

# Irwin Citation 34

***A mainstream coastal cruiser from an economy builder still managing to survive.***

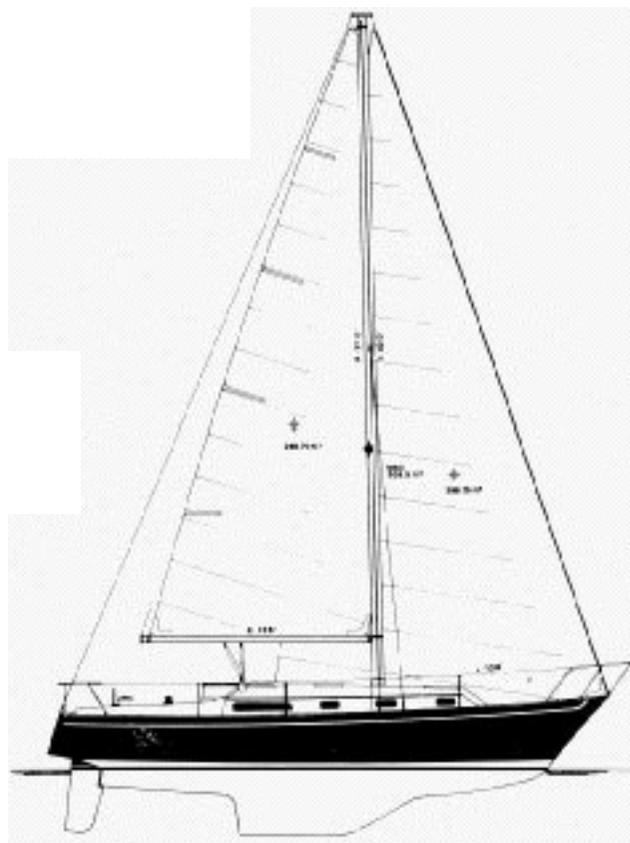
Irwin Yachts has been in operation for 27 years, one of the true old-timers in the fiberglass sailboat business. When we talked to them regarding the Irwin 34, they had just weathered the roughest storm of their history, having settled with their creditors and recovered from Chapter 11, when many other companies in similar situations were folding.

Irwin's recovery was marked by the start of a new production 50-foot cruiser. The new boat, like all the boats throughout the company's history, was designed by Ted Irwin, who has served continuously as CEO of the company as well as chief designer. In this respect, Irwin is like Catalina Yachts, whose CEO and chief designer Frank Butler is second only to Irwin in business longevity.

Like Catalina, Irwin has generally aimed at the economy end of the sailboat spectrum. However, unlike Catalina, Irwin Yachts has built a great variety of sailboats, 47 different models before their latest 50-footer—all sailboats, all larger than 20', from all-out race machines to full-tilt cruisers. Among American companies, only Pearson comes close to Irwin in the variety of cruising sailboats produced over the last quarter of a century.

The Irwin 34 is in many respects a typical Irwin boat. It was originally called the "Citation 34," which was meant to indicate that it was more of a plush cruiser than the race-oriented Irwins at the time, but more of a racer than the larger cruisers.

According to the company, 305 Irwin 34s were built in the production run, from 1978 to 1985, a moderate but successful model for the era. Near the end of its production, the boat was advertised as the Irwin 34 rather than the Citation 34. There were no major changes in the boat from beginning to end, just the details and equipment that are typical of any long production run.



## Specifications

LOA .....	34' 3"
LWL .....	27' 4"
Beam .....	11' 3"
Draft .....	4' 0"/5' 4" (cb/keel)
Displacement .....	11,500 lbs.
Ballast .....	4,100 lbs.
Sail area .....	538 sq. ft.

Owners report mixed feelings in dealing with the company. Irwin dealers got good marks, though there are a few complaints about "incompetents and crooks." The main objection over the years has been about slow response from the company, especially regarding warranty claims on new boats and getting basic information on older models. However, long-term owners report that the company seems to have up and downs in customer service.

