

Griff's first win

The inaugural Blue Bird Cup was won by Welsh comedian Griff Rhys Jones, who beat Tara Getty's freshly restored *Skylark*. By *Dan Houston*; pics *Kos*





SKYLARK

DESIGNER
Sparkman &
Stephens

BUILT
1937

LENGTH ON DECK
53ft (16.2m)

BEAM
12ft (3.7m)

DRAUGHT
7ft 7in (2.3m)

DISPLACEMENT
45,725lb
(20,741kg)

SAIL AREA
1,981 sqft
(184m²)



Previous spread:
Celebrations on
Griff's *Argyll*
Above: Skylark
was shipped to
the Med in 2011
Left: Her interior
was rebuilt to the
original plans
Above right:
Skylark spent
seven years in
restoration at
Rhode Island

When you are from a billionaire family with a surname like Getty, the size of your sailing yacht is fairly immaterial. So it was quite intriguing to see the 53ft (16.2m) Sparkman & Stephens yawl

Skylark alongside Tara Getty's recently restored *Blue Bird* (CB271/272), in St Tropez, last October.

And, for CB, I'm going aboard to race her! It's for a new perpetual cup – the Blue Bird Trophy for Speed Under Sail, which Tara intends to challenge for each year here. In a twist of synchronicity, the silver art deco trophy by Garrards was first awarded to Malcolm Campbell in Geneva in 1937 – the year *Skylark* was launched.

St Tropez in the first week in October feels like a privileged place to be. The nautical society (and the mayor) move all the ugly, slab-sided, plastic motor cruisers out and replace them with low-slung classics, opening vistas across the pretty stone-quayed port. It's pretty crammed too, with 200 yachts in harbour, but the effect of all these swept teak decks, this gleaming bronzework and deep lustrous varnish is electrifying, and brings crowds in from miles around.

There are boats of all sizes, from the 1923 26ft 5in (8m) Solent Sunbeam *Dainty*, up to the sleek 95ft 4in (29.1m) lines of *Mariquita* (plus her 30ft/9.1m bowsprit, of course). The whole pantheon of wooden yacht design is here, and a good many spirit of tradition boats, too. The disparate mix comes together in one of classic boating's most fabulous displays – Les Voiles de St Tropez, which started life 30 years ago as the Nioulargue series.

With its free quayside parties, it is as much for the crews as for the owners, and that helps to keep the atmosphere surprisingly real. A lot of people here are very down to earth in the way of wooden boat sailing everywhere. But down to earth people can party...

Skylark is a new boat on the scene. Built in 1937 and well known on America's west coast, with a Transpac in 1947, she was restored on the east coast, first at Loughborough Marine Interests, Rhode Island, then at East Passage Boatwrights, Bristol, RI. It was a thorough job – more of a complete rebuild, although her masts and mizzen boom are original. Everything else has been replaced to the original plans.

And that was one of the reasons Tara Getty was attracted to her. She had had a sympathetic rebuild, although her teak deck is laid over ply and epoxy for strength. He bought her over the winter 2010/2011 and she was shipped to France.

The day before this race, she and the other S&S inboard yawls, present including *Stormy Weather*, *Argyll*, *Manitou* and *Cometa*, had sailed in company creating a marvellous spectacle. But today is Thursday – traditionally the one-on-one challenge day, and we have challenged Griff Rhys Jones in his recently acquired 57ft 4in (17.5m) 1948 yawl *Argyll*... however there's no wind.

We jill around in the bay to the west, but there's not a puff. In the end the sailors are invited to lunch aboard the Getty family yacht *Talitha G* – acting as our committee boat today. It'll probably be the only time most of us have a glass of chilled rosé followed by superbly



succulent roast beef, on a committee boat, and it's only marred slightly by the fact that a zephyr of breeze starts up just as we sit down.

Early afternoon in St Tropez can feel like a state of suspended animation, as the rosé rounds off the senses till they seem to float in the quiet heat – about as slowly as the topsails of the large gaff cutters inching their way along just beyond the harbour wall.

So it's not until 3.15pm that we get back to our anchored boats and begin the start sequence. We know where Griff's boat is from some of the "urgent chat", shall we call it, coming across the water. On *Skylark*, Tara is at the helm with Chris Savage behind him doing tactics. The crew includes the broker-sailor Nick Edmiston.

With a 3.35pm start horn from *Talitha G*, both boats cross the line well, but soon after the start it's clear that *Argyll* has found more breeze in the Baie des Canebières – though she hasn't set her mizzen. With the breeze shifting again we pass just aft of *Argyll* and are able to lead her at the windward mark.

