



The fishing sloop *Eldy Maria* racing downwind off Sarteneja. The club at the foot of the jib helps to goosewing the sail when running.

from the stem which allows the club-footed jibs to be of generous size – simply lashed at the stem, the club can be moved outboard or inboard to account for wind conditions, wind direction, and helm balance. The club also keeps the jib goose-winged while sailing downwind. The jib halyard tension provides the only fore and aft support to the mast.

The sails have no reefing arrangements and fishermen anchor to escape extremes of weather. Fortunately, with their 2'6" draught, the sloops can be squeezed into tight, sheltered spots between the sandbars of mangrove islands. However, the shallow draught does not offer much space for internal ballast – very often only an icebox full of ice and lobster. So, to ensure sufficient stability for the large sail area, the sloops are quite beamy. For instance, one boat of 31'6" LOA (22' on the keel) measured 10' at the mast station; a smaller one of 26'6" LOA (18' on the keel) had a beam of 9'. Generally, the accepted beam-to-length ratio is about 1:3. The sailplan is low, the mast length

being the same as the deck length, while the boom equals the above-deck height of the mast. It is worth noting that while the shipwrights refer to LOA to establish certain measurements, Belizeans usually use length-on-keel to describe a sloop: the racing classes of 18, 20, 22, 24' reflect the most typical sizes.

Easter Sunday 1989 was perfect for the races, with a fresh southeasterly wind and smooth water. Each racing boat took on just a few hundred pounds of sand bags and otherwise relied on the crew hiking out on permanently rigged strops. To avoid confusion and collision the boats started from a line of buoys laid at a slight angle off the wind to equalize the starting odds.

The smallest, 18', class, had the most excitement that day; tiptoed along the gunwales, their crews strained to hang outside the boats to the limits of the harnesses. Eventually it was *Alicia* that made the best of the heavy gusts to win the race. For the 20' class the wind increased to 25-30 knots. In this group the older *Marina P* maintained the lead she had gained from starting at the

leeward-most buoy – a position that offered clear wind away from the crowd bunched up at the windward end. In the 22' class the lead changed several times between *Eldy Maria* and *Vitalia C* with the former finally confirming the previous year's winning reputation.

We followed the last race in our own yacht and, even though we were double-reefed we still made a brisk 6½-7 knots. But even this was not fast enough to catch the sloops that, under full canvas, now and then would take off on a semi-plane when reaching or running. Indeed, we only regained our self-esteem when it came to the windward leg and our draught made a telling difference in our favour.

Seventy men took part in those races and from the general enthusiasm it was obvious that the sloops meant more to them than just a means of obtaining a living. Still, their first and foremost raison d'être was to take the fishermen to and from the lobster grounds. As such, these craft had a good chance of survival for years to come and, though in far fewer numbers, they are still working today.