Union 36: A Tank Trimmed in Teak

A close cousin of several other double-enders, this cutter typifies the 1970s cruising scene.

If one was to pick a boat that best represents the many facets of the Taiwan-U.S. boatbuilding industry in the 1970s and 80s, there's probably no better poster than the Union 36. Take equal parts of good design, skilled handcraftsmanship, knock-off gear, and the occasional lack of attention to detail, and mix them with a generous portion of alleged double-dealing and broken promises, and occasionally you'll wind up with a well-built, good-sailing blue-water cruiser like the Union 36.

A stretched out version of a 34-footer designed by Bob Perry, the Union 36 was followed by a wave of Taiwanese-built double-enders.

Photo courtesy of Dan Berkey

DESIGN

According to naval architect Robert Perry, the basis of the Union 36 design was conceived in the early 1970s by Hans Christian Yachts founder John Edwards, a former high school teacher from Long Beach, Calif. Edwards commissioned Perry to design a 34-footer to be built at the Union Ship Co. in Taipei, Taiwan, and marketed in the United States as the Hans Christian 34. Although Perry is now well known for double-ended cruising boats like his ground-breaking Valiant 40, he was just beginning to earn his reputation at that time.

Before the first HC34 was launched, however, Perry said, he learned that Edwards had the yard build a second set of molds, adding about a foot in the center and aft of the cockpit, in order to stretch the design to a 36-footer (the Hans Christian 36). Hans Christian informed Perry that he would not receive royalties for the new 36-footer, but the company continued to associate him with the design, Perry said.

Under Edwards' Taiwan arrangement, Hans Christian "owned" the designs and controlled distributorship. But after a falling out with the Union Ship Co. in the mid-1970s (at which point Edwards relocated his business to another Taiwan yard), Edwards learned that Union held ownership of the molds and would continue to build the boat and market it as the Union 36.

After building a few 36s, Union Ship Co. changed its name to Union Yacht Co. and entered into various distributor arrangements on the West Coast, where the boat was marketed under names chosen by the importer, among them the Mariner Polaris 36.

In a blog by the late Terry Bingham, a Union 36 owner, Perry is quoted as saying that "the yard went on to continue building the boat, but they marketed it under whatever name the individual broker wanted, so that's why you find the same boat with so many names ... Hans Christian 36, Mariner Polaris 36, Union 36, EO 36—all the same boat. The Mao Ta 36 is a variation on the same hull but built by a different yard. [The Union 36] is a very good boat and in every way very similar to most of my early double-enders. It's a bastard child of mine, and I will continue to feel like the father."

Union 36s can be identified by a hull number beginning with USC or UYC, and their production run reportedly was about 160 after Edwards' departure, with the last being sold in 1988.

The Union 36 is a heavy-displacement, full-keel, double-ended cutter-rigged cruising yacht designed specifically for ocean sailing. It has a low chin bow, a short canoe stern, a long flat run aft, and a fairly straight deadrise in the mid-section over a V-bottom (similar to Perry's U.S.-built Valiant 40).

PROS

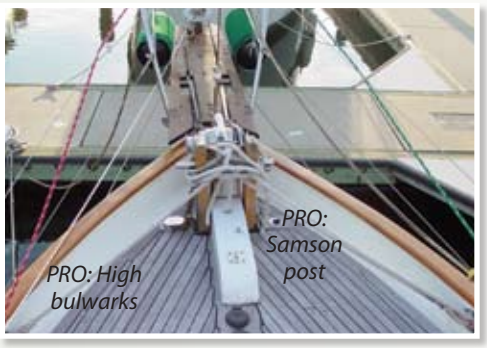
- High coamings keep cockpit dry and protected from breaking seas.
- Worm-gear steering is practically bulletproof, if well maintained.
- Silicone bronze hardware is super-sized and heavy duty.
- High bulwarks add security on deck.

CONS

- Leaving or entering the cockpit requires the skills of a high hurdler.
- Worm-drive steering presents more challenges for windvane steering.
- Teak decks are prone to leaking, and if neglected, deck rot.
- High-friction running rigging makes for a workout.

