweden, resisted this temptation because he knew that as a result of his newest world-championship 5.5 meters and other recent successful racing boats, he could now design an even faster and more powerful hull. And so he held off, until now, conducting further tank tests and carefully, meticulously developing and refining this new hull form to create an outstanding boat. The Ohlson 38 is the result."

The fiberglass hulls are molded by the highly respected Tyler Boat Company in England, and they are built to Lloyd's standards. I visited the Tyler Yard at Tonbridge, Kent, in 1975, and was most impressed with the operation. The O-38's hull is laid up entirely by hand, and clear gel coat is used on the bottom to give the laminator good visibility, thus helping prevent the entrapment of air in the laminations. According

to chemists used by Tyler, the lack of pigment also prevents adulteration of the resin and provides better protection against permanent immersion.

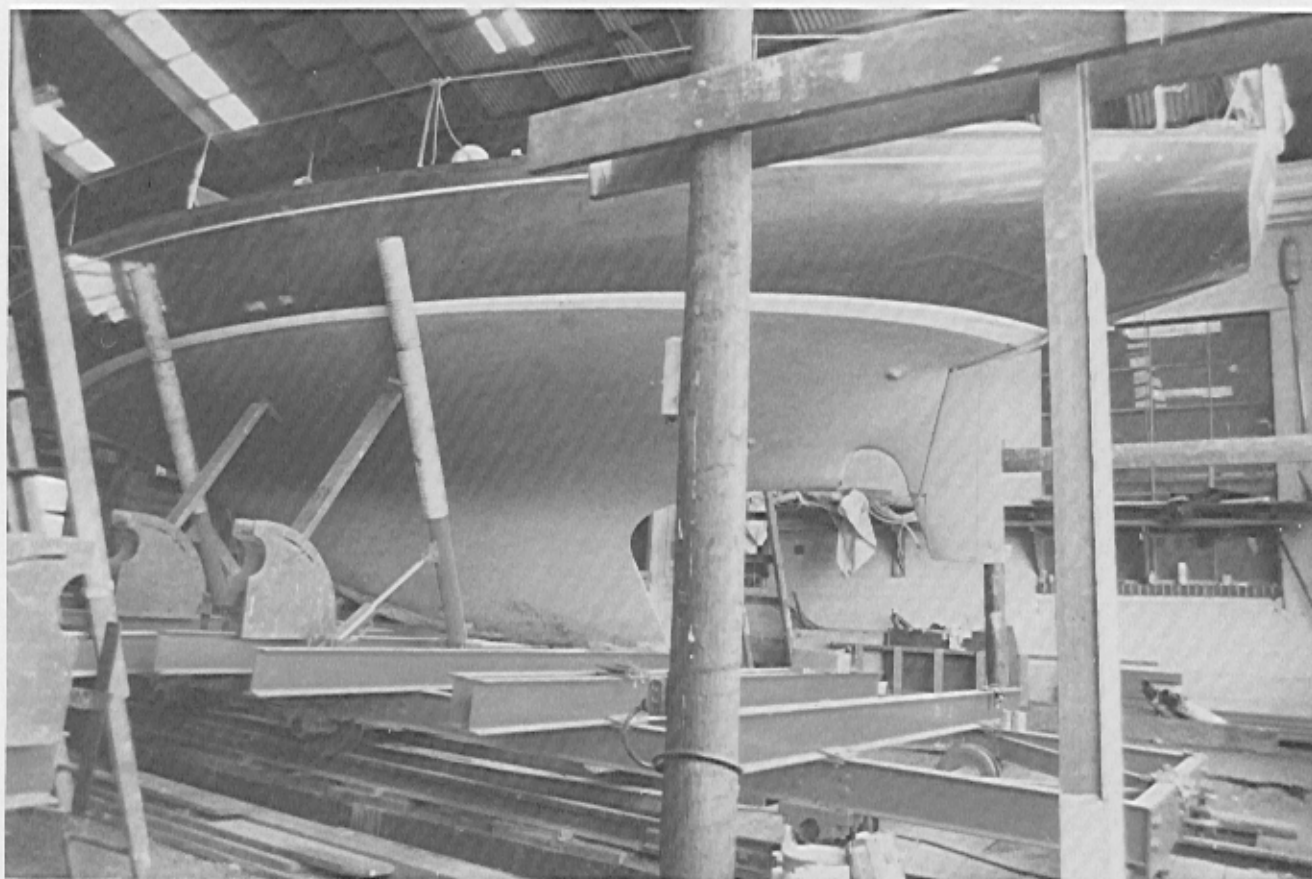
The O-38 hulls are made tremendously rigid with the use of 14 foam-filled fiberglass longitudinal stringers that run the full length of the boat or nearly so. Additional rigidity at the bow and stern is provided by glassed-in plywood vertical stiffeners to ensure that stays can be set up extra taut without distorting the hull. Further strength is provided by three full bulkheads and five half-bulkheads (made of Thames Marine plywood) and three fiberglass tanks (a 48-gallon water tank, 21-gallon fuel tank, and 8-gallon ice box sump) bonded in the hull and keel.