## Design and Construction

In design, the 34 looks like a cross between the old 1960s beamy CCA centerboarder and the mid-70s IOR racer, a combination that results in a moderate design and hence a healthy coastal cruiser. The bow has a distinctive concave curve, typical of many

## Owners' Comments

"The hull is good, but the fittings seem to be borderline. It has the best layout I have seen in a 34, but I would not buy another one because the exterior finish is so poor."

—1980 model in the Chesapeake

"For a liveaboard, the boat offers the best price/size factor. A lot of little problems, though: gate valves are sealed with 3M-5200, making installation of seacocks very difficult. Tanks utilize excessive under-bunk space, Irwin's own wheel pedestal creates problems in mounting instruments, and the wheel is too large for the cockpit. It needs a self-tailing mainsheet winch and the sheet winches should be mounted further aft. Head lighting is terrible."

—1984 model in Galveston Bay

"There is little I can complain about, but I don't have the confidence I should in a boat this size. The fiberglass work is not, or doesn't seem to be of high quality. The mast also seems light, but I've had no problems."

—1980 model on Long Island Sound

"Don't hesitate—buy it. It's a great boat. I think it is built a little light for distance cruising. For the way I use it, it fits my needs."

—1982 model in Massachusetts

"This is a good boat for the money—fine for coastal cruising in fair weather. Irwin could spend more time on details."

—1981 model in Massachusetts

"The Irwin 34 is a 'price' boat, but after looking at the Sabre 34, Aloha 10.4, Baba 30, Pearson 34, O'Day 34, Cal 35, Catalina 36, and others, I feel that this is a better boat, and it was \$10,000-\$15,000 cheaper than any of the above."

—1983 model in Texas

"The boat needs to come with an owner's manual, including wiring and plumbing diagrams."

—1983 model on Lake of the Ozarks

"I had many problems, especially leaks which I had to fix, but I would buy another as it is a very good value and sails well for shoal draft."

—1982 model in Louisiana

"The Citation 34 is a well-designed and fast sailboat. More attention to details would make it watertight below decks and afford some badly needed privacy (a must in a boat designed to sleep six!). There is an obvious shortage of locker space, particularly a wet locker."

—1979 model in Lake Erie

"I had nine pages of warranty claims. Water and fuel tanks leaked; all ports leaked; all hatches leaked, the sump pump didn't work, the starboard chainplate wasn't installed properly, the shaft strut failed, all stanchions leaked, the teak finish-work below was not completed, gelcoat voids everywhere, traveller leaked, etc. etc. The words 'quality control' cannot be used with the word Irwin when describing production."

—1978 model in Florida

Irwin designs, and a flattish sheer, with a molded-in cove stripe to make the sheerline appear a bit higher in the bow. The stern sections have the peculiar tuck-up typical of IOR boats of the era. The trunk cabin is traditional looking and fairly low. Overall, we think the boat is an attractive example of the modern racer-cruiser.

Underwater, the hull is beamy and saucer shaped. The centerline of the hull aft of the keel forms a shallow fence which runs back to form a skeg in front of the spade rudder. Though the boat was available with a deep fin keel, drawing 5' 4", the centerboard model was far more popular. Company literature advertises a shoal draft keel as standard, with the fin and centerboard as options, but we have never seen a shoal-draft model and none of the owners in our surveys had the shoal-draft version. Brochures show the shallow-draft keel as identical in outline to the

centerboard model but with no board installed.

The centerboard lifts into a shallow stub keel, and the pennant is a Dacron rope; it runs to the deck through a tube which forms a grab rail at the front edge of the galley. We examined three used 34s, and the two centerboard models each had badly chafed centerboard pennants needing replacement.

Other than the chafe problem, the centerboard version of the boat is probably to be preferred if you have a choice. Unlike some boats which are designed for a fin and compromised with a centerboard, the hull shape looks well matched to the board, and few designers have as much experience with centerboards as Ted Irwin.

The hull is a conventional lay-up of mat and woven roving. The deck is a conventional balsa core sandwich.

