

Columbia 36

A bargain-basement racer/cruiser from a granddaddy of American production boatbuilders.

It's hard to believe, especially for those of us who learned to sail in the 1960s, that fiberglass sail boats built back then are now a part of history. The "fiberglass revolution" that seems like just yesterday, is now 30 years in the past. A lot has happened in the world of boatbuilding since then, but many of those old boats are still sailing.

The Design

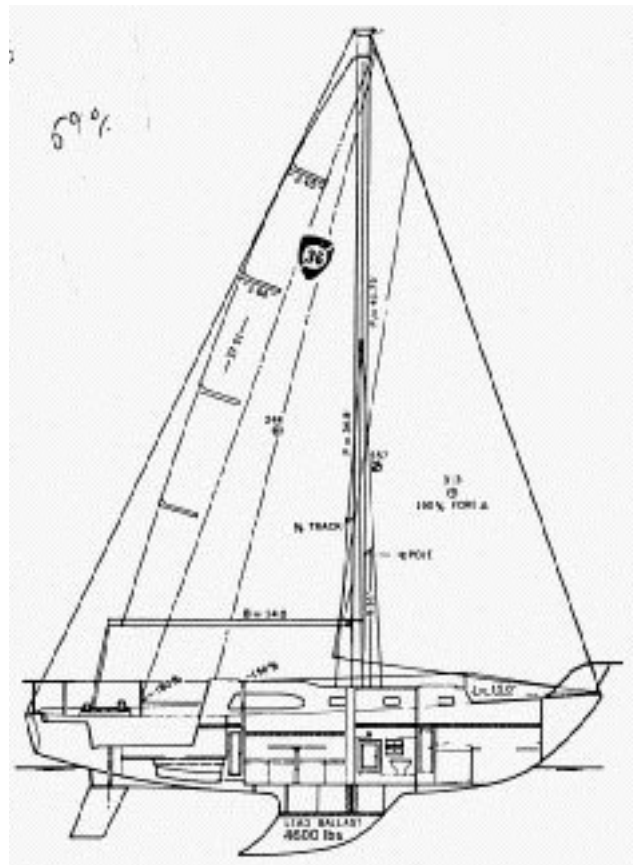
The Columbia 36 was in production between 1967 and 1972. One reader estimates that more than 600 were built, making it a very successful model.

The boat was designed by William Crealock, the California naval architect who today is more readily associated with the Pacific Seacraft line of blue-water cruisers bearing his name. The Columbia 36, with its transom stern, aluminum frame windows, and step-down cabin, bears little resemblance to the Crealock 34 and 37, whose canoe sterns and bronze portlights give it a tough, traditional, go-anywhere look.

The Columbia 36 was a pretty slick looking boat in its day, and though its lines have worn reasonably well with time, we're reluctant to call it a "classic." The sheer is essentially flat, with modest spring, the sidedecks wide and the cabin nicely proportioned. The rig is on the small side for this size boat.

Underwater, the divided underbody shows a swept-back fin keel that looks like an inverted shark's dorsal fin, and a skeg leading to the spade rudder. Interestingly, the propeller shaft (not shown in the drawings) is situated at the aft end of this skeg, which places it above and aft of the rudder and nearer the surface than one might expect.

The long cockpit rates highly with owners. One reader said it doesn't feel crowded even with a crew of eight.



Specifications

LOA	35' 9"
LWL	28' 3"
Beam	10' 6"
Draft	5' 5"
Displacement	12,000 lbs.
Ballast	5,000 lbs.
Sail area	557 sq. ft.

The displacement/length ratio is 261, which is a nice number for good all around performance—too high for a hot rod, but just right for comfortable family sailing.

A subtle point about Columbias is the tooling. A wooden boatbuilder in Maine once told us that one of his objections to fiberglass boats was the absence of crisp, sharp lines and edges. Study a glass boat, especially an old one like the Columbia 36, and you'll see what he means. Every edge is generously radiused. Of course, some of this is necessary to pull a form from the mold, but not to the extent that Columbia rounded everything. In our opinion, many of the old Columbia's lose a few points in looks for this reason. An exception would be the Columbia 50, where wooden toerails (instead of the usual rounded,

Owners' Comments

"Plan to reinsulate the icebox. Bulkheads are a deep brown Formica veneer. Check wiring, stanchions and lifelines. Tremendous storage access. Very simple systems. Truly sleeps six six-foot adults."

—1969 model in Texas

"Replace the rubber rubrail. Add ventilation with Dorades and opening ports. Rubrail constantly falls off. Hull-to-deck joint needs regular caulking. Boat flexes in heavy air."

—1969 model in California

"Have the deck area adjacent to the portlights surveyed for water damage. Check fairing between hull and external ballast."

—1969 model in New Jersey

molded fiberglass toerails) go a long way toward alleviating the impression of an amorphous, egg-shaped structure.

Construction

Like nearly all production builders in the 1960s, Columbia used standard hull laminates of polyester gelcoat, chopped strand mat and 24-ounce woven roving. Columbia was a pioneer in developing what it called the "unitized interior," or fiberglass pan, in which the engine beds, stringers and furniture foundations are all molded. This pan is then "tabbed" to the hull with wet fiberglass and is presumed to provide the necessary stiffening.

Finish work goes quickly after such a pan is in place. Teak trim, cut and milled in the woodshop, is simply screwed into place. The cabinet doors, juxtaposed against the gleaming white pan, and ubiquitous pinrails are as telltale of the late 60s and early 70s as shag carpeting.