After completion of the molding, the hulls are shipped to a finishing yard, normally either Broderna Ohlson (Ohlson Brothers) in Sweden or Alexander Robertson & Sons Ltd. in Scotland. *Kelpie* was finished at the Swedish yard, and her wood interior of African mahogany is superb. There is very little wood above decks on our particular boat, because her cabin trunk and decks are fiberglass, but the O-38 can be had with a mahogany cabin trunk and teak decks if the owner does not object to having some extra maintenance.

Unfortunately, Einar Ohlson would not release the O-38's lines for publication, but he was kind enough to send me the drawing of a section that is located slightly more than five feet abaft amidships, plus the midship section. Also, a number of photographs showing the O-38 out of water give the reader a fairly good idea of her underwater shape. The slackish bilge with easy curves at the garboards and at the turn of the bilge reduces wetted surface, thus overcoming the frictional drag of a fairly long keel. The easy sections (together with moderate displacement) help give the boat a comfortable motion with minimal pounding and without the jerkiness so often experienced on beamy boats with hard bilges. A large radius at the turn of the bilge suggests some lack of power, and the O-38 heels fairly easily up to about 25 degrees, but then she



The author's O-38 Kelpie under sail with her 150% genoa. The after window appears shorter than it really is because the sunlit companionway is seen through the after end of the window. (Fred Grell)



