



# LEADING EDGE

BY MATTHEW SHEAHAN

*Squeezers, snuffers, buckets and balls of wool – deploying and retrieving the spinnaker has been a crew nightmare. Now there is a new system that looks so simple we wonder why it wasn't done before*

**S**o new were we to big boat racing in the early 1970s that aboard my father's Reve de Mer quarter tonner, crewed by just three – two barely into their teens – a 'Spi Squeezer' looked extremely appealing. Pulling a sock over a spinnaker to snuff it, as demonstrated at the London Boat Show, appeared to provide a solution to our serious concerns as to how to deal with such a large sail with such an inexperienced crew.

The idea was sound in principle, but in practice the additional workload and extra control lines on a 23ft boat, which already had twin spinnaker poles, sheets and guys – yes, I know, but we were new to it – offered a greater chance of creating a giant macramé exhibit than an efficient means of dousing the kite. Even when the system did work, it wasn't quick and required plenty of planning, especially if a gybe was required.

In the end we simply had to grunt up and learn how to manhandle our masthead kite and blooper just like everyone else. Of course, today spinnaker snuffers are commonplace aboard cruisers and short-handed offshore racers, but the system has never been perfected for round the cans racing.

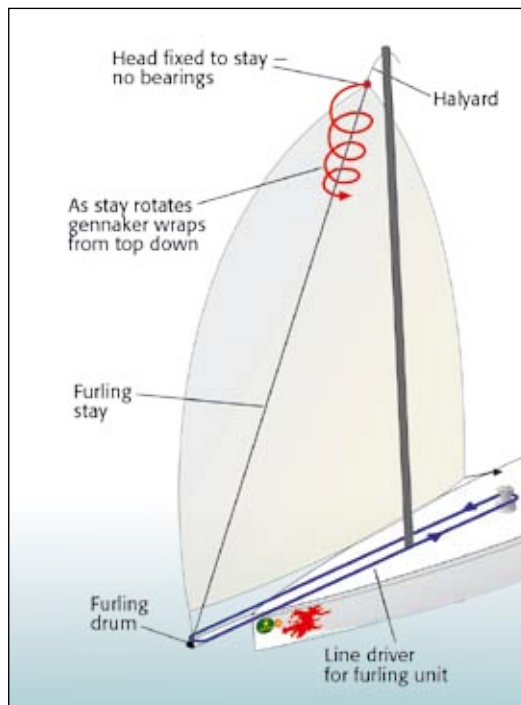
In fact, while boats and construction have changed immeasurably in the past 35 years, little has altered in the deployment of spinnakers.

String drop systems – where the spinnaker is hauled down through a hatch by a retrieval line driven at high speed on a primary winch – operate like dinghy chute systems and became popular aboard the Version 5 America's Cup boats. Now such systems are being incorporated aboard some of the top grand-prix designs, such as the latest crop of mini-maxis, and the arrangement looks likely to filter further down through the ranks.

But the system isn't without its problems. Broken, snagged or tangled retrieval lines can cause last-minute panics, the spinnaker itself can be damaged as a result and the system requires a long, clear run below decks to stow the sail – not an option for fully fitted cruiser-racers.

Now it looks as if there may be an alternative means of deploying and retrieving spinnakers that is so simple in concept that you'll wonder why no one has thought of it before.

Racing aboard Karl Kwok's brand new 80ft maxi *Beau Geste* at the Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup in Sardinia, I was impressed by a system that could change both the size of tomorrow's asymmetric kites and



C. Bortolotti/Rolex

The 80ft maxi *Beau Geste* employs many innovative handling systems, including this gennaker system, which acts like a furling headsail, but the luff flies free from the stay. For more about *Beau Geste* see Boat of the Month, page 92

the way we handle them. In principle, the system works just like a furling headsail, but imagine that when you've hoisted the furled sail and unfurled it, the luff flies free from the stay. At the bottom of the unit a line driver-type drum and a rotating bearing for the gennaker tack attachment looks much like that of a Code 0. The head of the sail is attached to the PBO stay, but without a bearing.

With the sail set, rotating the stay using the line drive will eventually twist the sail onto the stay and furl it from the top down. Aboard *Beau Geste* the furling line was taken back to a powered winch, allowing the crew to furl the entire 570m<sup>2</sup> gennaker in 15 seconds. Lowering the furled sail to the point where all but the head was below decks took around 45 seconds, while the operation engaged just four crew. Hoisting and deploying the sail took a similar amount of time.

The issue that will gain most favour with foredeck crews is that the spinnaker is always ready to be deployed, so you can ditch that open-ended bucket and the soggy, tangled ball of wool.

But perhaps most important of all is that it's easy to see this system working on cruisers with limited space as well as high-performance racers. Is this the end for the trusty old sock?



**The crew can furl the entire 570m<sup>2</sup> gennaker in 15 seconds. Now they can ditch that open-ended bucket and tangled ball of wool**