The snug cockpit is ringed in teak. Belaying pins (below, left) are handy for halyard tails. Samson posts (below, middle) offer a fast, easy way to secure anchor snubbers and dock lines. The shallow footwell drains fairly quickly.

PRO: Belaying pins



PRO: High bulwarks

PRO: Samson post

PRO: Shallow cockpit footwell

Like others of its kind, the Union 36 often is described as a traditional North Sea double-ender, although the resemblance to the original, legendary Colin Archer designs is mostly superficial. The tradition exists mostly in the imaginations of builders and owners. "They are exaggerated caricatures of old boats," says Perry. Nevertheless, the Union 36 has pleasing lines, and the boat often draws admiring glances.

As is the case with most Taiwanese-built boats from the '70s and '80s, the Union 36 is heavy with teak. The wood can be found in the interior joinery, the cockpit and coamings, cap rail and bulwarks, and decks, if they were specified during construction (as was the case with most Unions of that period).

Although quality can vary greatly between Asian-built boats from this era, the joinery and finish detail on the Union 36 is usually excellent, showing craftsmanship that was affordable only because the local carpenters were paid a fraction of what their U.S. counterparts earned. The end result is a warm, inviting interior where brass lamps seem to belong naturally.

ACCOMMODATIONS

The interior of the Union 36 is straightforward, with plenty of headroom and ventilation. It is a good-sized boat with plenty of storage below, although the interior layout can vary slightly between vessels.

The layout of the Union 36 we evaluated (*Melelu*, a *PS* test boat located in upper Chesapeake Bay) includes a large double berth forward. Just aft on the port side is a head compartment with a separate stall shower, and across from the head is a large hanging locker.

The main saloon features a large U-shaped dinette to port (with plenty of storage behind and beneath the seats) and a long settee to starboard. The settee pulls out to form a sea berth or additional seating for the dinette. There's also a full-sized pilot berth (often called the pile-it berth, for its propensity to collect clothes, books, pillows, and whatnot) above this settee.

The U-shaped galley is located to port and contains a deep double sink, a three-burner CNG stove/oven, and a 12-cubic-foot icebox (which on *Melelu* was fitted with aftermarket refrigeration). Although the galley is snug and has limited counterspace, it is functional and contains numerous drawers, lockers, and other storage spaces.

Photos by Frank Lanier

Varnished teak adorns the main saloon (above). White trim helps lighten the mood. The U-shaped galley is tight but functional, with twin sinks that drain well on all angles (above, left). Removing the companionway stairs offers good access to the engine.

Across from the galley is another sizable locker and a generously sized, stand-up navigation station. A large quarter berth occupies the starboard quarter.

Light and ventilation are provided by eight, oval-shaped, opening bronze ports, a large butterfly hatch in the main cabin, and a smaller hatch located in the V-berth. Both hatches are wood reinforced with stainless-steel rod.

This is a deep boat with a voluminous bilge, however, most of the bilge space is occupied by fuel and water tanks in an effort to maximize tankage as much as possible.

DECK LAYOUT

Abovedecks are substantial bulwarks and oversized stainless pulpits joined with double lifelines, which all offer an overall feeling of comfort and safety when moving about the decks. The cockpit, while smaller than that of a modern 36-footer, is snug and comfortable. Its high coamings help keep the cockpit dry, and the small footwell, drained by two 1½-inch scuppers, reduces the volume of water that a breaking sea might dump aboard.

Steering mechanisms vary from boat to boat, ranging from the oversized worm gear found on *Melelu*, to a binnacle-mounted wheel driving a large cast-bronze quadrant with chain and cable. The heavy-duty nature of the worm gear is offset by the friction it introduces, which can present challenges for wind-vane steering.

As cutters, most Union 36s were rigged with self-tacking staysail booms, although many owners have opted to free up the foredeck by removing this spar or replacing it with a roller-furling unit. Perry recommends sailing with a genoa and without the staysail to maximize light-air performance.