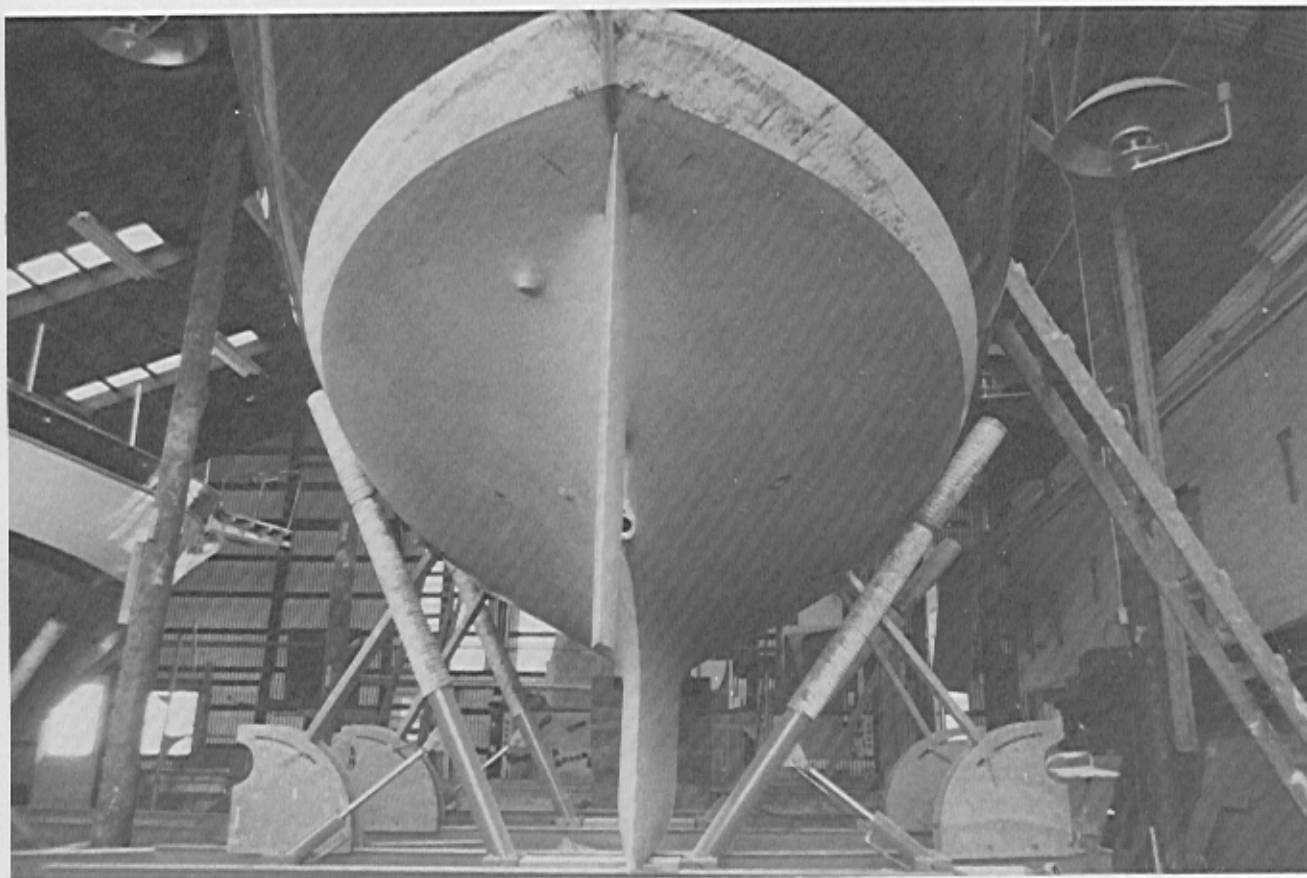
Kelpie hauled out soon after she was purchased by the author. Note the shark-fin keel and kicker skeg, which help reduce cross flow. The small bump near the top of the rudder is the fathometer's transducer.

becomes exceedingly stiff and rarely dips her rail.

To my way of thinking, the O-38 is extremely handsome. Her sheerline is fairly flat, but it gives the boat a sleek appearance, and it provides adequate freeboard amidships to help keep the rail out of water in a fresh breeze. Her overhangs may look old-fashioned to some, but to me they are very attractive, and they make sense. They not only supply a reserve of buoyancy at a boat's ends, but they allow a reduction of wetted surface when the boat is upright in light airs and an extension of sailing length when the boat is heeled in a breeze. I regret the modern fetish of reducing weight in a boat's stern at any cost, and I think the effectiveness of this practice in reducing pitching is somewhat overrated. I remember racing our Ohlson against a

bobtailed competitor during an overnight race. We were closely matched until the increasing wind kicked up a nasty chop. The masthead light of our competitor took on the appearance of a metronome as she began to hobbyhorse, but our motion was much easier. We soon left our rival behind, pitching like that well-known robin that went "bob-bob-bobbin' along."

Other features that enhance the O-38's appearance are her moderate freeboard with bow definitely higher than the stern, her low cabin trunk sans doghouse, smallish cabin windows, and attractive cockpit coamings that curve around to meet a dodger coaming on the cabintop. The dodger coaming is not only attractive and useful in keeping water away from the companionway hatch, but it also adds strength to the cabintop.



The stern view of Kelpie shows her thin keel and the slightly swollen bustle area just forward of the rudder. Who forgot to clean off the boot-top?