The three boats we examined all had decent gelcoat

and exterior finish, but owners in our surveys report an inordinate incidence of gelcoat problems, including patches coming off, large voids, and excessive crazing. One boat we looked at had quite a few repaired spots in the deck molding, and we suspect most of the gelcoat problems were new boat problems. Once fixed, they should not be a major concern for the used boat buyer.

With regard to other elements of construction, quality is on the poor side. In fact, the three boats we examined were serious contenders in our own used-boat search but were finally rejected because we didn't like many details of the way the boats were built. For example, two of the boats we looked at clearly had a history of deck leaks at the portlights and a variety of fittings. The interior is generally well finished with teak-faced plywood and an interior liner, but the ceiling and liner made it very difficult to get at the inside of the hull and deck to trace or fix the leaks. It was clear that the previous owners had little luck in stopping the leaks. Further, the hull-to-deck joint is fastened with sheet metal screws rather than bolts. The screws are installed both vertically, from the top of the aluminum toe rail, and horizontally, from the side of the toe rail. Through-bolting is preferable.

More importantly, on the boat we were most interested in, it was evident that the hull-to-deck joint was leaking, at best a nuisance, at worst a major repair job. Though we couldn't examine most of the joint because of the interior joinerwork, we did find one spot where the deck molding actually did not overlap the hull flange. You could see the underside of the toerail from inside the boat.

On one boat, the deck cleats were fastened only with sheet metal screws, and on all the boats, the bow and stern pulpits were only screwed down rather than through-bolted.

There were several details—cheap through-hull valves, no washers on chainplate bolts—which were relatively easy to correct, but they put us off the boat.

Obviously, Irwin believes these construction details are adequate, but we consider them very minimal or problematic—something we would feel compelled to correct.

In contrast to the details, the basic fiberglass work seemed solid and good on all the boats we examined.

### Interior

The interior of the 34 is generally well done, good production-line work with teak veneer and plastic. Some of the details of the cabinetry were a little sloppy on the boats we examined, but all in all the interior of the boat, when new, was undoubtedly a strong selling point.

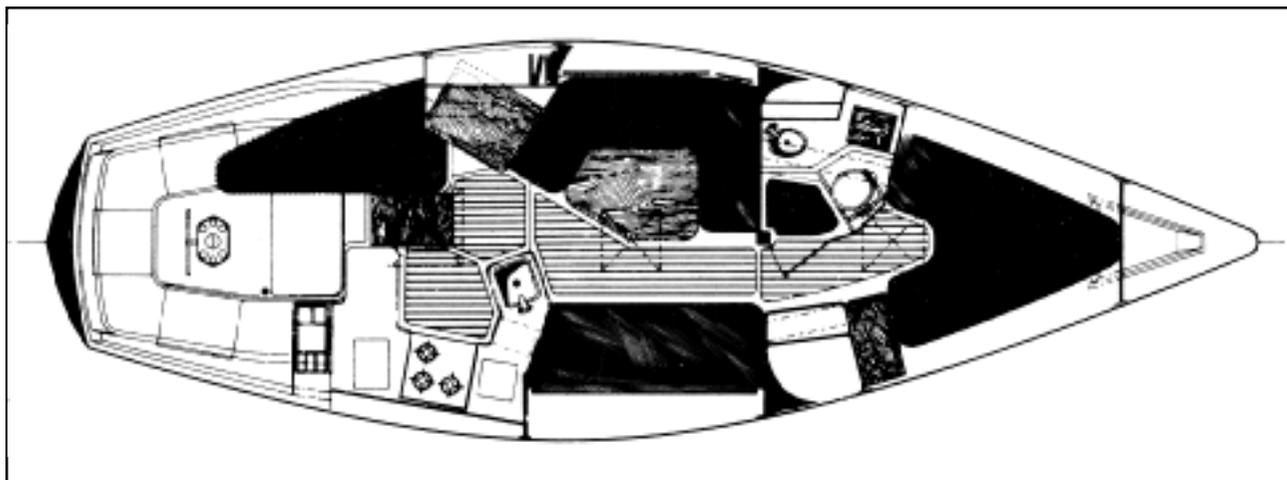
There are three good berths—a V-berth double and a quarter berth. The quarter berth will be just a little tight, especially at the foot, for a large, tall man. The settee is usable as a single berth (it's a very comfortable settee), and the dinette opposite is convertible to a small double. The head is of good size, and the galley is well arranged in a sort of wrap-around U. There's a good electrical panel at the aft side of the galley. The nav station is set at an angle, with the table a bit small though adequate.