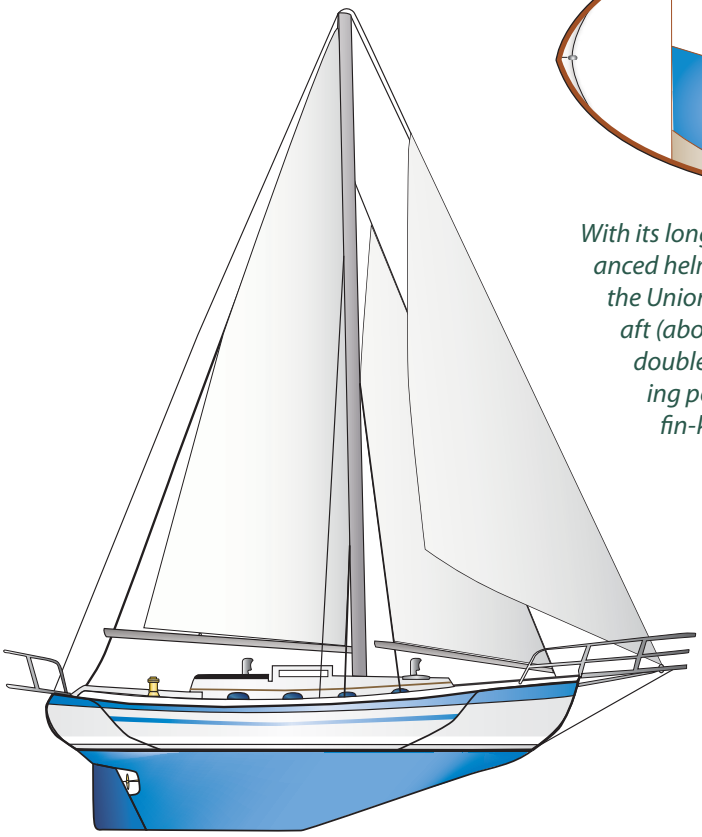
Originally, halyards led to the mast and were handled on winches and belaying pins—a handy tool in the days of "sweating" halyards, but obsolete with today's winches and rope clutches. On *Melelu*, genoa sheets lead to two large winches mounted outside of the cockpit. The boom-end mainsheet block and tackle (6:1 ratio) rides on a traditional—but hardly friction-free—bronze traveler, conveniently located behind the helm. The staysail is tended by a winch near the companionway, although this can usually be handled without much mechanical assistance.

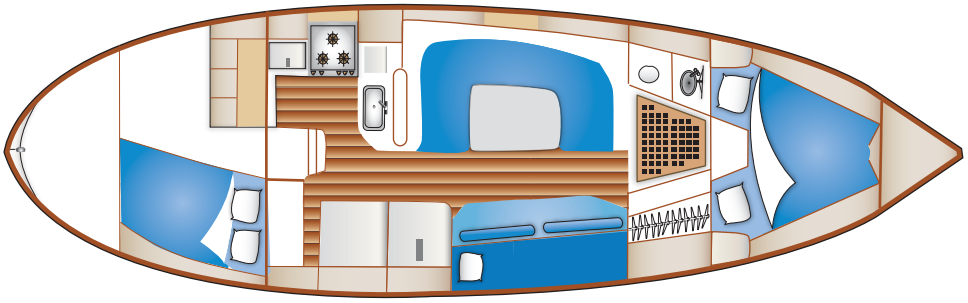
CONSTRUCTION

From a structural standpoint, the boat is typical of Taiwanese-built boats from that era. Displacing 22,000 pounds, the hull is heavily constructed, almost to the point of being over-built.

The hull is thick, hand-laid fiberglass, while the deck is 5/8-inch teak planking over a sandwich of 3/8-inch fiberglass, 3/4-inch plywood, and another 3/8-inch glass layer. The cabintop is slightly lighter composite, using half-inch plywood as the core. The hull-to-deck joint is both through-bolted and glassed over on the inside. Rarely used in today's production boats (which rely on high-strength adhesives at this joint instead), this labor-intensive approach yields a long-lasting watertight joint.