By 4.20pm, we're broad-reaching to a downwind mark and the call goes out for the mizzen staysail – a great secret weapon of ketch and yawl. But it's not enough to gain a lead on *Argyll*, who's crept ahead again, and once round, the race is all but over... Griff's grin says it all. "He's totally made up," says photographer Kos – who is busy capturing it all. "He says he's never won anything before."

In the interim months since that first race, Griff has been training in other Med events (see article opposite). Tara has to challenge him in order to get his cup back. So the race will be repeated at Les Voiles again this year, on Thursday, 4 October.



Top: Bluebird led *Argyll* at the windward mark
Above right: Griff (right) hoists the cup provided by Tara Getty (left)

Sailing with Griff Rhys Jones

BY SAM LLEWELLYN AT ALCUDIA MALLORCA, IN THE TROFEO ALMIRANTE CONDE DE BARCELONA, AUGUST 2012

The sun is belting down. Ahead, dun mountains rise from a sea blue as ink. I have hoisted the mizzen, and the downhill trimmer is grinding his winch, and at the helm, *Argyll's* owner Griff Rhys Jones is grinding his teeth. Our beige uniform shirts smell faintly of bilge.

A committee boat looms ahead. As I scuttle up to my rightful spot on the foredeck, the tactician says "four minutes". We will sail away from the line for two minutes, tack, and come back. In the cockpit, people are beginning to give each other advice. Alex the skipper is giving his in French. Regis, from Barcelona, is disagreeing with him, also in French. Griff is

“The boat with the black girl disappears abruptly,
scraped off on the committee boat”



Top: *Skylark* sets a relaxed tone to the upwind mark
Above left: The inboard yawls were a spectacle passing *Getty's 'committee boat', Talitha G*
Above right: At the award party

speaking, too, but the other two are not paying attention, because they are doing the excitable Latin thing, which is different from the excitable Welsh thing, though not very.

The foredeck is a spearhead of calm teak under a cathedral of close-seamed white sails. On the planking is an asymmetric bag, and on the asymmetric bag reclines Henry. I find a spot of my own. For a moment there is perfect peace. Then a voice floats forward from the cockpit. “Ready about!” it howls. “Lee-oh!”

The cathedral collapses with a roar. Henry bashes a corner of genoa round the lower shroud. I grab the clew and run it down the side deck before the pressure comes on. The winches go. *Argyll* heels, accelerating, starboard telltales just lifting, tearing a roaring plume of sea towards the committee boat.

There is another big boat 20 yards (18m) up to starboard. Its helmsman is looking nervous, possibly because Henry is making useful progress towards getting the telephone number of the beautiful black girl sitting on his forehatch, or possibly because he fears that Griff will push him the wrong side of the committee boat, or maybe both.

“One minute!” yells someone. We are really moving now. Griff is easing onto the wind. The boat with the black girl disappears abruptly, scraped off on the committee boat. Someone in the cockpit is yelling: “Too soon! Too soon!”. On the next boat down, someone starts shouting for water. *Argyll's* winches jingle and her nose comes up again, and as we slide past the committee boat

hard on the wind I notice that the girl with the stopwatch has a fleck of spinach on her top right-hand incisor. We have started.

There are a few minutes' peace on the rail. “Tacking!” yells someone. I grab the sheet. A bight of slack slams onto my nose. I run the clew down the side. Griff does not like blood on his decks. I wipe it on my shirt. We tack again, and again, and then over the hammering of my heart I can hear Baines the bowman shouting that *Manitou* is under the genoa on starboard, and we are on port so we dip her. We are looking for wind under the headland, charging along at 8 knots while Griff shouts the depths, and I can see pale sand through blue water as we tack again. “Too low for the mark,” says someone in a thick French accent.

“I AM STEERING STRAIGHT FOR THE MARK. DO NOT TELL ME THAT I AM GOING BELOW THE MARK. HOW DARE YOU TELL ME I AM STEERING BELOW THE MARK. MIZZEN STAY!”

The debate fades back into the heartbeat as someone throws a halyard and a sheet and I bend them on to the head and clew of the staysail stuffed down the companionway.

“Asymmetric,” says Henry. The tall yellow mark slides by close enough to touch. Up goes the asymmetric. Up goes the mizzen staysail. You can feel the power through the soles of your feet. In the cockpit, teeth and winches grind. Reclining on the genoa, Henry reaches for his fags and we start a discussion on comparative religion.

There are not many sails ahead. So far so good.