The hull-to-deck joint is unusual in that it incorporates a double-channel length of aluminum into which the hull and deck flanges are fitted top and bottom. It probably made good engineering sense, but given the complaints about leaking, and the fact that this method, to our knowledge, has not been used by other builders, suggest it had its problems. Because aluminum has little or no springback, we imagine that bumping a piling could permanently "dent" this channel, causing leaks that would be very difficult to repair properly.

The deck was cored, and to finish the interior a molded headliner was glassed in. The old Columbia brochures are rather funny to read, showing as they do plant workers dressed in lab coats, installing winches, cleats and windows as if building a boat was no more difficult than assembling pieces from a kit. In fact, Columbia fomented this idea, marketing its boats in kit form and calling them Sailcrafter Kits.

The basic structure of the early Columbias was reasonably sound, and sold with a two-year warranty. That many of those boats are still around says something positive about general construction quality.

On the other hand, the boats were pretty much bare bones. No frills. But then, they were more affordable than a comparable boat today. We don't mind the opportunity to do our own customizing, but the interior pan limits what you can do.

Most readers responding to our Owner's Questionnaire rate the construction quality of the Columbia 36 as above average. No major problems were reported, though we do have some complaints of deck delamination. In all fairness, separation of the fiberglass skins from the coring is common in many older boats and should not be judged as a weakness peculiar to Columbia. But you should have your surveyor check the deck for soundness before buying.

Miscellaneous complaints include inadequate ventilation, need for a sea hood ("The companionway hatch is a joke"); various leaks at windows and hull-deck joint; and mainsheet and wheel poorly located. The brochure says the keels are lead, but at least one reader said his was iron.

Performance

The Columbia 36 was intended to be something of a hot boat when it was introduced. In fact, it was offered with a trim tab on the trailing edge of the keel for better control off the wind. A brochure credits the inspiration to the Twelve-Meter *Intrepid's* "lopsided defense of the America's Cup."

We don't know how successfully the boat was raced, but do know that its PHRF rating is about 162, making it just a hair faster than a Catalina 30 (168) and a Cal 34 (168). None of our readers indicate that they race. One said, "Built for comfort, not speed." Typical reader ratings for speed are "average" upwind and "above average" off the wind. Several note the importance of sail trim (true of any boat!); annoying weather helm (excessive weather helm is unforgivable, but we suspect there's always a few whiners in this department who must not understand that a boat without any weather helm is a bear to steer); and one reader noted that the spar doesn't bend much to optimize sail shape (bendy rigs weren't in vogue at that time).

The standard sloop rig doesn't carry a lot of sail. One reader said he had a "tall boy" mast, which presumably was available as an option, as was—surprisingly—a yawl rig.

Overall, readers have positive remarks about seaworthiness, stability and balance. "The boat is a very good sailer," wrote one reader, adding that his boat "...has taken all Lake Michigan has to offer and never broken."

Most Columbia 36s were equipped with Atomic 4 gasoline engines. Several readers complain that the 30-hp. doesn't move the boat fast enough—about five knots. One reader had an Albin 20-hp. diesel. Another said engine access was very poor: "No room even to check oil."

Fuel tankage is 29 gallons; water is 44 gallons.

Interior

The layout of the Columbia 36 is standard, with a V-berth forward, U-shaped dinette amidships, and quarter berths aft. The sideboard galley puts the cook in the way of traffic, and the sink may have difficulty draining on port tack.

The most unusual feature of the plan is placement of the chart table opposite the head. This certainly isn't convenient to the cockpit for navigator-helmsman communications, but it does allow two quarter berths instead of just one. Readers note that the boat sleeps an honest six people, and tall ones at that. Headroom is listed at 6' 3".

Fiberglass interior pans tend to make for a rather sterilized appearance—the proverbial inside look of a refrigerator or Clorox bottle. We're not fond of them for several reasons: Pans restrict access to parts of the hull, tend to make the interior noisier and damper, and make it difficult to customize. But, that's the way it is with most production boats.

Conclusion

The Columbia 36 was a popular boat in the late 60s and early 70s, and still has its fans today. The basic structure is good. The interior is plain. We suspect that prospective buyers will find a wide range of customizing by previous owners. The quality of this workmanship will have a lot to do with your decision to buy or look elsewhere.

The *BUC Used Boat Guide* lists average prices for Columbia 36s ranging from about \$25,000 to \$33,000, depending on year and condition. Our original research showed those prices to be reasonably accurate. In today's market, you should be able to pick up a Columbia 36 in decent shape at a great price. One reader wrote, "The boat can be bought at bargain rates as it is the most underrated boat on the market."

Prices for all boats tend to be higher on the West Coast than the East Coast. Freshwater boats from Canada and the Great Lakes are most expensive (BUC Research says 25-30 percent more), and those in Florida and nearby states are the least expensive (about 10 percent less).

We think the boat represents an outstanding value for the person who wants the most boat for the least money. On the other hand, it suffers from the usual economies and slap-together techniques of large production builders. And the design is beginning to look a bit dated. We doubt that you'll make any money on the boat. **• PS**

The only unusual element of the Columbia 36's interior layout is the placement of the chart table forward, opposite the head, rather than in its more common location near the companionway. Since radios and instruments are usually mounted near the nav station, we prefer it aft.

