

RICHARD LANGDON/PATRICK GOSLING/RICHARD PAGE/PHIL YEOMANS



Sailing personalities at the Excel event this month will include Olympic hero Ben Ainslie, left; powerboating champion Shelley Jory, inset; and the inspirational sailor Geoff Holt

We can all rule the waves

Potter about or win a medal: there's a boat for everyone, finds **Tom Rowland**

Ben Ainslie, Great Britain's most successful Olympic sailor with a tally of three golds after Beijing, was given his first boat when he was nine — the sort of little plastic tub, 9ft long with a blunt nose and a flappy sail, you see on estuaries and reservoirs all around the British Isles. You can pick up an Optimist dinghy, not unlike the one in which Ainslie began his voyage to glory, for less than £100 second-hand, although a smart racer can easily cost 10 times that much and, at the top end, competition can be fierce. But it is not necessary to take it that seriously and many pick up the skills messing around for fun during the summer — essentially what Ainslie did.

"Sailing is such a great sport because it is so varied," he says, adding that the variety comes from the kaleidoscope of boats you can buy and the ranges of experience on offer — from competitive racing to relaxed days of lazy cruising; from single-handed endurance tests to

participation in a team. Now 32, Ainslie is part of the British outfit hoping to compete in the next America's Cup ocean-racing series — an event where without a sponsorship deal worth millions you are left standing at the start line, but which still reflects the essential joy of playing with boats.

Ainslie, in rather exceptional form, admittedly, embodies a widespread national passion. Research shows that 11.6m UK adults participated in water sports and water-based leisure activities in 2008. There are 3.2m people in Britain involved in leisure boating, says the Royal Yachting Association (RYA). Each year about 1,500 candidates take its prestigious yachtmaster examination.

The evidence is overwhelming: we have a national predilection for and brilliance at boating — from canoes to solo circumnavigations to powerboat feats. And at its best it is a remarkably democratic pastime and it is possible to participate without trying to win anything and still have a huge amount of fun.

Shelley Jory, 39, is one of the UK's leading powerboat racers — the top female in the world in the sport — and knows a bit about working hard and playing hard. She made history in 2009 by heading the first all-female team to enter the Powerboat P1 World Championship series. By day, she runs a family bridal business on the south coast.

Jory became involved in powerboating 15 years ago, when a boyfriend took it up. They did not have much money, but managed to scrape a few thousand pounds together to get started. She eventually became the navigator as well as team manager.

In a man's sport, being a woman has advantages: "I was about 4st lighter than most of the other co-drivers, and

in the smaller boats the power to weight [ratio] is very important," she says. Jory went on to obtain her own boat and her own all-girl team to take the Honda Formula 4-Stroke British championship, beating 19 all-male teams. She even managed to persuade veteran circumnavigator Sir Robin Knox-Johnston to accompany her on the 2009 Cowes-Torquay-Cowes powerboat race. Knox-Johnston was the first person to sail single-handed and nonstop around the world in 1969.

Today, for an outlay of about £25,000 you could buy the sort of deep-keel, ocean-going yacht he took on that epic. Pick correctly and you will find one able to take high winds in her stride and go anywhere, while keeping you feeling safe.

Among his many continuing links to boating, Knox-Johnston is chairman of Clipper Ventures, which offers the chance to become an ocean yachtsman or even a circumnavigator to a wide range of people. There were 440 competitors in last year's Clipper round-the-world race.

"About 40% of the people who come to us have never been on a boat before," says Knox-Johnston. "People at various stages in their lives think they want time out."

In 2007, Geoff Holt became the first quadriplegic to sail single-handed around Great Britain. In December 2009, he set sail in a catamaran on a voyage across the mighty Atlantic Ocean. "Disability need not be a barrier to achieving your dreams," Holt believes.

The vessel has been adapted so that he can handle the sails and he has a non-sailing care assistant on board to help provide him with food. When not out at sea, Holt is a motivational speaker who addresses audiences from big business. "It is all about setting objectives and not giving up," he says. ■ Ainslie, Jory and Holt will feature in Boating Heroes on the Show Stage during the London International Boat Show at Excel on January 8-17. Visit londonboatshow.com for details of the Boating Heroes programme.

London International Boat Show

The nation's sailors will be making their way to Excel between January 8 and January 17 for the Tullett Prebon London International Boat Show. More than 500 exhibitors will be filling the halls and the Royal Victoria Dock outside with power and sail boats, dinghies, engines, electronics, deck equipment, charter holidays, sailing courses and more. There's no better way to discover the thrills of getting on the water.

■ For details of this year's attractions, competitions, races and entertainment, and for special ticket offers, see pages 12-13 or visit londonboatshow.com