There are seven berths below, and these are more than what are needed on this size boat, but this gives great versatility to the accommodations. For instance, the after bunks can be used in rough weather at sea, and there are always two or three bunks to leeward when the boat is heeled. At anchor, the forward bunks afford good privacy in a well-ventilated stateroom. Two bunks in the main cabin are pilot berths, and these are handy for sail stowage when they are not needed for sleeping. The pilot berths are quite narrow (one is sliding), and they still leave room for a dinette to port, which converts to a bunk, and a sliding transom berth on the starboard side. I particularly like the sliding transom, because it allows variable width for the most comfortable sitting, sleeping in port, or sleeping at sea when narrow width is desirable. A

quarter berth on the starboard side makes a splendid sea berth, or it can be used for stowing sails.

Unlike many boats of her size, the O-38 has a large chart table that can be used standing up or sitting down, and on the boat's opposite side is a fine U-shaped galley that allows the cook to be securely belted in during heavy weather. The galley has a three-burner stove with oven, a large stainless steel sink near the boat's centerline, and a three-compartment ice box that holds 125 pounds of ice. The O-38 has a large enclosed head that allows use of the full width of the boat if desired. There are numerous shelves throughout the boat and a total of 36 lockers, including a large hanging locker and one for oilskins near the companionway.

Auxiliary power is supplied by a 15-horse-

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power, two-cylinder Volvo diesel. Ours has proved reliable and amazingly economical. We are very much comforted by the safety of a diesel.

The Ohlson 38 may be had as a sloop or yawl, but I prefer the sloop, which is the way *Kelpie* is rigged. Not that I don't like yawls, but *Kelpie* is perfectly balanced, and I think the addition of a mizzen might cause a bit too much weather helm at times unless the main boom were cut off to make an extremely high-aspect-ratio mainsail, which would be less desirable, in my opinion. There are two sloop versions, the original with a low-aspect rig and outboard shrouds, and a modern version with tall rig and inboard shrouds. Of course, the modern rig allows close pointing, 67 degrees between tacks in a 12-knot wind according to advertising literature, but judging from the upwind performance of *Kelpie*, which has the outboard shrouds, I don't think her speed made good would be very much improved with a closer sheeting angle. We have found it seldom pays to strap the genoa in extra tight.

In 1975 my family (son, daughter, wife) and I sailed *Kelpie* from the Chesapeake Bay to the Azores. We experienced some very heavy weather, and this is when I learned firsthand that the O-38 is a splendid sea boat. During the heaviest gale we ran off under bare pole and then lay ahull for 15 hours. Our experience was described in my book *East to the Azores*, published by International Marine Publishing Company, Camden, Maine.

I was very interested to read of Clare Francis'

heavy-weather experiences aboard the Ohlson 38 *Robertson's Golly* when she crossed the Atlantic alone via the northern great circle route in the 1976 singlehander's race. Miss Francis encountered several gales, including a Force 10 screamer with 35-foot seas, and she, too, successfully lay ahull. Although some seamen disapprove of hulling in severe weather, I think a boat like the O-38 is quite well suited for the tactic in all but perhaps the most extreme conditions with very confused seas having spilling breakers. This suitability is due to the boat's having a low center of gravity and thus a good range of stability; the ability to self-right; a small cockpit well; a low, strong cabin trunk with small windows; some initial tenderness to allow heeling from wind pressure on the bare mast; and the kind of keel that allows considerable leeway when there is no forward speed so that the boat can retreat from beam seas without tripping.

At any rate, because of all the aforementioned qualities, the Ohlson 38 is my favorite boat. I have often said there is no such thing as a perfect boat, but the present *Kelpie* comes very close. Of course, there is no such thing as a perfect woman, either; but if I were to choose, like those World War II GIs, a favorite from the opposite sex (hmmm), I guess I'd stick with my wife. After all, she is probably the only one who could really endure and put up with all of my idiosyncrasies over the long haul. I'd better say so anyway, because she may get around to reading this.