



BALANCE 526

The Outlier



The Balance 526 is a very good-looking, South African-built catamaran of which 6 examples are currently sailing (numbers 7 through 10 will be in the water 2019/2020...). We haven't yet had the chance to test one, since all the owners are off making the most of their multihulls... But Dave Block, well-known professional skipper, agreed to give us a detailed analysis of his experience on the Balance 526!

I first heard of Balance Catamarans from delivery skipper friends in the Caribbean who were impressed with what they had seen and heard. I therefore jumped at the chance when Reliance Yacht Management asked me to deliver a Balance 526 called Dragonfly (hull #4) from Tortola to Newport, RI, in May of 2018.

After a bit of research, I learned that the 526 was built by legendary professional South African big wave surfer and boat builder Jonathan Paarman. After leaving the composite and tooling division of Voyage Yachts, which he



ran for eight years, he set up a factory in St. Francis Bay in 2008 with a view to crafting high-end carbon/epoxy voyaging cats. It began with a 60-footer that he launched in 2010 for fishing and surfing expeditions in Indonesia. That later led, in 2013, to a thriving partnership with American sailor and yacht broker, Phil Berman, a former Hobie Cat World Champion and au-

thor of a range of books on catamaran sailing and racing. It is hard to imagine two more experienced men coming together to design and build a voyaging catamaran.

Paarman and Berman were of like minds when it came to the sort of catamaran that they would want to sail if they ever had time to do it. They were serious racers when young but recognized that what they most wanted to do was have adventures on the water. Going fast was great, but they wanted a boat that could be easily short-handed, repaired in remote locations, and which would have enough payload capacity to carry fishing gear, kayaks, surfboards, dive gear, a big tender to travel to remote surfing reefs, and plenty of parts and spares, together with large fuel storage capacity when required.

mance I experienced on her. For those who are curious about the performance differences of a 526 with keels or dagger-boards I strongly suggest visiting the Balance website where you will find a comprehensive comparison of the two configurations. It also offers 526 performance polars for the two configurations in a wide range of wind conditions.

Now, back to Dragonfly. She was a fully cruise-equipped 526 with a 6.5 kW generator, 1300 watts of solar panels, washing machine, water-maker, two refrigerators and two freezer units, a life raft, full house air conditioning and four sails in her inventory. Prior to departing Tortola our crew of three topped off her fuel and water stores. Given the above our experiences of her performance should accurately reflect a keeled version Balance 526 in a laden ocean passage

pulled 10 to 11 knots. Upwind in 14 knots or better she will get to 9.5 to 10 knots and close reach in the 11 to 13 knot range. Give her 17 knots or more and she will not go any faster upwind (you take in the first reef in the mainsail at about 14 to 15 knots true), but as soon as you crack off to a close reach or beam reach expect speeds in the 13 to 15 knot range. In very strong winds surfing with the wind aft she will sometimes burst nicely into the high teens to low 20's, but such speeds will not be sustained consistently. Several Balance owners have reported 24-hour periods covering 260 miles or more. This is one very, very fast catamaran - laden or empty.

I found the ride to be smooth and pleasant with little fore and aft pitching. The designers took pains to center the heavy weights on her care-



The like-minded surfer/sailors decided pretty quickly they wanted to work together on a new design that a couple could sail around the world in speed and comfort. They then partnered with Cape Town naval architect Anton Du Toit to oversee the engineering and fine design details. Judging by the result, it was an excellent coupling of strong talents - the Balance 526 I delivered is a truly remarkable performance voyager - a sort of BMW M series for the open seas.

HOW SHE SAILS

Balance builds the 526 with either fixed high-performance keels or with dual dagger-boards. The boat that I sailed, Dragonfly, sported fixed keels, so I can only speak about the perfor-

crusing mode.

Although our delivery had a lot of low and no wind days, we had enough variety in our 1,800 nautical mile trip to get a solid feel for her speed, motion, and live-ability in a good range of winds and seas.

We delivery skippers learn early on that every boat we deliver has a "sweet spot" where she slithers through the water effortlessly, and this speed for the 526 is in the 10 to 12 knot range when fully laden with any breeze over 12 knots. On a broad reach with her large Code Zero she will often do wind speed in true winds as low as 7 knots. Upwind in a 12 knot or better breeze she wants to sail around 9 knots. Crack off to a close reach in the same winds and we

fully, leaving little heavy equipment in her bows and sterns.

The most interesting thing about the 526 is that she sails these high speeds with ease. Her rig, reefing systems, sheet handling are no more complex than a production charter cat. It is a testament to the designers that the 526 is a remarkably easy boat to sail given her powerful sail-plan, the high speeds she achieves, and the degree to which she pulls the apparent winds forward. Although we did not have much back and forth tacking, the self-tending blade jib does not need to be touched to tack the boat. And the jib, like all of her sail handling, comes back to a winch station positioned just to the starboard side of her helm in the "up position."

1 : Having the rig set further aft allows for good weight centering and maintains a good foretriangle area.

2 : Captain Dave Block is a professional delivery skipper who has logged over 350,000 miles at sea. He has delivered or raced every major brand of catamaran over the past 25 years.

3 : Access around the deck is particularly fluid.

4 et 5 : The steering wheel is articulated and sail handling maneuvers are grouped together just to starboard of the helm station.



SPECIAL USA - TEST



The 526 steering system is a mechanical racing type design - large Edson sprockets carry spectra cords around pulleys. The feel is sumptuous for a catamaran, where the normal feedback we get on charter builds is akin to driving a semi-tractor. For the sporting sailor this helm will not disappoint - it is perfectly balanced and responsive on all points of sail.

