

Foil school

Ever wondered what it's like to try foiling? Only too happy to find out, Georgie Corlett volunteered as a test pilot on a unique new course for the foiling wanna-be...

Until recently, Foiling Moths have been the playthings of the pros – only the very best of the best have dared to take on the challenge, whilst the remainder of us mere mortals have been left to gape open-mouthed as these incredible pocket-rockets whizz by.

But at last, Nothing for mere mortals has become a possibility, thanks to the enterprising partnership of Datchet Watersports and Bladerider UK. Combining the teaching skills of Datchet Watersport's instructors with the boat-specific know-how of Bladerider's UK distributor, Mike Airey, wanna-be foilers can now sample for themselves the incomparable sensation of flying along, four feet above the water, with a unique two-day tuition package.

Moth vs butterflies

The Foiling Moth is unquestionably the coolest, most-happening class around; not an issue of DSM goes by without them getting a mention. So, when the offer came to try out the course and actually attempt lift off myself, I needed no second bidding.

What I did need, however, was a perfect 8-18 knots – a pretty narrow wind range in which the average novice stands half a chance of getting the thing to fly. Third try lucky (day one, too little wind; day two, too much wind; day three, spot on) and we finally had the Bladerider on the shore, tipped on her side, ready to launch. As my instructor talked me through the controls and demonstrated how the mechanics of the hydrofoils work, Mike got ready to carry the carbon ensemble (weighing a mere 30kg all-up) sideways into the water. This was the first clue that sailing a Foiling Moth means disregarding most of what you know about conventional sailing!

Mike expertly launched the Bladerider, threw in a couple of tacks and a demo capsized recovery, and then the moment came. Butterflies abounded as I tentatively climbed onto the trampoline from the safety boat, with assurances of "It's easier than it looks!" ringing in my ears; easy for my instructor to say, being one of several of the Datchet Watersports staff who have spent the whole winter perfecting their foiling techniques in order to design and tailor this one-of-a-kind course.

That foiling feeling

Foiling isn't really something you make happen as such, it is more sort of something that happens to you... that was the realisation that struck me approximately 30 seconds after I first set foot in the Bladerider. Having half-sheeted in the main and half-clambered (most inelegantly!) out

onto the windward rack as an opportune gust happened to whisk the boat briefly into foiling mode. What struck me more than anything was the incredible rate of acceleration; I could think about little else. The concrete edge of the reservoir looming, it seemed as good a time as any to attempt my first tack. Steering cautiously into the wind, the boat decelerated slowly and I felt the hull's resistance against the water as it sank back into displacement mode, demanding a positive push on the tiller to encourage it through the wind.

Emerging successfully on the other side, confidence building by the second, I took proper control of the mainsheet and found my way to the edge of the rack, sheeting in as I edged outboard. Suddenly everything went quiet; glancing down, the water seemed extremely far away. I was up! As it dawned on me that I was fully foiling, I wondered what to do.

Nothing, it seemed.

Once properly airborne, the Bladerider is perfectly happy just zipping along. Keeping it there takes little more than gentle tweaks of the mainsheet to maximise the power in the main, and some clever steering to take advantage of the apparent wind. I'm sure that a pro foiler would tell you there's actually more to it than that - but for a first timer it may not have been text-book but it certainly was simple. Boat balance is, not surprisingly, crucial. It is the weirdest sensation to be hiking out and trying to bounce the thing flat when there is barely any boat in the water and nothing underneath you save several feet of

Below:

Looking over the Bladerider on land; practising balancing techniques in a converted Laser.

Right:

The first time you take off it takes a while to realise what's happening!



Photos: Emily Brown





Left: Balance and trim are key: it's a fine line between getting it right - and getting it horribly wrong!

fresh air - but get the rig suitably powered up and hike it over a few degrees to windward and the Bladerider responds gamely, giving you an extra knot or three of speed on top of the 20 or so you've already got. And that's the other weird thing - in a conventional dinghy you tend to have to put a lot in to get the speed and acceleration out. But this boat needs little - if anything - to get it foiling and just the tiniest of adjustments to keep it there; no intense pumping, no hardcore ooching. There is barely any load in the mainsheet thanks to the apparent wind factor. Steering doesn't feel particularly different; in fact you can be reasonably aggressive with the tiller as once the boat is in foil-mode with so little rudder actually in the water it doesn't make *that* much difference; you don't come crashing down off the foils in the same way that a conventional dinghy would wobble and fall off the plane if you started wagging the tiller around. And from the moment the boat starts foiling, the over-whelming sensation is that of silence; with just the foils slicing through the water, there is no crashing of the hull through the waves or sheets of spray slamming into your face, which adds further to the impression that foiling is really, actually, quite easy!

Of course, in the few seconds that I achieved my first real take off I didn't have time to reach all these conclusions at once - in fact, I barely had time to figure out I was foiling before I sailed out of the breeze, crashed down to earth with a bump, splashed over sideways and realised I had capsized. There's not a lot of thinking time built into these boats! And whilst taking off may feel smooth as silk, landing like *that* feels anything but.

Living proof

With the help of the safety boat I soon had the Bladerider upright again and was being given pointers on how to get the boat to lie to; this is managed with the windward rack resting in the water, supported by the cheeky float

which the Bladerider has incorporated on the underside of the trampoline to give that extra bit of stability - yes, in short, stabilisers!

With this move perfected (ish) and with a few new pointers from my instructor I was all set for another attempt... at which point the wind fizzled to the lightest of zephyrs, leaving me stranded in sub-foiling conditions, leaping from rack to rack like a monkey in a bid to keep the boat upright. "I am meant to be doing this?!" I enquired of the pursuing safety boat. It seemed I was. At just 32.5cms wide the hull of the Bladerider is, like any Foiling Moth, slim, and it takes every ounce of concentration and boat balance skill you can muster to stay upright. There are no two ways about it, this is very hard work.

Thankfully, a dark patch soon gathered pace and skitted across the reservoir towards us. With the breeze back up, I continued to alternately foil, whoop, cartwheel, giggle and swim my way backwards and forwards across the lake for the remainder of the session.

Totally buzzing and still high as a kite on adrenaline, I returned to shore with a huge grin, living proof that foiling is well within the reaches of a mere mortal. There is no doubt that to become a pro foiler would take a lot more hard work with countless more capsizes, but the thrill of the ride would be well worth it! **DSM**

Want to try?

The two-day Bladerider Coaching Course is run by Datchet Watersports and Bladerider UK. The course costs £599 and includes full instruction (max 1 instructor to 2 students). A reasonable sailing ability and level of fitness is required. Contact 01753 683990 or click www.datchetwatersports.co.uk for more details. A 3 hour Bladerider Hydrofoil Experience course is also available, priced £299. Find out more about the Bladerider at www.bladerideruk.com or www.bladerider.com.au/