From the early '70s to the early '80s, most Union 36s came with wooden spars, but by 1983, aluminum masts and booms became the norm. Boats with aluminum spars will hold their value better, and any wooden spars should be closely inspected for signs of rot. The liberal use of silicon bronze hardware, like the wooden blocks, is part of the boat's traditional aesthetic. Though it lacks the shine of stainless steel, high-grade





With its long keel, canoe stern, and cutter rig, the Union 36 provides a balanced helm, well-suited for long ocean passages. Unlike many modern boats, the Union 36 has good sea berths: two in the main saloon and a pilot berth aft (above). Comparing the design specs of the Union 36 and three similar double-enders (below), the Union 36 lands in the middle in terms of sailing performance. The Tayana and the Crealock (the only boat with a fin-keel and detached rudder) should have an edge in lighter winds.

UNION 36 IN CONTEXT

	UNION 36	TAYANA 37	ALAJUELA 38	CREALOCK 37
LOA	36′ 8″	36′ 8″	38	36′ 11″
LWL	32′	31′	32′ 7″	27′ 9″
BEAM	11′ 4″	11′ 6″	11′ 6″	10′ 10″
DRAFT/SHOAL	6′	5′ 8″	6′	5′ 6″
DISPLACEMENT	22,000 lbs.	22,500 lbs.	27,000 lbs.	16,200 lbs.
BALLAST	7,800 lbs.	7,143 lbs.	8,600 lbs.	6,200 lbs.
SAIL AREA (100% foretriangle)	786 sq. ft.	861 sq. ft.	880 sq. ft.	619 sq. ft.
ENGINE	33 hp.	33-40 hp.	40 hp.	33 hp.
WATER	100 gals.	100 gals.	80 gals.	85 gals.
FUEL	66 gals.	90 gals.	65 gals.	40 gals.
SA/D RATIO	16.02	17.2	15.6	15.4
D/L RATIO	300	337	349	334
PRICE*	$60,000	$70,000	$150,000	$120,000

** Mean price of online search; actual prices can vary greatly.*

bronze hardware is in many ways superior to stainless for many applications. Though bronze's tensile strength is lower, it is highly resistant to corrosion and more ductile. Often, a piece of bronze hardware will deform, rather than completely fail under extreme loads.

Although some owners have reported issues involving mast compression, fuel or water tank failures, mismatched hardware, and the like, the Union 36 manages to avoid most of the hardware horror stories associated with some Taiwan-built boats.

One complaint sometimes voiced by owners is the drag-inducing squared-off leading edge of the keel. Perry notes that this was probably his fault as a relative newcomer who neglected to give precise enough instruction to the yard that built the keel. He indicates that the best way to correct this would be to reshape the leading edge with foam and fiberglass.

Another concern is the encapsulated iron keel. On similar designs, moisture has reached the iron causing it to swell and split the fiberglass, sometimes causing structural damage. We are not aware of any such problems associated with the use of encapsulated iron ballast in the Union 36.

Nevertheless, the Union 36 is a maintenance-intensive boat. The teak decks are particularly vulnerable to the range of issues that can plague this design: loose bungs, failed caulk seams, leaks, and ultimately rotten plywood core. Anyone considering buying a Union 36 should have a qualified surveyor give the decks a thorough inspection.

The sheer amount of exterior wood guarantees owners will never lack opportunities to sand, clean, and try out a wide range of teak care products. If you like to keep busy in your retirement, these teak-laden beauties present plenty of busy work opportunities.

PERFORMANCE

At 22,000-plus pounds and with a 6-foot-deep, nearly full-length keel, the Union 36 is not your ideal light-air cruiser, even with three sails (main, Yankee, and staysail) and total sail area of more than 700 square feet. It does, however, handle beautifully in winds over 15 knots (about the minimum required to reach anywhere near hull speed). Although best on a reach, the Union 36 also points fairly well.

The Union 36 came powered with a variety of marine diesels. *Melelu*'s original engine was a three-cylinder 35-horsepower Volvo, however this was replaced in 2008 with a new 43-horsepower Beta Marine engine. The

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