The Irwin 34 came with seven opening ports as well as forward and midship hatches, so ventilation should be good.

Stowage below is minimal, since tankage occupies space below the berths—a shortcoming of the modern hull shape. Tankage is adequate on the boat—30 gallons fuel, 80 gallons water, and a big holding tank for the head—a rarity on production boats of this size.

There's little bilge in the boat, which can cause problems when you take water inside the hull. This showed up in the discolored and delaminated teak/

*The Irwin 34's interior has a fairly straightforward layout, but with a number of angled bulkheads to add interest. The sink is near the centerline to facilitate draining on either tack.*



holly plywood on the cabin sole of two of the boats at which we looked.

Original standard equipment is quite complete and modern—hot/cold pressure water, shower, propane stove, 4" cushions, AC and DC electrical systems, and so on, meaning that little upgrading should be necessary, assuming the boat has been well kept.

Overall, the interior seems very desirable for a couple cruising or a couple with one or two children. There are no privacy doors for the forward cabin, so two couples will have to be (or become) intimate while cruising.

### On Deck

The deck is conventional but well done for working the boat. There's a deck-opening anchor locker forward, wide side decks, and a good big cockpit with a small ice/beer locker, two lazarettes, and a propane tank locker.

A wheel was standard on the boat. A nice feature is that a portion of the cockpit sole is removable for superior engine access, the best we have seen on a boat this size. Cockpit drains are also large, another rarity on production boats.

The companionway opening is large, with just a small lip/step above the cockpit sole. While not desirable in an offshore boat, this is okay in a coastal cruiser and makes for easy access to the interior. Most owners will want to arrange a way to secure the lowest companionway drop board, so it can be left in place during rough conditions.

The mainsheet traveler is on the cabin top, just ahead of the companionway. While this is a conve-

nient location, the boats we looked at had exceptionally unsightly dodgers because the multi-part mainsheet was somewhat in the way.