Another distinctive characteristic is the view: even when sailing her on autopilot, walking about the 526 with the remote control in hand, the visibility and the sight lines, are the widest and clearest of any catamaran I have ever delivered. Whether you are piloting the 526 down below, up top, sitting in the saloon, or in the aft cockpit, the clear views in all directions are remarkable. The designers have removed as many blind spots as is possible on a catamaran.

HOW SHE MOTORS

The standard 526 comes with dual Yanmar 45 HP engines but I was told that so far, every customer has upgraded to the Yanmar 57 because it adds no additional weight to the boat. At full throttle in flat seas with both engines she will motor at 10 to 10.5 knots, but when passage-making we ran one engine at 2,400 RPM and this moved us along nicely at 7.5 knots. Fuel consumption at this speed on one engine is very low, giving her outstanding range with her fixed tanks. Balance adds a fuel transfer pump to the large locker in front of the mast for those who wish to extend motor range by adding a bladder tank or jerry cans.

HOW SHE IS BUILT

The Balance is built like most epoxy carbon reinforced racing cats. There is not a single fiberglass interior module, nor any fiberglass furniture modules, to hold down weight. Each and every piece of furniture is hand crafted at the factory using light weight cored panels. The bulk of the interior is hand sanded and painted to a smooth white finish to avoid the use of liners or wood paneling. The workmanship is superb, reflecting thousands of hours of careful fairing and paint work. A catamaran such as this built in Europe or America would surely have to cost many thousands more due to the enormous labor costs associated with such a build. All the handholds, doors, and cockpit furniture are in composite. There is simply no wood or stainless steel found on the deck of this catamaran, other than the bow pulpit seat.

The amount of cabinetry on the 526 is significant compared to any other performance catamaran of this length that I have seen. It is not the sort of spartan catamaran where guests will be climbing over clothing and gear as each cabin provides ample drawers, hanging closets and shelves.

A NO-FRILLS CATAMARAN

It is evident to anyone who sees or sails this boat that Berman and Du Toit come from practical sailing backgrounds, but are also driven by strong esthetic philosophies. The design and look of the 526 is gimmick free. Her lines are lean and angular, crisp and contemporary, free of any garish bling – understated and elegant. When we pulled into Newport harbor on Dragonfly all heads turned.

Pretty as she is, every aspect of her design seems to have been refracted

through a simplicity prism. Access for repairs is exceptional. Movement from helm to side decks and from side decks to foredeck is a breeze. The wiring and the systems installations all reflect a commitment to functional excellence. Moving from the salon to the cockpit and from the cockpit to stern steps, is as ergonomically correct as one can get. Whether it is the bathrooms, the sleeping cabins or the galley - the Balance 526 is a finely crafted, gracious catamaran to live on.

HIGH PRICE

The only major negative to the Balance 526 is that most of us cannot afford her. She comes in at a base price of \$1,399,000 U.S. dollars, and most of the units leave the yard cruise-equipped at around 1.6 to 1.7 million dollars. This actually appears to make her the least costly carbon/eglass/epoxy cat on the market of her size, but there are cheaper alternatives for those that require it. The buyer for a Balance 526 must be the sort of experienced sailor who appreciates the build quality, performance, and design features she offers. It comes as no surprise that all of the buyers for the 526 so far are purchasing their second or third large catamaran.

6 : The cockpit is a great area for relaxing, with numerous seats, a large table and a sunbathing area.

7 : Despite having reduced volume, the nacelle is home to a decent galley, a saloon fitted with two modular tables and even a navigation station.

8 : Every cabin has plenty of storage - cupboards, drawers and hanging lockers.

9 : All the units are in sandwich construction, thus reducing the catamaran's displacement.



The all-carbon construction results in a featherweight catamaran despite her 16 m.

A Cunningham makes for easier tensioning of the mainsail luff.

No need to trim the sheets when beating thanks to the self-tacking jib.

The fixed bowsprit allows for downwind sails to be attached well-clear of the forestay.

The inverted bows allow for a maximum waterline length while keeping the weight down both forward and aloft.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Overall length:	52'6" / 16.00m
Beam overall:	27'2" / 8.26m
Sail area (100% foretriangle):	1690 sq ft / 157.1m ²
Main sail:	1141 sq ft / 106 m ²
Working self-tacking jib:	461 sq ft / 43m ²
Screecher/reacher:	1159 sq ft / 108m ²
Asymmetric spinnaker:	2582 sq ft / 240 m ²
Draft:	boards down: 7'3" / 2.20m
Boards up:	3'8" / 1.12m
Keel version:	4'6" / 1.37m
Air draft/mast clearance:	78'6" / 23.93m
Bridgedeck clearance:	2'11" / 0.88m
Disp (l/ship):	26,929lbs / 12.2 t (keel version) 27,030lbs / 12.3 t (daggerboard version)
Maximum displacement:	34,450lbs / 15.6 t
Maximum cruising payload:	6,890lbs / 3,125 kg
Motors:	Yanmar 2x 57 hp / 2x43 kW
Fuel capacity:	2x130 US gals / 2x500 liters
Fresh water capacity:	2x103 US gals / 2x390 liters
Base Price:	\$1,399,000
Price equipped for world voyaging:	\$1,600,000

Being almost 90 cm / 3 feet above the water, the nacelle is well clear of the waves.

No need to trim the sheets when beating thanks to the self-tacking jib.

The Balance 526 is available with daggerboards or fixed skeg keels.