### Performance

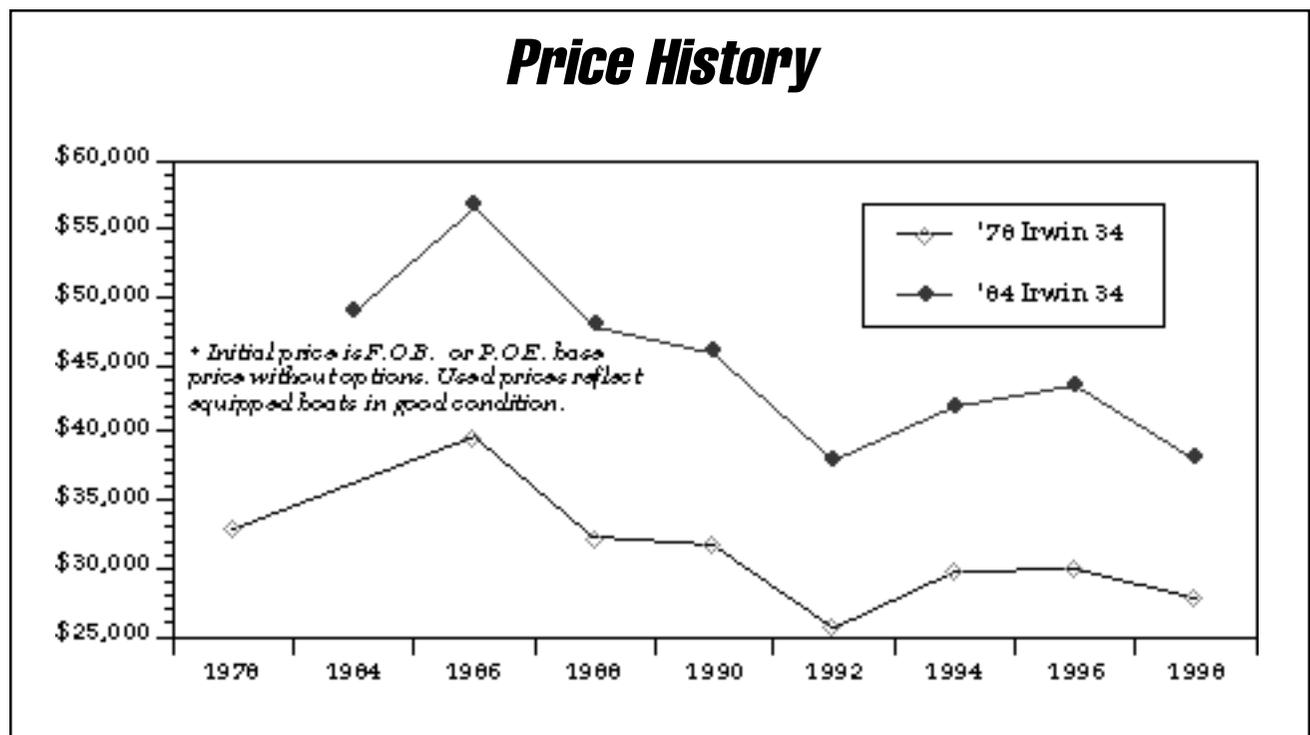
The boat came with a Yanmar 15, which generally gets good reports from owners, though some think the boat is a bit underpowered. A 20-hp Yanmar was available as an option, and this would be desirable if a buyer were choosing between otherwise similar boats; the 20-hp model would be smoother running as well as more powerful.

The boat we sailed handled adequately under power, though some owners report it difficult to back up straight. Most of the 34s had solid props, and the performance-oriented sailor will want to upgrade to a folding or feathering prop so the boat's sailing ability isn't hurt.

The boat has a big rig, well balanced between mainsail and jib, and as you can expect from Ted Irwin's design board, it is a good sailing boat. With a PHRF rating around 160, it is slightly slower than other cruiser/racers of that era, like the C & C 34, but it will make good passages, especially off the wind.

Many owners report that they consider the boat quite tender, especially the centerboard model, but we found the boat to be reasonably stiff, with lots of initial stability from the beamy hull. We didn't sail the boat in heavy air, but we suspect an early reef would be desirable. Cruisers will find that it works well to sail the boat under roller-furling jib alone.

Early boats may have the DynaFurl roller which came as an option from Irwin, and buyers may want



to factor in a replacement in their price figuring. The boats are generally of an age where the original sails are still aboard and, for all practical purposes, best used as drop cloths. Though the boat was advertised as a “club racer,” we saw no used 34s with spinnakers or any spinnaker gear, so a chute and related gear may also have to be purchased to complete a sail inventory.

Standard winches on the boat were minimal, and an upgrade will be desirable if the original owner didn't buy the optional package when the boat was new.

The rig is adequate, the only problem reported by owners being paint problems on the mast, perhaps from a poor priming job on the aluminum. The mast of one boat we looked at had been re-painted.

### Conclusions

It is an excellent design, a wholesome all-around

racer/cruiser with shallow draft that would serve a family's needs as a coastal cruiser, at a reasonable cost.

Unfortunately, the Irwin 34 suffers from some corner-cutting: details of construction which are cheap or shoddy, such as using only screws to secure the hull-to-deck joint.

Realistically, those details should not hamper the boat's use in normal conditions as a coastal cruiser, but are substandard compared to many other boats available. We generally would not recommend the boat to anyone contemplating ocean passages, unless considerable basic upgrading had been completed.

But for a coastal cruiser, for an owner who likes to do some upgrading, the boat is a handsome, well-thought-out design, with a good interior, well-equipped. In today's market, it offers a lot of basic boat, especially if bought at the right price. • **PS**